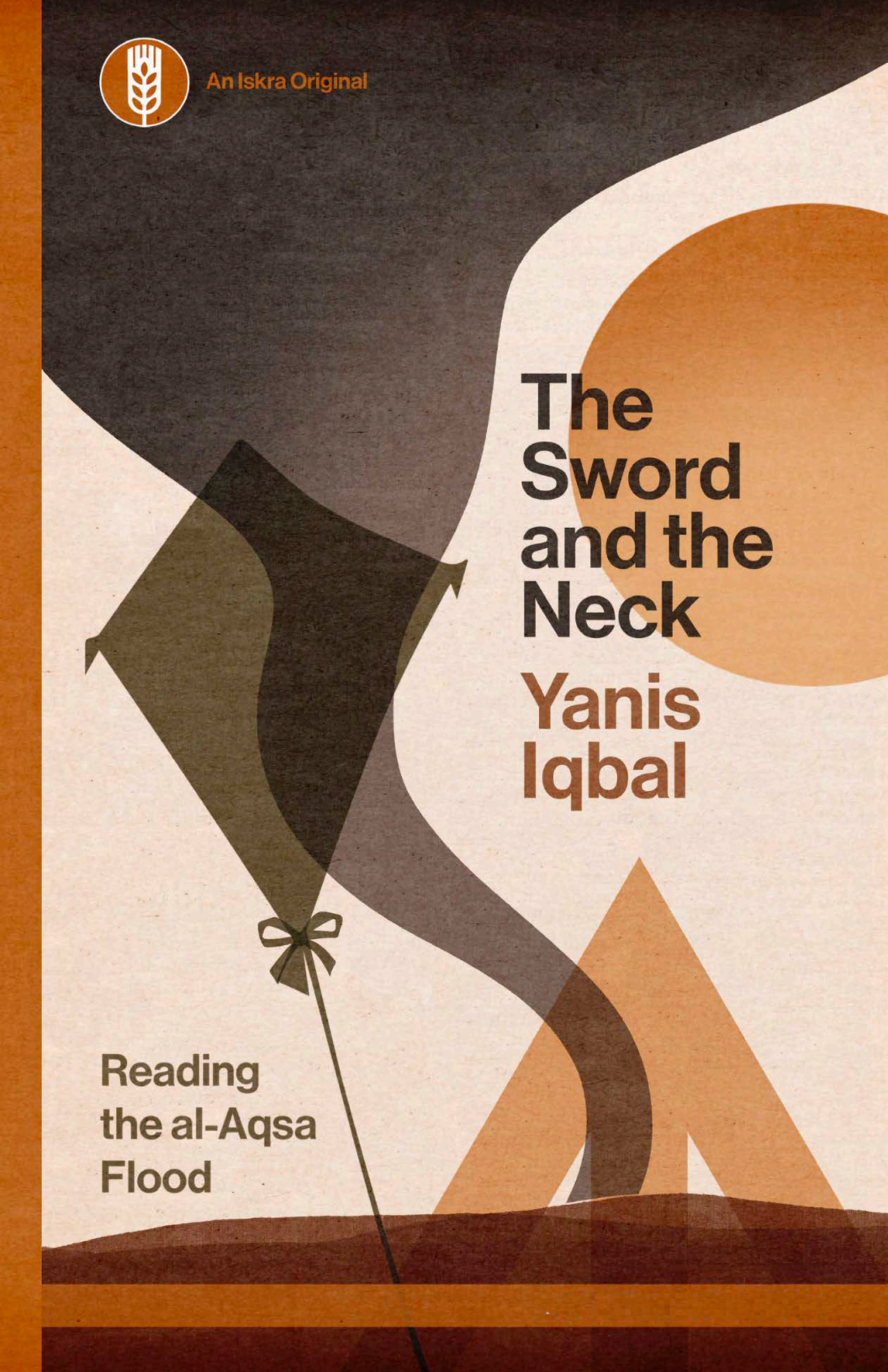

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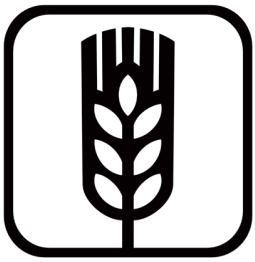
The Sword and the Neck

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Yanis Iqbal



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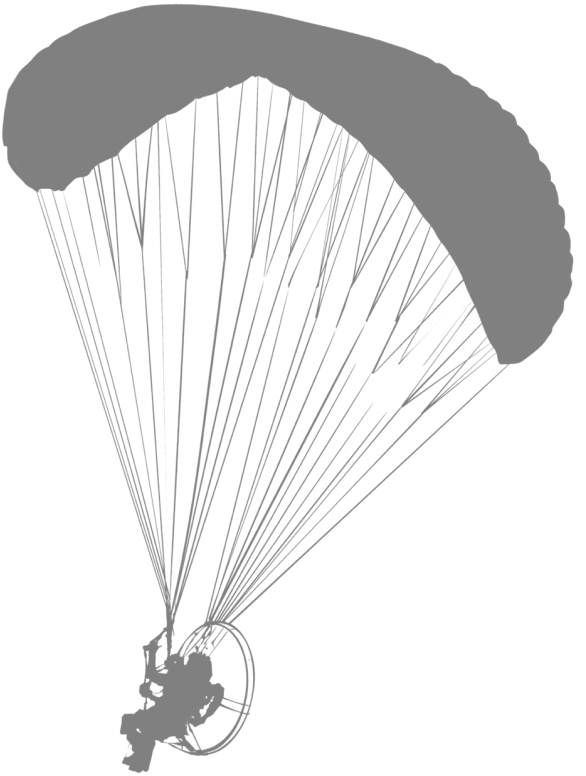
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If I Must Die

Refaat Alareer

If I must die,
you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings,
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze—
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself—
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love
If I must die
let it bring hope
let it be a tale

Preface

Daniel Tutt[1]

This book does not ask what solidarity with Palestine looks like in the abstract; it calls for nothing less than a total re-thinking of solidarity based upon the concrete actions of the struggle for Palestinian liberation from within its terms and field of operation. This is a call to arms for critical theory and Marxist thought in our time. To arrive at this new vision for an engaged and practical form of philosophy, Yanis Iqbal addresses the crisis of contemporary bourgeois philosophy in the wake of October 7 and the brutal genocidal war persecuted by the Israeli state in Gaza. Iqbal diagnoses a pervasive idealism in some of the leading luminaries on today's left, from the exilic and passive detachment of the late Edward Said to the ontological pessimism of Slavoj Žižek and the relativization of nonviolence in Étienne Balibar. Philosophy must not only speak to the histories and the realities that have brought about the generation-defining event of October 7 and the genocidal aftermath perpetuated on Gaza by Israel; philosophers must cultivate the courage to shrug off these frameworks of philosophical idealism. This is not a call to abandon philosophy as the inadequate tools of the master; it is a call to seize these tools and re-direct them to the urgent cause of Palestinian freedom and emancipation.

1 Daniel Tutt is a philosopher and host of the *Emancipations* podcast. He has lectured in philosophy at George Washington University, Marymount University, the District of Columbia Jail and the School for Materialist Research. He is the author of *Psychoanalysis and the Politics of the Family: The Crisis of Initiation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) Series and *How to Read Like a Parasite: Why the Left Got High on Nietzsche* (London: Repeater Books, 2024). His writing has been featured in *Jacobin*, *Current Affairs*, *Philosophy Now* and *Aeon Magazine*.

