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Palestine

# The tragic solitude of the Palestinians

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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**From the Verso blog: Following this year's latest onslaught in Gaza, this month we're revisiting some of the writing of the late Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010) on the topic. This week, from November 2000, on the silence of academics and his dissent as an anti-Zionist:**

Who has broken it? Not the Vase of Soissons, that is, but the peace process. The papers and the media generally present the second intifada [September 2000] as the product of an accidental derailing of the peace process. For most of them, the fault lies with Arafat and his stubbornness in the Camp David negotiations. In the best of cases, they lay equal blame on his refusal to bend to Israeli-American demands and Ariel Sharon's provocation in front of the al-Aqsa mosque.

Moreover, we were lucky enough to be able to read and hear the most unreal sounding arguments about the teenagers killed as they threw stones: apparently their deaths are the fault of their parents, who ought to have kept their kids at home. That already means supposing that they could have instead curled up for a cosy evening by the fireside watching the TV. Most of the 180 people killed by the Israel bullets were young, it is true. But how old were the soldiers of the French Revolution's Year II, the Baras and the Vialas, 'whose fate we would like to share', as they sing? How old were some of the partisans of the Affiche rouge in the Resistance, the Thomas Eleks and Marcel Raymans? How old was Gavroche? Of course, if he hadn't gone to screw around on the barricades and had sensibly stayed at Mum and Dad's place, he wouldn't have been knocked into the dust quite so young. The young insurgents in the Occupied Territories are, ultimately, Palestinian Gavroches and Baras. After all, if we are going to speak of Occupied Territories then that means that these young people are confronted with occupiers, an army of occupation, which behaves as such. Who can then deny them their right to resist?

So it is a false symmetry, the politics of Pontius Pilate, to wash our hands of it all, to put the oppressor and the oppressed side-by-side and charge both with committing 'violence'!

This explosion is neither an accident nor an exception. On the contrary, what we have here fully fits into the chronicles of a long-foreseen tragedy. After all, history didn't begin at Camp David, nor in front of the al-Aqsa mosque.

Everyone can remember the historic handshake between Rabin and Arafat as Clinton looked on with a paternalist, benevolent gaze. The Oslo accords have often been championed as marking the beginning of the peace process. Yet these were iniquitous accords, an unequal exchange between unequal partners. While the Palestinians recognised the State of Israel, Rabin only recognised the Palestinian representatives as legitimate interlocutors, without recognising their right to self-determination and their right to a sovereign state. He agreed that they could have an autonomous administration in Gaza and in Jericho, but only under supervision and with only limited sovereignty. The explosive question of East Jerusalem was put off for later discussion, while the settlements issue was evaded entirely. And as for the refugees' right to return – evidently, to address this was out of the question.

This iniquitous accord did, however, have certain contradictory aspects. Insofar as the Palestinians greeted it favourably, this was because in spite of its limitations it did strengthen their recognition and legitimacy on the international stage. Moreover, in breaking with the logic of war it could also encourage differentiation within Israeli society and the growth of its peace movement.

These were still nonetheless iniquitous accords resulting from an unbalanced relation of force. Indeed, it is worth recalling some of the main features of the international situation at that time, in 1993.

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With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR, the so-called socialist camp had just collapsed. Certainly it had never been the best supporter of the Palestinian cause, having backed partition. But at least the conflictual character of international relations had provided the Palestinians with some margin for manoeuvre.

Two years after the Gulf War, American hegemony was consolidated and the majority of the Arab regimes – Saudi Arabia and Egypt first among them – were aligned with the new Pax Americana.

National liberation movements and anti-imperialism were in retreat almost worldwide, while the European workers' movement had been struck by the liberal counter-reformation.

Finally, the Palestinian movement had itself emerged weakened from the defeat suffered in the 1982 siege of Beirut, even if the first Intifada did give the initiative back to the population of the Occupied Territories.

So the Oslo accords were indeed very iniquitous. At issue, however, was to what extent it would be possible to make good use of these iniquitous accords. That essentially depended on mobilisation on the ground, in the Occupied Territories and in Israel itself, but also on the extent of international solidarity.

But, just as Che Guevara could long ago say that the Vietnamese were 'tragically alone', the international balance of forces in the early 1990s meant the 'tragic solitude of the Palestinians'. So we can understand why their leaders played the card of compromise. They faced a race against time. The secular Palestinian national movement, unable to move for the increasing number of settlements – an attempt to create a new and irreversible 'fact on the ground' in the Occupied Territories – risked taking a pounding. So it had to take the smallest opportunity for an embryonic economic development that would allow for some 'normalisation' of the crippled and deracinated Palestinian society.