The first lesson of this book is that the theoretical frameworks we adopt need to be immanently deconstructed to reveal how they are shaped by class imperatives of bourgeois thought and its tendencies towards subjective idealism and apolitical agnosticism. In *The Destruction of Reason,* the great Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács points out that subjective idealism overtook bourgeois philosophy as imperialism emerged in the latter part of the 19th century. Bourgeois philosophy became incapable of applying Hegelian dialectical thought to social realities of becoming and being or freedom and necessity; it could only express their mutual relationship as an insoluble antagonism or an eclectic amalgam.[2] When it comes to contemporary philosophy—even much of what is known as radical philosophy—the post October 7 situation has resulted in a similar idealist paralysis. Nowhere is the disconnect of thought from practice more palpable than in the theoretical model of the seminal Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, whose praxis of liberation emphasized the importance of "educational consciousness" and the "hegemonic role of symbols and ideas." The Marxist lesson that Iqbal imparts to us is that Said's exilic cosmopolitanism was shaped by his conjuncture, a world prior to the Oslo accords in which the possibility of diplomatic routes to statehood seemed open. Edward Said was one of the great ambassadors and intellectual figures of the Palestinian cause, and he knew the gravity of what the Oslo Accords changed in the historical basis of the struggle for Palestinian freedom. Referring to Oslo as the "Palestinian Versailles"[3] Said rightly saw Oslo as the collapse of the prior form of resistance to the paradigm of normalization and the concomitant liquidation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from its central role as the key leadership of Palestinians. It was in the post-Oslo environment of the late 1990s and early 2000s that Hamas rose to prominence. As the political economist Adam Hanieh points out:

> By resuscitating key demands that the PLO had conceded, including the goal of liberating historic Palestine, Hamas was attempting to take Palestinian nationalism back to a pre-Oslo period. The Oslo Accords had failed to achieve the goals that Palestinians aspired to, and had instead facilitated the continu-

2 Lukács, Georg *The Destruction of Reason* translated by Peter Palmer (Verso Books: 2022), p. 379

3 Said, Edward "The Morning After." *London Review of Books.* October 21, 1993. Available at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v15/n20/edward-said/the-morning-after.

> ation of Israel's occupation at significant cost to Palestinians. Hamas's efforts to undo the political structures created by Oslo challenged a status quo that had been made sustainable, if not beneficial, for Israel and its colonization of Palestinian territories.[4]

In the wake of the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in the 1990s, diaspora capital became integral to the development of the new Palestinian economy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As Hanieh has pointed out, this shift in power took place through direct capital investments and the establishment of subsidiaries in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well as through the formation of a network of holding companies that linked the diaspora class to state capital and local elites.[5]

Palestine and the Colonial Mode of Production

As a work of Marxist philosophy, Iqbal's book offers a conjunctural analysis of the Palestinian Occupied Territories in the wake of the October 7 al-Aqsa Flood, an event that has made visible to the world the brutal policies of extermination, displacement, and erasure that Israel has consistently practised since its historic dispossession of Palestinians in the Nakba in 1948. To supplement and build off Iqbal's conjunctural analysis, I want to introduce an additional analysis of the political economy of the Palestinian Occupied Territories by drawing from the work of the late Lebanese Marxist Mahdi Amel.

The first point to note is that the Palestinian Occupied Territories are both enmeshed in both the wider regional political economy and subjected to settler-colonial forms of domination by the Israeli state, which directly controls the land, water, and mobility of the people. The surplus labor of Palestinians is siphoned off into Israel and not permitted to be locally reinvested. According to UNRWA in 2022, over 80% of individuals in Gaza—71% of whom are refugees from elsewhere in Palestine—live below the national poverty line, and well over half of them are food

4 Hanieh, Adam "Rethinking Statehood in Palestine" from *Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition*, edited by Leila H. Farsakh (Luminos Press, University of California Press 2021), p. 61.

5 Ibid., p. 43.

insecure.[6] Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as those living in areas occupied in 1948, face what Domenico Losurdo refers to as a "caste democracy in the model of ancient Athens which had at its foundation the enslavement of barbarians and the American South through the 1960s (the era of Civil Rights protests)." Losurdo writes that, "the picture Israel presents is clear: Its minority of Israeli Arabs vote but they are second-class in many other ways."[7] Losurdo reminds us that the Arabs that Israel rules in the occupied West Bank cannot vote and have almost no rights.

Thus, although Gaza and the West Bank are subject to a settler-colonial form of domination, they are not self-contained social formations in which state-civil society relations are separate and distinct from the wider region.[8] Amel develops an important concept of what he names the "colonial mode of production," a hybrid mode of overlapping modes of production that both integrates the Palestinians into the regional capitalist order and subjects them to a colonial form of domination that enacts a deeper and more archaic form of subjection. This is a framework that originates in Lenin's writings on imperialism, as Amel notes: "according to his [Lenin's] analysis, a capitalist system exists within a feudalist framework, and a feudalist framework exists within a capitalist system. This kind of coexistence is a new development in human history. It appeared only in countries subjected to colonial rule at some point during their historical development."[9] In the colonial social structure, there is a coexistence of multiple systems of production, and the conditions for socialist revolution in colonized countries are born out of the development of contradictions internal to a distinct colonial mode of production. The

6 United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), "15 Years of Blockade" 2022. Available at: https://www.unrwa.org/gaza15-years-blockade.

7 "Zionism and the Tragedy of the Palestinian People" translated by Roderic Day (*Red Sails*: 2001) Available online: https://redsails.org/il-sionismo-e-la-tragedia-del-popolo-palestinese/.

8 Hanieh, Adam "Rethinking Statehood in Palestine" from *Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition* edited by Leila H. Farsakh (University of California Press: 2021) p. 29.

9 Amel, Mahdi *Arab Marxism and National Liberation: Selected Writings of Mahdi Amel* edited by Hicham Safieddine, translated by Angela Giordano. Chicago: Haymarket, 2021, p. 48.

possibility of socialist revolution in colonial countries is different from non-colonial capitalist societies, such that a revolution against the specific political contradiction of the colonial context emerges as the necessary obstacle that must be overcome in a liberatory revolution against colonial existence.[10]

As mentioned, Amel argues that the colonial mode of production is not autonomous or self-sustaining; rather, it coexists within the wider capitalist mode of production. In the 1970s, Amel argued that a real revolution for liberation from the colonial mode of production must be followed by a socialist revolution, and this would entail a violent transition from one particular mode of production to another, namely from colonialism to socialism.[11] As it relates to Gaza and Palestine, this revolution will inevitably involve violence as a historical confrontation with the founding moment of Palestinian dispossession in 1948 and the Nakba. One of the most important insights that Amel's work opens for the struggle for Palestinian liberation is the idea that due to the imposition of the colonial mode of production, there is a tendency for the fragmentation of class solidarities based on the distinct colonial social dynamics. The colonized population forges unity through the overwhelming *political contradiction* of the colonial power—in this case the Israeli occupation and day-to-day domination. This implies that the locus of struggle for the Palestinian people must entail the overcoming of this specific relation of domination, a relation that is an embedded feature of the social structure of Palestine. It can only be overcome through the abolition of the colonial mode of production.[12]

What Amel's analysis of the colonial mode of production allows us to see is the way that anticolonial violence emerges as a unifying force and tactic, not as an end in and of itself. The hybrid basis of the colonial mode of production does not make class domination fully reducible to the imposition of settler-colonial domination. As such, class analysis of Palestinian factions that contend for leadership must be rigorously analyzed and even criticized, including Hamas. While the urgency of the Israeli extermination campaign following October 7, 2023, has shifted priori-

10 Ibid., p. 51.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., p. 50.

ties to survival of the Palestinian people in the face of extermination, any alternative model of state formation, including that of a single state, will inevitably have to face the contradictory reality of Palestinian elites still maintaining a link to global capitalist markets and accumulation, and the fact that its political economy would still be predicated upon the maintenance of current state/class relations.[13]

Anticolonial Violence: Recognition and Class Struggle

One of the most insidious devices of hasbara and Zionist propaganda in the wake of October 7 is the claim that this event must be abstracted from history and assessed in its pure immediacy and that reasonable actors must unequivocally condemn October 7 as a heinous act of violence. When analyzed from this immediate, decontextualized position, anyone can easily acknowledge the depravity of this violent act. But it is not possible to isolate this event from the concrete historical experiences of dispossession, humiliation, deprivation, and domination Palestinians have faced over the long duration. Such a demand of willful historical ignorance is itself oppressive to social reality. To assess October 7 from an ahistorical point of view only serves to decontextualize it and thus risk feeding into Israeli war propaganda, which has used the brutality of October 7 as justification for a genocidal war.

It must be noted that only three years prior to October 7, the Trump-backed 2020 Abraham Accords saw the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain formally normalize relations with Israel, and many geopolitical analysts predicted that Saudi Arabia was on the cusp of doing the same.[14] If Saudi Arabia were to have normalized relations with Israel, this would have threatened to weaken the political demands for the Right of Return and dilute Arab diplomatic pressure for Palestinian rights.[15] Pal-

13 Hanieh, Adam "The Political Economy of State Formation" from *Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition* edited by Leila H. Farsakh (Luminos Press, University of California Press: 2021), p. 47.

14 Al-Jazeera, "What's happening with normalising ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel?" (September 21, 2023). Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/21/whats-happening-with-normalising-ties-between-saudi-arabia-and-israel .

15 Arab Center Washington DC, "Saudi-Israeli Normalization Persists Amid

estinian resistance to normalization, combined with the unsustainable barbarization of life in Gaza, had reached a boiling point on the eve of October 7. To assess October 7 in an ahistorical vacuum is precisely what must be avoided, because the immediacy of violence it projected is a reaction to the continual and compounded structural violence imposed on Palestine. Moreover, such immediatism rejects the very meaning of solidarity in the Palestinian solidarity movement and its long-standing deployment of a multiplicity of tactics to achieve liberation, from non-state action, armed violence, strikes, protests, and demonstrations. From the time of the original acts of dispossession which culminated in 1948 to the present, these tactics have sought to avoid the path of normalization and integration with the occupation and its settler-colonial dynamics. These efforts have also importantly entailed the development of international solidarity through initiatives like the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement, as well as diplomatic and legal avenues.[16] But even when Palestinians pursue legal, diplomatic and non-violent means such as the non-violent "Great March of Return" along the Gaza-Israel border from 2018-2019, they are met with overwhelming violent retaliation. Israel's response to the Great March of Return was to kill 195 Palestinians and injure over 28,000, an indication that any call to decontextualize October 7th as pure barbarity only further obscures the historical reality.[17]

In the immediate aftermath of the al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, the Jewish intellectual and Palestinian advocate Norman Finkelstein called on moral philosophers to weigh in on the historic event. Finkelstein referred the readers of his blog to Israel's leading human rights organization, B'Tselem, which observed that what happened on October 7 was a slave revolt *inside Israel*. Finkelstein adamantly agreed with B'Tselem

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Gaza War," https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/saudi-israeli-normalization-persists-amid-gaza-war/.

16 Adam Hanieh, Robert Knox and Rafeef Ziadah *Resisting Erasure: Capital, Imperialism, and Race in Palestine* (Verso Books: 2025), p. 72.

17 "Approaching the first anniversary of the 'Great March of Return' protests in Gaza," The Monthly Humanitarian Bulletin (March 2019), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, available online at https://www.un.org/unispal/document/approaching-the-first-anniversary-of-the-great-march-of-return-protests-in-gaza-ocha-article/.

and developed a wider theory of October 7 as a "slave uprising,"[18] drawing a historical analogy between October 7 and Nat Turner's slave uprising in 1831. While this analogy risks anachronism by conflating two contradictory historical social formations and thus mystifying the stakes of rebellion and resistance in Gaza, it has the merit of shining light on the suffering of Gazans who were enclosed in "the world's largest open-air prison."[19] Nat Turner's slave uprising killed nearly 100 whites and led to a massive shift in the practices of domination and control of the enslaved population by the southern enslaving class; Christianity amongst the enslaved population was restricted, and the uprising set in motion a series of new threats of slave uprisings.[20]

Finkelstein's argument is reminiscent of the wider perspective on slavery that the Gramscian historian Eugene Genovese developed in his controversial 1974 work *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Unlike the colonial and post-colonial subject, the subjectivity of the enslaved black population in the Antebellum South under conditions of chattel slavery was dominated by an ideology of what Genovese calls "paternalism." The ideology of paternalism was largely successful, in Genovese's view, in that it sustained obedience to slavery as a mode of production while simultaneously allowing for the development of a degree of reciprocal dependence that afforded the enslaved enough room to develop a culture that would come to defy the wider system of oppression. This hits at the Gramscian core of Genovese's argument, namely that paternalism allowed for the cultural development of modes of resistance to enslavement. But most of the time—according to Genovese—paternalism was a deterrent to political

18 Finkelstein, Norman "THE SLAVE REVOLT IN GAZA, and Bernie Sanders," October 12, 2023. Available at: https://www.normanfinkelstein.com/the-slave-revolt-in-gaza-and-bernie-sanders.

19 In 2010, then British Prime Minister David Cameron referred to Gaza as "an open-air prison." See Ilana Feldman "Gaza as an Open-Air Prison" (Summer 2015), Middle East Research and Information Project. Available at: https://merip.org/2015/06/gaza-as-an-open-air-prison.

20 See Genovese, Eugene, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (Vintage Books: 1974). Genvese writes: "Each insurrectionary scare from Gabriel's to Vesey's to Nat Turner's led to a wave of repression. Especially after 1831, laws forbade free Negroes to preach to slaves or sought to register and control them or required whites to be present when any black man preached. But the preachers, free and slave, carried on" (p. 256).

militancy and resistance. The power of paternalism meant that it "could not readily pass into an effective weapon for liberation. Black leaders, especially the preachers, won loyalty and respect and fought heroically to defend their people. But despite their will and considerable ability, they could not lead their people over to the attack against the paternalist ideology itself."[21] Paternalism was a gruesome ideology of rule that Imamu Amiri Baraka also argues was at the core of slavery.[22]

From a Marxist perspective, paternalism was an effective system of rule because it reduced the capacity for the enslaved population to identify with one another as a class. The analogy between October 7 and Nat Turner's uprising is anachronistic and therefore imprecise. As I have argued, in Mahdi Amel's theory of the colonial mode of production, there is an element of an archaic, pre-capitalist form of domination in Israel's colonial occupation, but the referent to this form of domination is not paternalistic in the same way that chattel slavery was paternalistic. As I will develop in the discussion of Frantz Fanon below, analogies to anti-colonial resistance movements of the twentieth century, from Vietnam to Algeria, are far more apt to the contemporary situation facing Palestinians. To understand October 7 as identical to Turner's slave uprising seems to misconstrue a deeper materialist analysis of the overlapping modes of production that coexist in Gaza, as Madhi Amel articulates the colonial mode of production.

Despite the confusions of this historical analogy, Finkelstein's tireless efforts to shed light on the history of Palestinian dispossession and his courage to directly address the falsehoods of hasbara and Zionist media agendas and genocide apologetics should nonetheless be lauded. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's response to October 7 presents a far different picture than Finkelstein's uncompromising solidarity with Palestinians. Žižek analyzed the event as abstracted from history entirely. He condemned October 7 as an act of "barbarism" and insisted that the existing mechanisms of democratic adjudication and appeal to European values offer the most viable path forward for Palestinians and Israe-

21 Ibid., p. 61.

22 I owe this reference to Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, 1063), pp. 54, 39.

lis to live together in peace.[23] Žižek rejected the long-standing demands of the Palestinian solidarity movement for resistance to normalization, which calls out the current democratic mechanisms as inadequate for the achievement of true freedom for Palestinians. Contra Žižek, it is not possible, within the post-Oslo and post-Abraham accords environment, for both parties to "converse on the basis of the knowledge of their mutual lack."[24] Žižek reduces his analysis to the pure immediacy of the violence opened by October 7, and this prevents him from considering how the violence of October 7 can be learned from—not passively celebrated in some nihilist fashion, but seriously understood as an act of total desperation that also entails a strategic decision in the face of a totally dire political situation.

It is only through a patient and careful analysis that Marxist students of Žižek might retain the radical edge to his concepts. Let's take his concept of the *political act*, a theory rooted in Lacanian psychoanalysis. With this theory, Žižek argues that true political transformation requires a radical "leap of faith" to break ideological deadlocks and reveal the repressed "real" of the situation. In his 2001 book, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, the radical act is applied to moments in which politics opens a "real" beyond liberal democracy and its managed choices. In a previous work, Žižek defined the act as "not simply an intervention into the domain of being, but an intervention into the domain of possibility itself: after the Act, the field of what is possible is no longer the same."[25] Missing from Žižek's commentary on the post-October 7 situation in Gaza is a true account of what he once referred to as "systemic violence" that led to October 7, namely the compounded and systemic patterns of humiliation, domination, and dispossession that Palestinians in Gaza have had to endure. "Systemic violence," Žižek writes in *On Violence*, is "something like the notorious 'dark matter' of physics, the counterpart to an all-too visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into

23 Slavoj Žižek, "The Real Dividing Line Between Israel and Palestine," *The Japan Times*, 16 October 2023. Available at: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/10/16/world/israel-palestine-fundamentalists/.

24 Slavoj Žižek, "Israel-Palestine Conflict: Who Is to Blame?," *New Statesman*, 19 October 2023. Available at: https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2023/10/israel-palestine-blame.