We knew that it was coming, after seven years of the peace process. Not only was the growth of the settlements continuous (no matter whether Likud or Labour were in power), but they practically doubled in number (some 350,000 settlers). So, too, grew the segregation of territory, the bypass roads, the roadblocks and the permits, the economic supervision, the everyday harassment, and the controls on water and petrol. There was an uninterrupted succession of humiliations, abuses and frustrations. Moreover, in making keeping order – as an auxiliary of the IDF – a priority responsibility of the Palestinian Authority, the Israelis took the calculated risk that in making the PA look complicit with the occupier they might in turn encourage a fresh upsurge of Islamism.

It is in this context that the second Intifada looks like a predictable explosion and not the result of a conspiracy or orders from on high. It is even surprising how much patience the masses showed, after being kept on tenterhooks with so many promises of peace.

An unequal struggle pitches boys throwing stones against tanks, combat helicopters and sharp-shooters. Right and the reason are not symmetrical, here, and nor are the results. One dead against fifteen or twenty – or just so many wasted bullets, as Bernard-Henri Levy might say.

Faced with all this evidence, the intellectuals maintain a deafening silence. Imagine what they would write, what they would say if fifty years (fifty years!) after the exodus of 900,000 Kosovars they were still a pariah people, confined to the refugee camps! Why do those who stood up for the national rights of the Bosnians, Kosovars or Chechens here suddenly fall into a deafening silence? Finkelkraut tells us that it is all very complicated, that there is nothing he can say, even if he says it all the same. Glucksmann is conspicuously silent. And as for BHL, well, at least we can say he is frank enough to speak up for Israel über alles. It is easy, no trouble, to look at the Bosnians and Chechens and speak up for them. It can even be an advantageous posture. Without any cost, without any risk. That is not going to cause any problems with publishers, journalists or whoever's providing your pay-cheque. But when it comes to Israel

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and Palestine you risk becoming persona non grata, getting mixed up in fights that are not just a matter of opinion. You risk losing relations, support, and goodwill.

Le Monde waged such a vigorous campaign on the Balkans, shouting from the rooftops that the war criminals must be brought to justice – and yet it is suddenly circumspect when it comes to the heads of the Israeli general staff. Its chief editor, who wrote a book called *L'Épreuve* ['The Ordeal'] to explain the degree to which the Balkan conflict concerns us and demands our attention, the degree to which it serves to tell us broader lessons about our epoch and marks an important political watershed, might not be writing a *L'Épreuve 2* to tell us about the meaning, the broader importance, of the Palestinians' ordeal.

Why such silence? Why these double standards? The spectre of the Judeocide may explain it, though it could never justify it. Firstly because the extermination of the Jews in the camps was not a Jewish-Arab affair, but a 100 percent European matter, just as the Dreyfus affair was wholly French. Also because the fact of having been a victim does not at all authorise anyone to make another people victim in turn: the suffering undergone does not give unlimited good-conscience credit.

We must finally break this vicious circle where the bad conscience of some provides the good conscience of others. In any other circumstance, we would call a spade a spade and the separation policy followed by Israeli governments by its proper name: apartheid. In any other circumstance we would call the 'transfer' policy (today documented by historians like Morris and Pappé) practiced during the 1948–49 war its proper name: ethnic cleansing. And Deir Yassin, Kafr Qasim, Tel al-Zaatar, and Sabra and Shatila would be considered so many Oradour-sur-Glanes.

A perhaps irreversible step is being made in the march toward catastrophe. Some people wanted to see in the ethnic degeneration of the Balkan conflict only the product of the decomposition of the bureaucratic nationalist (or, as they put it, 'communist') regimes. We emphasised at the time that it was, sadly, just a particular form of a more general tendency toward the racialisation, ethnicisation and confessionalisation of politics, as demonstrated in the Africa of the Great Lakes and today in the Middle East.

National liberation struggles are diverted into wars of religion, political conflict into communalist or tribal clashes. This is the inverse, the reverse face, of imperial globalisation: national aspirations slip away from being about political sovereignty toward a quest for origins, a genealogical legitimation, an archaeology. In particular in Israel and Palestine, saturated as they are with symbols. Where are we headed, if Israel's religious leaders justify the expulsion of the Palestinians on account of the chronological precedence of Solomon's Temple or of Joseph's tomb over the al-Aqsa Mosque? Then anything is possible. Perhaps a Catholic and Papist 'third thief' will come to tell the Israelis that they still have blood on their hands because of the crucifixion!

This logic is, indeed, very much at work in the principle of the Law of Return, which allows any Jew from the diaspora a blood right, at the same time as refusing Palestinians exiled since 1948 the right to return that goes with *jus soli*.

That is why it is of the greatest urgency that we get back to the political basis, the political meaning and stakes of these conflicts. No, this dispute is not an opposition between two camps, two communities, two identities, two religions. It traverses these identities, it is greater than them.

Given the communalist institutions' appeal to 'all the Jews' of France and elsewhere to rally behind Israel and its leaders, as well as the identification of the whole diaspora with the Jewish State and of all Jews with Zionism, young Palestinians and young Arabs in the banlieue will end up believing them, thus confusing the synagogues and the Israeli embassies, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. So yes, after once having been the 'socialism of fools', anti-Semitism could become the 'anti-imperialism of fools'. And that will be the symbolic cause and identity of the

rebels without a cause in the banlieue dying of unemployment, exclusion, and poor educational achievement.