25 Žižek, Slavoj *The Ticklish Subject* (Verso: 1999) p. 375.

account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence."[26]

Žižek's idealism in the face of October 7 is unfortunate; however, it is essential to note how the dynamics of class struggle tend to force philosophers into conformity with bourgeois pressures and imperatives. In his book on Kant, *Autocensura e compromesso nel pensiero politico di Kant* [*Self-censorship and Compromise in Kant's Political Thought*], Domenico Losurdo shows how Immanuel Kant initially generated his concept of universalism in direct support for Robespierre and the Jacobins in the French Revolution, but over time ruling class pressure forced Kant to self-censor his conceptions of universalism, and this practical commitment seemed to lose any concrete linkage to political struggle and gradually became overridden with abstractions.[27] In what is likely the most powerful chapter in this book, Chapter 3, "The Politics of Abstract Negativity: A Critique of Slavoj Žižek," Iqbal argues that Žižek's idealism can be traced to an invariant philosophical system of abstract negativity that imposes prescriptions upon political processes instead of learning from them. It is at this point that I would propose the challenge of what we might call the task to *radically re-appropriate philosophy*. Towards this end, we should ask whether Žižek's concepts may very well remain vital to emancipatory thought on the condition that they are applied in such a way that is *not disconnected from the material realities of the class struggle*.

The conundrum of how to appropriate philosophy for the cause of emancipation introduces us to the main challenge of Iqbal's book: how can philosophical frameworks and concepts adapt to a properly materialist frame of analysis? For Iqbal, idealism is a problem because it relies on epistemic structures of knowing reality reduced to representational depictions of certain essential attributes. In other words, idealism is a problem because it does not think any necessary connection to the underlying social formations that determine subjectivity. Idealist philosophy refuses to account for the history of a given struggle, how it has shaped the contours of current political violence and possibility. It reduces the dynamics of power to categories of individual judgment and comprehension. This

26 Žižek, Slavoj, *Violence* (Verso Books, 2006) p. 3.

27 Losurdo, Domenico, *Autocensura e compromesso nel pensiero politico di Kant* (Bibliopolis: 2007).

is not to say that materialist readings of psychoanalysis, Lacan or even the wider tradition of Freudian-Marxism that Žižek's work emanates from must be abandoned as improperly materialist. It is to say that philosophy is only worth its weight if it can squarely address the genocide and extermination campaign against the Palestinians by not remaining indifferent to the underlying dynamics of power and inequality that brought this situation about.

Marxism Contra Postcolonialism

In the history of Marxist thought, Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* stands as a grand exception to the otherwise idealizing tendencies of European philosophers who weigh in on colonial situations. In no uncertain terms, Sartre argues that Fanon is correct in his wider diagnosis and prescription that anticolonial violence is necessary for rehumanizing both the colonized and the colonizer. Specifically, Sartre endorsed the Fanonian view that the national struggle requires a concrete class alliance with the peasantry and the lumpenproletariat[28] but importantly, Sartre did not go so far as to embrace the socialist position that a new mode of production needs to be established in the anticolonial sequence. Sartre articulates Fanon's position on anti-colonial violence as a necessary force, writing that "in a time of helplessness, murderous rampage is the collective unconscious of the colonized."[29] At issue is another act of radical re-appropriation of bourgeois philosophy, namely the Hegelian idea of the struggle for recognition as developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as the core dynamic involved in anticolonial violence: "we only become who we are by radically negating what others have done to us."[30] It is only through an act of "decolonization" that the mythic violence that is already embedded in the status quo itself can become dislodged. But Sartre's position on anticolonial violence is not without its limitations.

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28 Sartre, Jean-Paul preface to Fanon, Frantz *The Wretched of the Earth* translated by Richard Philcox (Grove Press: 2004), p. xlix.

29 Ibid., p. li.

30 Ibid., p. li.

As Domenico Losurdo has pointed out, Sartre's support is not fully in line with Fanon. This is because Sartre only considers the first movement of anticolonial violence but fails to link this to a dialectic entailing a second stage that Fanon himself insisted upon, namely that anticolonial violence is predicated on the development of economic infrastructure and the harnessing of the productive capacities. This is the missing materialist kernel in Sartre's reading of Fanon, and it limits his conception of anticolonial praxis to a one-sided development. Fanon argued that anticolonial struggle must consist of a double movement from the military to the economic phase. Sartre practiced an "idealism in reverse," as Losurdo writes, saying that "he [Sartre] championed an anticolonialism that was passionate and praiseworthy, but that remained populist and idealist. It was an anticolonialism that could not understand the phases of the revolution involving the construction of a new order."[31]

Unlike many post-colonial forms of praxis that have liquidated an emphasis on class struggle and the necessary movement to a revolution in the mode of production following anticolonial violence, Fanon maintained that the anticolonial path must necessarily lead to socialism or barbarism. Put simply, Fanon must be defended as an anticolonial Marxist, and Iqbal approaches Marxism in a similar way. Fanon's socialism is very much in line with the sort of Marxism that Iqbal applies to a post-October 7 world. In Iqbal's framework, Marxism is not as an ideological or programmatic label but a creative method that "allows the mapping out of contradictions," and this leads to a "politico-theoretical openness" which is maintained through the pursuit of a determined practical line. Post-colonialism is far afield from Marxism in this regard, as it tends to revel in the amnesiac celebration of oppositional discourse. As Homi Baba stated in his more recent foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*, "the choice for the colonial subject is not that between socialism and cap-

31 Losurdo, Domenico, *Western Marxism*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill, (Monthly Review Press: 2024) p. 137. It is worth further noting that Sartre's record on this kind of anti-conialism is inconsistent, to the extent that Josie Fanon, (Frantz's Fanon's widow) would later ask for Sartre's famous introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth* to be removed from future editions, due to his latter support for Zionism. See: 'Josie Fanon and her fidelity to Palestinian liberation,' *Verso Books Blog*, https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/josie-fanon-and-her-fidelity-to-palestinian-liberation?srsltid=AfmBOoqRdWprLtXH52MbcHnnxXQDxbsXawF62komvYMkWCkh7y9Zfwpq

italism but a decompartmentalization of the colonial predicament."[32] We are left with the question: Which Fanon? It is an urgent theoretical priority to defend the Fanon steeped in a socialist method of anticolonial praxis and anticolonial resistance who maintained a commitment to the development and the harnessing of the productive forces in the wake of anticolonial violence, and to avoid the postcolonial Fanon who may be in favor of violence but only vaguely points to the means to transform society and leaves questions of political economy and class to the side.

Fanon's revolutionary thought should not be relegated to the 20th century; indeed, Fanon speaks to the Palestinian liberation struggle today. To open this active engagement with Fanon, we would be well served to analyze the political economy of the precise mode of production that determines Palestinian class relations and class struggle so that we can better understand the possibility for class consciousness amongst Palestinians. The late sociologist Michael Burawoy posed an interesting debate between Fanon and the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu over the anticolonial struggle in Algeria, and the parameters of this debate can serve as an impetus for a similar analysis of the class dynamics facing the Palestinian struggle today. Bourdieu and Fanon were primarily at odds over the question of the class agency of the revolutionary movement within Algeria. Bourdieu pinned the revolutionary agent to the Algerian working class and argued that unlike the peasants and lumpenproletariat, only the Algerian working class had the "stability to think rationally and imaginatively about future alternatives, as opposed to the peasantry, which is stuck in an eternal present," or what Bourdieu refers to as "traditional traditionalism."[33] The uprooted and unemployed are a force for revolution but not a revolutionary force in Bourdieu's vision.

In Fanon's view, the relative stability of the working class does not grant them greater revolutionary potential; on the contrary, it leads them to be more prone to reformism in the colonial context.[34] Fanon

32 Fanon, Frantz *The Wretched of the Earth* translated by Richard Philcox. Foreword: Homi Baba (Grove Press: 2004), p. vx.

33 Burawoy, Michael *Symbolic Violence: Conversations with Bourdieu* (Duke University Press: 2019), p. 87.

34 Ibid., p. 89.

thus advocated an alliance between intellectuals and the peasantry over the working class. When we apply this debate to Palestine, the insights of Amel and the "colonial mode of production" outlined above prove important, because Amel argued that the colonial mode of production introduces a "non-differentiated class structure" in which:

> each class of workers in colonized countries (e.g. labourers, peasants, and petit-bourgeois factions) undertook its own struggle independently and in isolation from the others. It is as though each of them belonged to a discrete social structure even though their class enemy was one and the same. This class independence appeared as though it was the outcome of different, independent social structures coexisting within a single colonised country.[35]

Within the colonial mode of production, there emerges a unifying *political enemy*, namely colonialism, that becomes the objective basis for the unity of the colonized country's social structure. Under the colonial mode of production, the ensemble of classes within the colonized society experiences a unification that Amel argued is structural, but this unity is not apparent at the level of class consciousness of the toiling classes in the subjugated state. It only becomes realizable in the struggle to overcome the specific colonial mode of domination.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels diagnose the very problem of bourgeois philosophy that Iqbal seeks to overcome in today's time. They warn that "the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force"[36]—and with this radical insight call upon philosophers to adopt a critical class analysis or risk their ideas being subsumed into the status quo. Put simply, without a critical class analysis, philosophers risk their concepts and ideas being overtaken by the ruling ideas. The challenge posed to philosophers is the necessity to subtract their thought from complicity with systems of class power, and they argue that this subtraction is achieved by placing philosophy at the service of the class struggle. Philosophy must become an active and critical tool put into the service of the transformation of existing conditions; philosophy must become a practice of liberation.

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35 Amel, Mahdi *Arab Marxism and National Liberation: Selected Writings of Mahdi Amel* edited by Hicham Safieddine, translated by Angela Giordano (Haymarket: 2021), p. 50.

36 Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick *The German Ideology* edited by C.J. Arthur (Lawrence & Wishart: 1974), p. 64.

The extermination campaign waged against Gaza by the Israeli state must be engaged by philosophers as a terrain of proletarian struggle and emancipation. Building off of Marx and Engel's critique of philosophy, Lukács once remarked that "the proletariat is the first oppressed class in history that has been capable of countering the oppressors' philosophy with an independent and higher world-view of its own."[37] Iqbal's *The Sword and the Neck* is a militant call for philosophy to re-think categories of history, territory, memory, and struggle, not from a position of exile, melancholy or despair but from an active and engaged perspective. Iqbal reminds us that the standpoint of resistance to extermination in Gaza is indeed the site where the production of new regimes of knowledge emerges. This is a new lesson for our time, but it is grounded in an old tradition of thought, a tradition that instructs us that freedom cannot be awarded, conceded or given according to maturity. Freedom can only be taken. This is what the revolutionary tradition opens.

37 Lukács, Georg *The Destruction of Reason* translated by Peter Palmer (Verso Books: 2022), p. 379.

Chapter 1

Zionism and Apartheid in the Long Arc of Liberalism

On December 29, 2023, South Africa filed an 84-page case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) accusing Israel of violating the 1984 Genocide Convention during its war in Gaza. According to the document, the actions of Israel are genocidal in nature because they are "intended to bring about the destruction of a substantial part of the Palestinian national, racial and ethnical group, that being the part of the Palestinian group in the Gaza Strip ('Palestinians in Gaza')."[1] Whereas Israel claims that it is engaged in a morally exemplary war of national self-defense against a barbaric horde of radical Islamists, South Africa exits the net of ideological narratives to foreground the physical and mental destruction imposed upon Palestinians. The grandeur of a modern myth—a lawful state against lawless terrorists—is exploded into the pieces of corporeality, the annihilation of native bodies, that guides the Zionist war machine. A political divide emerges here: the metaphysics of dominant narratives versus the physics of the oppressed. Ideological narratives practiced by status quo-ist powers are lubricated by the seamless, interlocking flow of discursive terms: Israelis are a perfectly cohesive group embodying the spirit of democracy in a land surrounded by the medievalism of an equally cohesive uncivilized race. There is no need for

1 "South Africa v. Israel: Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip," *International Court of Justice*, December 29 2023. Available here: https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/South-Africa-v-Israel.pdf.

practical critique, for the generative task of politics: politics is functional only when collective interests need to be debated and dissected through the antagonistic interaction of historically situated actors. The metaphysics of ruling class narratives dispenses with the necessity of practical critique: the lines of conflict are already given in the discursive neatness of well-defined groups. There can be no question of criticizing Israel and celebrating Hamas because the demarcations of struggle are etched into the inner spirituality of humanity, into what an Israeli government article calls the "sanctity of human life."[2]

The physics of the oppressed, on the other hand, starts with a situation where there is no pre-established spirit that can guarantee the "sanctity of human life." One has to stand amidst the rubble of bodies and buildings, attentive to the frayed edges of bombed memories and blood-stained belongings. The discursive flow of Zionist confidence in a self-professed democracy is interrupted by the material remains of Palestinian reality, a reality that is under constant siege by Israeli colonialists. This is the situation one begins with: a group experiencing intense subjection to a systematically organized drive for control and power. The insistence of a permanently suppressed colonized reality questions the integrity of the worldview that is preached by the establishment: how to reconcile the dismembered body of a Palestinian child with the moral magnificence of Israel? Can the claim to self-defense function as an absorptive narrative, incorporating all annihilated, colonized corporealities into the "sanctity of human life"? The cognitive dissonance that results from this comparison creates leakages in the ideological absorptivity of colonial hegemony: there is no "human life" whose "sanctity" one has to protect from the violence of the uncivilized. Any life has to be created anew through a painstaking critique of the reality that faces us. The reality that confronts us is constituted by the overwhelming brutality of the Zionist colonial project. Dismantling this colonial order is the first step in emancipating human life. That's why South Africa's legal document says that "[t]he acts [of destruction] are all attributable to Israel."[3] This is a surprising statement for the liberal worldview that regulates public

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, "Israel-Hamas Conflict 2023: Humanitarian Efforts," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs,* December 16 2023. Available here: https://www.gov.il/en/pages/israel-hamas-conflict-2023-humanitarian-efforts

3 "South Africa v. Israel," *International Court of Justice*, p. 1.

discourse: wasn't it Hamas that disregarded the norms of civilization by launching Operation al-Aqsa Flood? Isn't Israel justified in attempting to restitute this norm through its ongoing war? This viewpoint is analytically viable only if one begins with the presupposition of a civilization/spirit/human life that needs to be guarded from a death-obsessed enemy. However, if there is no pre-existing human life that requires maintenance from us, then no clear normative lines can be drawn. If life doesn't exist, if it is overshadowed by the presence of death, one can't attribute clear motivations to political actors. Israel doesn't preach life; Palestine doesn't preach death. Both life and death have to be *constructed* through a co-constitutive dynamic: by inflicting damage on the colonial war machine, Palestinian revolutionaries strengthen indigenous political autonomy, thus creating the social pre-conditions for a future life. Living is not an ethical spirit that can be monopolized by Israel. Rather, it is a function of politics, forged in the crucible of historical defeats and victories. As Nadia Bou Ali puts it:

> What does it really mean to be alive? This question is posed precisely when the conditions of living are suspended; we become conscious of life not only via an unmediated immediacy, but via an error, a shortcoming, a limit that is imposed on living. Living is only thinkable when it seizes to be an object to be apprehended: life is only an object if we recognize that it is conditioned by the ability of the subject to recognize the restraints on living.[4]

Community of the Free

The divide between the metaphysics of the oppressor and the physics of the oppressed flows from the historical constellation of liberal modernity. Liberal modernity's self-narration consists of an idealist myth of origins: a group of European and Euro-American white men started preaching universalist principles that later became embodied in the global structure of modern states and civil society. An "inner logic" of modernity is supposed to account for all the subsequent transformative social, political, and economic movements that humanity has witnessed.[5] If any upheaval takes place in any society, it can be attributed to the restless desire for free-

4 Nadia Bou Ali, "Ugly Enjoyment," *Parapraxis*, 26 November 2023. Available at: https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/ugly-enjoyment

5 Anne Phillips, "Gender and modernity," *Political Theory* 46, no.6 (2018): pp. 837-860.

dom that is constitutive of modernity's "inner logic." Against this idealist myth, one has to situate liberal modernity in the context of the capitalist mode of production. It is capitalism that breaks the stasis of traditional formations by organizing production around market competition rather than fixed norms. In pre-capitalist social formations, individual labour is consciously directed towards the fulfilment of social needs that have been determined in a concrete manner before the initiation of the production process. As Andrea Ricci notes, individual labor is "always and exclusively concrete labour, the producer of specific use values corresponding to the socially assigned task to each individual worker and intended for socially pre-determined specific consumers."[6] Insofar as labor is coordinated according to pre-given symbolic codes, there is no basis for equality: people are defined by the kinds of labor that they perform. For example, a blacksmith in a feudal village would be responsible for creating and repairing tools, weapons, or horseshoes for the lord and the local peasants. The blacksmith's labor was not interchangeable with that of a farmer or a miller. His role and identity were bound by his socially assigned task, and his work was intended for specific, predetermined consumers within the manor system. The labor was concrete, producing use values (e.g., tools or weapons) for those directly tied to his social position, reinforcing a system in which individuals were defined by the labor they performed. Because roles were so tightly linked to specific tasks and functions, there was no room for equality in this system. People were born into their roles and defined by the work they did, whether as a serf, blacksmith, or noble, with each position tied to the specific needs of the manor and society's broader symbolic codes.