That as why we have taken the initiative, unusual as it is exceptional, to sign a collective appeal 'as Jews'. Without the slightest coordination having taken place, analogous initiatives have taken place in the United States, England, Canada and Australia. For my part I consider myself first and foremost a secular and internationalist militant. So while Finkelkraut attacked us 'as a nothing', I can reply as something less than nothing – if he is going to stick to being a good-for-nothing. But this cosmopolitan citizenship does not at all imply denying or hiding my origins. Thus there are two circumstances in which I can assert my Jewishness: faced with an anti-Semite and faced with a Zionist.

Adjectivally Jewish, that is: not as 'a Jew', as if that were my very essence, but Jewish in a specific context, in relation to a specific situation. A mutant Jew, a Jewish non-Jew, you might say. A 'Spinozant', as Edgar Morin prettily put it. Jewish in terms of a dissident, critical spirit, as a challenge.

I am struck by the way in which the discourse of the Israeli leaders annexes and enrolls in its own political cause all the victims of the Judeocide and all diaspora Jews, and also the way in which the communalist institutions' spokesmen exhort such identification – and thus complicity. This is just unacceptable. It is a violation and a subversion of heritage. It is a robbery, a private appropriation of collective suffering and collective memory. Without doubt there were Zionists among the deportees, but there were also plenty of communists, Bundists, Trotskyists and people of no political allegiance. Like many I have a good dozen aunts, uncles and cousins who never returned. They were not politically involved. I do not see in what sense their Calvary can serve as a justification for today's Israeli policy. The Jews of the International Brigades, including those of the Botwin brigade, did not take part in the Spanish Civil War in order to found a Jewish state in the land of Israel. They did so in order to fight fascism – as Jews, without doubt, but also inextricably and indivisibly as communists, as Trotskyists, as proletarians, tailors or hat-makers. In any case, Zionism was not a majority viewpoint before the war.

The communalist logic has an unlimited propensity toward appropriation and usurpation. It can take in anything under its wing. Bernard Lazare included! But read and re-read his *Le Fumier de Job*. With the Dreyfus affair forcing him to re-engage with his Jewishness, Lazare understood very well – he knew from his experience – the evasiveness, the cowardice and hypocritical inattention of the community and religious institutions. He said that 'The Jews have again been dispersed, fragmented' and that with 'the bourgeoisie having acquired privileges and thus becoming separated from the people', solidarity had disappeared. He thus called on Jews not to content themselves with being revolutionaries 'in someone else's society and not their own'. He called on them to rise up 'against the oppressor within'. He spoke in pitiless words of anger, justice and prophecy: 'You are hugging the rich among you too closely, you can't see anything else! You turn to your priests; you forget that there are no priests in Israel. You are no longer Jews, but wretches'. And he was no Zionist: Our homeland is made of so many things, so many memories, so many regrets and joys, so many laments and pains, that a little barren and desolate piece of land would never be able to sustain it. Jerusalem or Judea are just one slice of our homeland'.

So we wrote as Jews, against the hijacking, against the appropriation of the living and the dead, against the state monopoly of memory. But above all as a means of dissociating things that some people hope to confuse, and distinguishing between things they want to identify. In order to show that Jews and Israel, Jews and the Israeli leadership, Jews and the policy of the Israeli leadership, are not all the same: it's not just six of one and half a dozen of the other. That is, we can oppose such policies as Jews. This means refusing to allow ourselves to be holed up in 'community' belonging, and not to accept being drowned in the communalist morass. It is to introduce discord, dissent. It is to show that when we position ourselves on the terrain of political reason and not religious unreason, when we address the problem in secular, political terms, when we seek another thread of solidarity beyond the borders, the bells and the chapels, when we want to see another of ourselves among the 'other', then we – I – feel closer to a Leila, an Elias, a Camille, an Edward Said than a rabbi Sitruk, a Laurent Fabius or a Dominique Strauss-Kahn. And I hope that in turn Leila, Elias and the others will feel closer to me, realise that they have much more in common with me, than the Mubaraks, the Ben Alis and the Saudi petro-monarchs. That is itself is a step

forward.

We took an unusual step in an unusual situation. Something we did not do, something we would not even have imagined twenty years ago. But I am tempted to say that we have been reduced to this, that we have been reduced to these symbolic gestures on account of other people's resignation, their abandonment of responsibility. Where has the workers' movement gone? And what about the Left? What is left of international solidarity?

So we wrote as Jews by default. But not just although we are Jewish – also because we are Jewish. That is not self-denial or treason – on the contrary, it is also because of our concern for the fate of the Jews in Israel, for their safety, for their future.

*Translated from [French](#) by David Broder for [Verso](#) and originally published there on 9 October 2014.*

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