The emergence of capitalism destroys the ability to coordinate labor according to traditional norms set by local rulers. In the market, it is impossible to determine before exchange the quantity of individual labor that will be socially exchanged in the form of money. As Karl Marx states, "a priori, no conscious social regulation of production takes place" and the social character of labor "asserts itself only as a blindly operating average."[7] The predominance of market competition means that

6 Andrea Ricci, *Value and Unequal Exchange in International Trade: The Geography of Global Capitalist Exploitation* (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 61.

7 Karl Marx, 'Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann,' April 6 1868, in J.S. Allen, P.S. Foner, D.J. Struik, and W.W. Weinstone (eds.), *Marx and Engels Collected Works (Vol. 43):*

the economy doesn't work through the creation of qualitative similarities and dissimilarities between concrete objects. Rather, it operates according to the quantitative calculus of the capitalist market: whatever fetches the greatest profit in the arena of competing capitalists is produced and distributed. There is no regard for the qualitative specificity of the labor that is involved in production. All labor is potentially equal in terms of its quantitative ability to contribute to the expansion of profit. In this way, the exchange of commodities on the capitalist market creates the possibility of equality since the labour of one person can be exchanged for that of another person. Marx writes:

> The secret of the expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labour are equal and equivalent, because, and so far as they are human labour in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice. This, however, is possible only in a society in which the great mass of the produce of labour takes the form of commodities, in which, consequently, the dominant relation between man and man, is that of owners of commodities.[8]

Does the break induced by capitalism mean that it conclusively institutes equality? The rise of capitalism in the West didn't solidify equality as a "popular prejudice." Women continued to be regarded as sexual objects meant to be oppressed by men. Colonized people were treated with naked brutality by self-assured colonizers. Workers were inferiorized on account of their impoverished class status. The persistence of inequalities demonstrates that there was no natural transition to "modernity." Capitalist market exchange only created the *possibility* of thinking equality by equalizing labor in terms of its quantitative contribution to profit-maximization. In no way did it present humans with a full-fledged spirit of modernity that liberals glorify. In the narrative of liberal modernity, gender, colonial, class and other forms of inequalities are dismissed as "relics" that the spirit of humanity has constantly transcended in its increasingly inclusive march of progress. But the materialist contextualization of modern ideas in the structure of capitalism demonstrates that the thought of equality emerged under specific conditions with no inherent guarantee of normative generalization. The conceptual possibility of

Letters 1868-70 (London: Lawrence & Wisehart, 2010), p. 69.

8 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Vol. 1): The Process of Capitalist Production*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1867/1967), p. 40.

equality brought about by the capitalist market could very well go along with an exclusivist socio-political identity. Equality could function as the equality of a certain community of individuals, rather than extending to all human beings. In the course of history, equality has functioned not as a purely rebellious disruptor of the status quo, but also as the cultural patrimony of an enlightened collectivity that defines itself against a mass of ignorant people. Liberal modernity has thus always posited equality and inequality at the same time. It arose not from an Enlightenment ambition for freedom, but from the assertion of the rising bourgeoisie to have the "equal" right to violate slaves and women as enjoyed by the sovereign monarch. The universality imagined by liberal modernity was a restricted one: propertied, white, and male. Domenico Losurdo explains:

> At its inception, liberalism expressed the self-consciousness of a class of owners of slaves or servants that was being formed as the capitalist system began to emerge and establish itself, thanks in part to those ruthless practices of expropriation and oppression implemented in the metropolis, and especially the colonies, which Marx described as 'original capitalist accumulation'... Against monarchical despotism and central power, this class demanded self-government and peaceful enjoyment of its property (including that in slaves and servants), under the sign of the rule of law. We can then say that this liberalism was the intellectual tradition which most rigorously circumscribed a restricted sacred space wherein the rules of the limitation of power obtained. It was an intellectual tradition characterized more by celebration of the community of free individuals that defined the sacred space than by celebration of liberty or the individual.[9]

Consider the slogan of the rebel American colonists: "We won't be their Negroes!" The ideological legitimacy of enslavement wasn't questioned. What was questioned was the harm that Britain was doing by treating American settlers as if they were "Negroes." Instead of being treated as such, American settlers also wished to enjoy the freedom to enslave enjoyed by the British. As Losurdo says, "precisely because they established a marked superiority over blacks and redskins, the colonists felt themselves completely equal to gentlemen and property owners residing in London, and demanded that such equality be recognized and consecrated at every level."[10] He thus asks whether the "movement of

9 Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History,* trans. Gregory Elliott (London/New York: Verso, 2011), p. 309.

10 Ibid., p. 301.

political emancipation by a section of the white settlers against control from England" should be considered a genuine revolution or a "reactionary slaveholders' rebellion."[11] The American Revolution (1775–1783) is traditionally viewed as a fight for independence and self-governance by American colonists against British imperial control. However, Losurdo challenges this view by suggesting that for certain settlers, particularly in the South, the revolution had reactionary motives. Rather than purely a struggle for freedom or democracy, settlers saw it as an opportunity to solidify regional power, particularly those who were part of the slaveholding class. With British interference removed and a weak central government established under the Articles of Confederation, Southern slaveholders had fewer barriers to expanding their regional dominance. The British, particularly after the Somerset case in 1772, which ruled that slavery was not recognized under English law, were increasingly viewed as opponents of slavery. Additionally, some of their colonial policies provided protections to Indigenous peoples by limiting settler expansion. The British had made efforts, such as the Royal Proclamation of 1763, to limit colonial expansion into Native lands west of the Appalachian Mountains, angering many settlers who sought to expand westward. The revolution, then, was driven partly by a desire to break free from these limitations, allowing settlers to seize more Indigenous lands.[12]

The historical contextualization of liberal modernity reveals that it was more dedicated to the preservation of the "community of the free" than to any genuine spirit of freedom. Rational, enlightened people were constituted as a sacred space whose boundaries had to be guarded from the profane space of unenlightened barbarians. This brings us back to the divide between the metaphysics of ruling class ideology and the physics of the oppressed: whereas liberal modernity portrays the uninterrupted expansion of a spirit of freedom, a counter-hegemonic perspective reveals how such a spirit is delimited by the sharpness of spatial barriers. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon incisively outlined these sharp spatial divisions through a comparison of the settlers' town and the native town. The settlers' town is a hub of "stone and steel," reflecting the stability and

11 Ibid., p. 307.

12 Other historians such as Dr. Gerald Horne, have made more detailed expositions of this argument in works like *The Counter-revolution of 1776* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

permanence that accompanies colonial power.[13] Brightly lit, the town remains unaware of dark recesses. No garbage lies in the open. Streets are free from holes or stones. The elimination of any form of unevenness manifests itself in the form of the "settler's feet," which are always shielded by sturdy shoes.[14] This is the "community of the free": "The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners."[15] The town of the colonized people, on the other hand, "is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute."[16] Birth and death are insignificant events: it doesn't matter where or how a person is born; it doesn't matter where or how a person dies. The native town is a cramped space, a space that fails to live up to the standards of spatiality due to its lack of spaciousness. Whereas the presence of adequate space in the settlers' town enables the individuation of colonizers as humans with a distinct biographical identity, the colonized town is just an agglomeration of stacked bodies: "men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built on top of the other."[17] Lacking food, shoes, coal, or light, the native town becomes a "crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire."[18] The "community of the free" gives way to the profanity of a strange space that is not able to stand erect, constantly bowing to the confidence of the settlers' town.

The spatiality of liberal modernity demonstrates the necessity of practical struggle against oppressors. A nebulous spirit of freedom, or an innate sanctity of human life can never function as the motor of emancipation. Such a motor is constituted by the historical weight of the oppressed that breaches the barriers erected by the oppressor. The territory occupied by the settlers' town has to be re-occupied—both materially and imaginatively—by the praxis of the colonized. Land that appears impermeable and impervious to native movement has to be subjected to the

13 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 39.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

fluidity of anti-colonial operations: soil has to become permeable, breaking out of the confinement of colonial demarcations. Operation al-Aqsa Flood performed precisely this praxis of permeability by breaking down the infrastructure of Israeli security. Rawan Masri writes:

> From the moment those fighters flew in on paramotors, disrupting the parallel reality that was this music festival, they accomplished something profound (one must wonder what it felt like for these fighters to see a party just outside where they have been trapped under a suffocating blockade). They reimagined their relation to the land not as something in the distance but as a tangible place for them to set foot on. They entered the rest of their homeland not through a checkpoint hoping to be granted a permit, but as a force to be reckoned with. They were autonomous, enacting their will by force against this population of heavily militarized settlers, the very vast majority of whom have "served" or are currently in the Israeli military where careers are made out of Palestinian suffering and death. That moment when a (Palestinian! For Once!) bulldozer took down the fence was decolonization in practice: that fence, and the snipers behind it defending the settler-colonial order, were overcome.[19]

The Modernity of Apartheid

When political struggles are analyzed in terms of their resistance to the spatiality of oppression, it becomes impossible to construct the fiction of a unified, dynamic liberal modernity. In order to maintain that fiction, one needs to consider struggles as an embodiment of a prior universal principle. One is supposed to be struggling not against the historically constructed spatial divisions of liberal modernity but against "relics" that scupper the onward march of the spirit of freedom. It is asserted that the spirit of equality preached by modern thinkers has served as a source from which subjugated peoples have derived resources for their own struggle against inequality. This results in an ideological obesity: every particular struggle against historical oppressions can be assimilated to the original message of liberal modernity. No historical dynamic remains immune from the all-pervasive spirit of freedom that supposedly animates liberal modernity. Take the example of apartheid. In the liberal consensus that has formed after the downfall of socialist regimes, it is presumed that the end of apartheid was caused by a drive towards democratization. The

19 Rawan Masri, "'Operation Al Aqsa Flood' was an act of decolonization," *Mondoweiss*, 13 October 2023. Available at: https://mondoweiss.net/2023/10/operation-al-aqsa-flood-was-an-act-of-decolonization/

downfall of apartheid is framed as a conflict between a peaceful, gentle South African crowd and an autocratic party-state. Democracy is, then, joined to a general thesis of modernization, which is represented as the ultimate resolution to all social problems. The responsibility of humanity consists in fighting for the extension of the democratic idea to exceptional pockets of autocracy that continue to remain aloof from what is plainly a universal trend.

According to Anthony Butler, "[t]he ANC's assault on the apartheid state was not justified in the name of democracy; nor was it executed by means of liberal democratic practice. Other opposition parties were not ideologically committed to liberal democracy, and the most effective struggles against apartheid were by unionized workers seeking improved living standards and by South Africans resisting influx control."[20] Given the lack of liberal democratic ideology among anti-apartheid political groups, why does mainstream discourse assimilate the fall of apartheid to a general narrative about democratization? This is linked to the presumption of a unified spirit of freedom that struggles for democracy everywhere. When the presence of this spirit is assumed, then apartheid inevitably appears as an aberration from a triumphant global modernity. What happens if we get rid of this assumption? What if liberal modernity is not a coherent logic of freedom but a historically situated "community of the free"? This means that apartheid can be analyzed as a component of liberal modernity. Liberal critics argue that racism or tribalism, rather than the modern idea of self-government, was the intellectual foundation for apartheid in South Africa. However, Butler counters this by emphasizing that ethnicity and nationality play a crucial role in shaping identity within liberal-democratic theories of self-government.[21] Representative democracy hinges on the interconnectedness of collectivity, territory, and agency. Collectivity embodies the notion of a nation or people unified by shared identities, traditions, and moral frameworks. This idea is manifested in the modern state, which represents a clearly defined territorial entity and acts as a cohesive agency for its citizens. Within this framework, the state emerges as a singular actor, expressing the collective will of its people and distinguishing itself from other nations. The

20 Anthony Butler, *Democracy and Apartheid: Political Theory, Comparative Politics and the Modern South African State* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), p. 58.

21 Ibid., p. 78.

boundary between the "inside" of this political community—characterized by belonging, shared resources, and mutual obligations—and the "outside," filled with strangers and uncertainties, is sharply defined. The inner world of community thrives on stability, security, and economic strength, all rooted in internal legitimacy, which arises from the people's acceptance of their shared identity and way of life. Thus, the effectiveness of a state as an actor on the global stage relies on its ability to cultivate a citizenry that feels a sense of belonging and coherence, alongside a territorial domain that serves as both a physical and metaphorical home, aligning with the state's capacity to harness and manage resources. The construction of the democratic nation as a "home" accounts for the exclusions that have characterized democracy, which always defines itself through a distinction from a "homeless" other:

> [P]ersons can be defined as non-citizens on grounds of age, gender, origin and race. The scales at which democracy expresses a relation between territory and political agency are arbitrary, and a part of a given territory can become a self-governing unit (to the potential benefit of inhabitants in seceding provinces, or to their evident detriment as in South Africa's homeland system). People can be characterized as lacking the qualities that make citizenship meaningful: education, civilization or property ownership. South Africa, indeed, has seen each of these arguments used to justify the exclusion of Blacks from meaningful citizenship.[22]

Since liberal modernity is defined by collectivity, territory, and agency, it wasn't difficult for South African apartheid to use those ideological resources in the construction of its own "community of the free." For Afrikaners, apartheid wasn't so much an atavistic aberration from liberal modernity but a modality for ensuring democratic self-rule among their own ethnic community. Racial franchise was the means through which Afrikaners expressed their liberal-democratic "ideal of self-government—a restored harmony between ethnicity, agency and territory."[23] The state became the collective embodiment of modern agency: society could be molded into harmony through the strong interventionism of a panoramic gaze. Stephen John Sparks foregrounds the modernity of apartheid through an analysis of SASOL, which was an oil from coal

22 Ibid., p. pp. 67-68.

23 Ibid., p. 82.

plant.[24] SASOL's managers saw their project as a transformation of the subjectivities of rural Afrikaners into modern industrial citizens. In 1974, the then managing director Dawid de Villiers of SASOL scrutinized the draft manuscript of the company history that marked its 25th anniversary. He remarked that the technical specialists who established the coal-to-oil plant in Sasolburg in the 1950s "took a bunch of farm children and taught them to do the thing [converting coal to oil]. They brought a bunch of kitchen kaffirs here, who are now completely sophisticated people."[25] Here, one can witness the binary that is constitutive of liberal modernity: rural, uneducated Afrikaners are configured as subjects who are vested with the imperative of exiting from the profanity of an emasculating environment. The racial modernity of Afrikaners needs to be ensured by separating from Africans, who were categorized by apartheid ideologists as inherently rural. In the project of this racial modernity, the technical ingenuity of South African engineers was supposed to create an integrated white society: SASOL products would be used by prosperous white people to drive cars, reflecting the fusion of market aspirations with the exclusivism of an ethnic collectivity. This is a linear vision of development: a backward tradition is exited to enter a new, clearly defined superior age. The state plays a crucial role in this linear development, shaping the disorder of society into the order of a liberal-democratic collectivity, a "community of the free." Deborah Posel links this racial modernity with the wider history of Western liberal modernity:

> South Africa's reference point, and political standard, was always Western—even at the height of the country's international isolation as a racist pariah state. The idea of proper planning became integral to the discourse of power here, as in colonial states elsewhere. Indeed, the aspiration to 'create order from chaos' became one of the mantras of apartheid policy making. The advance of apartheid was therefore closely associated with the professionalisation of administration.[26]

During the age of cold war, the creation of order from chaos in-

24 Stephen John Sparks, *Apartheid Modern: South Africa's Oil from Coal Project and the History of a South African Company Town,* PhD Dissertation, The University of Michigan, 2012.

25 Ibid., p. 90.

26 Deborah Posel, "The Apartheid Project: 1948-1970," in Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager and Bill Nasson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa Volume 2: 1885 to 1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 344.

volved tackling the possibility of a Soviet-backed anti-imperialist uprising among the people of the Third World. After World War II, the rise of global communism heightened fears of political and social instability in countries like South Africa, where the government sought to prevent any ideological shift that might disrupt its apartheid system.[27] In this context, the Western bloc, led by the United States and its allies, pursued strategies to protect their interests in key regions like the Middle East, which they saw as critical to stopping Soviet expansion. Prime Minister Daniel François Malan expressed this concern in April 1952 when he emphasized South Africa's readiness to collaborate with NATO and the Commonwealth to prevent Soviet advances into Africa through the Middle East. South Africa viewed any Soviet presence in North Africa or the Middle East as a direct threat, as instability in these regions could easily spill over into Africa, particularly through Egypt, which was a strategic gateway between continents. South Africa's alignment with the Western bloc dovetailed with its relationship with Israel. Shortly after Israel's independence, its Foreign Minister, Moshe Sharett, visited South Africa, and an Israeli destroyer made a symbolic visit, signaling the developing ties between the two nations. Both shared concerns over security in the region, particularly as they witnessed the rise of Pan-Arabism under Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who took power following the military overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy in 1952. Nasser's anti-colonial and Pan-Africanist policies alarmed South Africa, as he became a hero for many African liberation movements. By the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956, South Africa found itself sympathetic to the tripartite invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel, seeing it as a necessary measure to counter Nasser's influence. Many Afrikaner Nationalists, in particular, used the crisis to justify South Africa's apartheid policies, arguing that their own racial policies were a defense against the kind of emancipation and anti-colonial fervor spreading across Africa.

The integrity of a white socio-political order had to be defended from the black and brown masses that were rising up along with the communist forces. Colonialist obsession with the dangers of communism/anti-imperialism translated into a strategy of paranoia in which no dissent would be tolerated. This paranoia continues to structure Israeli politics.

27 Richard P. Stevens, "Zionism, South Africa and Apartheid: The Paradoxical Triangle," *Phylon* 32, no.2 (1971), pp. 123-142.

In his opening statement at the ICJ, Israeli lawyer Tal Becker declared, "They [Hamas] are coming for us."[28] The paranoia of settler-colonial violence highlights the fascist valence of global liberal modernity. Under the guise of fighting communism and promoting democracy, the US has played a key role in spreading authoritarian and fascist practices globally after World War II.[29] It has done so by supporting dictatorial regimes, military juntas, and other oppressive governments that align with American economic and geopolitical interests. This has helped sustain a global system of repression, which includes mass violence, torture, dirty wars, as well as covert operations. Rather than defeating fascism, the US has enabled its expansion by incorporating former Nazis into its Cold War strategies. The internationalization of fascism through the structures of liberal modernity was highlighted by South African Pan-Africanist Victor L. Makyekiso in his 1969 essay 'Fascist South Africa and Zionist "Israel"—Hitler's Heirs.' According to him, "Israeli Zionism and South African Christian Nationalism manifest themselves as religious movements of a people that have a covenant with God."[30] This religious dimension directly draws upon fascist ideas of racial "mutation": it is supposed that a God-given race will suddenly acquire the capacity to transform itself into supremely powerful human beings, thereby contributing to the flourishing of humanity.[31] The humanity that is sought to be strengthened is an imperialist construct, founded upon violence against the colonized. African National Congress leader Oliver Tambo, addressing the UN General Assembly in November 1982, stated:

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28 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, 'Opening statement of MFA Legal Advisor Dr. Tal Becker at the International Court of Justice Proceedings,' *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 29 December 2023. Available at: https://www.gov.il/en/pages/opening-statement-of-mfa-legal-advisor-tal-becker-at-icj-proceedings-12-jan-2024.

29 Gabriel Rockhill, 'The U.S. Did Not Defeat Fascism in WWII, It Discreetly Internationalized It,' *Counterpunch*, 16 October 2020. Available at: https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/10/16/the-u-s-did-not-defeat-fascism-in-wwii-it-discretely-internationalized-it/.

30 Victor L. Makyekiso, 'Fascist South Africa and Zionist "Israel"—Hitler's Heirs,' *Black Agenda Report,* 14 February 2024. Available at: https://www.blackagendareport.com/essay-fascist-south-africa-and-zionist-israel-hitlers-heirs-victor-lungelo-mayekiso-1969.

31 Ibid.

> The parallels between the Middle East and Southern Africa are as clear as they are sinister. The onslaught on the Lebanon, the massive massacre of Lebanese and Palestinians, the attempt to liquidate the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Palestinian people, all of which were enacted with impunity by Israel, have been followed minutely and with unconcealed interest and glee by the Pretoria racist regime which has designs for perpetrating the same kind of crime in Southern Africa in the expectation that, like Israel, it will be enabled by its allies to get away with murder.[32]

Zionism as a Liberal-Democratic Ideology

The modernity of apartheid demonstrates that liberal-democratic ideology is not immune to colonial impulses. When Zionists today foreground the uniqueness of Israel as a beacon of democracy in an otherwise undemocratic Arab world, their claim needs to be traced back to the intellectual construction of the "community of the free" involved in liberal modernity. On July 25, 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave a speech before a joint session of the US Congress. He framed the genocide in Gaza as a "clash between barbarism and civilization. It's a clash between those who glorify death and those who sanctify life."[33] This is the classic trope of liberal modernity: the freedom/democracy/life that is defended by the liberal ideologue exists not as a universal dynamic of transformation but as a clearly delimited object whose possession is threatened by others. Instead of treating life as an indeterminate process that needs to be constructed through historical struggle, it is treated as an already available thing that needs to be protected with determined aggression. In the case of Zionist settler-colonialism, "Iran's axis of terror" functions as the embodiment of death. The "community of the free" has to be anchored vis-à-vis this otherized enemy. As Netanyahu says: "For the forces of civilization to triumph, America and Israel must stand together. Because when we stand together, something very simple happens. We win. They lose. And my friends, I came to assure you today of one

32 Oliver Tambo, "Statement at the plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly, 9 November 1982, New York," *South African History Online*, 9 December 2016. Available at: https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/statement-oliver-tambo-plenary-meeting-united-nations-general-assembly-09-november-1982-new.

33 Benjamin Netanyahu, "We're protecting you," *Times of Israel*, 24 July 2024. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/were-protecting-you-full-text-of-netanyahus-address-to-congress/.

thing: we will win."[34] The ideological notion of "civilization" sutures the different communities of the free into a global order of democratic harmony, one that is constantly threatened by the disorder of un-democratic others. Hamid Dabashi locates the discursive construction of "civilization" in the West, wherein the rising bourgeoisie used such a universalizing abstraction to criticize the dynastic histories of aristocracies and the religious values of Christian elites.[35] This capitalist project began with the establishment of unified nation-states and national cultures and shifted to the civilizational realm as Western economies were faced with the consequences of colonial exploitation. Discrete civilizations in the colonized world—India, Islamic, African etc.—were invented as the negative counterpart to Western civilization, whose colonial endeavors were justified as humanizing efforts on the part of European national economies. The construction of a civilizational worldview meant the suppression of the "dynastic, regional, and tribal histories" of the colonies and their re-narration "into national cultures and...civilizational constructs—Islamic, Indian, and Chinese."[36] In the context of Zionist settler-colonialism, Dabashi's critical genealogy of civilization needs to be supplemented by a political account of the figure of "un-civilization." Netanyahu is very clear that the Israeli war in Gaza "is not a clash of civilizations. It's a clash between barbarism and civilization."[37] The theater of colonial warfare moves from the binary of superior Western civilization and inferior non-Western civilizations to a more radical binary of "civilization" and "barbarism." This radical binary flows from the foundational opposition that motivates liberal modernity: the sacred space of free people versus the profane space of unfree people. The term "civilization" reflects the international organicity of this sacred space: a global alliance of freedom paves the way to democracy through its grand conquest over the surrounding environment of un-civilization. In the words of Netanyahu:

> I'm hopeful about Israel because my people, the Jewish people, emerged from the depths of hell, from dispossession and genocide, and against all odds we

34 Ibid.

35 Hamid Dabashi, "For the Last Time: Civilization," in *On Edward Said: Remembrance of Things Past* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020).

36 Ibid.

37 Netanyahu, "We're protecting you."

> restored our sovereignty in our ancient homeland, we built a powerful and vibrant democracy, a democracy that pushes the boundaries of innovation for the betterment of all humanity.[38]

In the above passage, democracy is configured as a project that Israel consciously undertook for the "betterment of all humanity." However, there is no necessary link between "democracy" and "humanity." In Zionist ideology, democracy has always stood for Jewish self-government, for the ability of Jews to collectively participate in the oppression of Palestinians. From its very beginning, the Zionist movement has always refused to share democracy with Palestinians.[39] Prior to the formation of Israel, Palestinian leaders sought to reach an agreement with the Zionist settlers. In 1928, they voted to grant the settlers equal representation in future governing bodies, even though the settlers were a newly arrived minority. However, the Zionist leadership turned down this offer. The Zionist leaders had initially supported the proposal, but only because they assumed the Palestinians would reject it. In reality, the concept of shared representation was fundamentally opposed to the principles of Zionism, which wanted to subjugate Palestinians. In the Zionist rendering presented by Netanyahu, the aggressive expansionism of settler-colonialism becomes a "beacon of progress and a beacon of light" whereby the "medievalism" of "militant Islam" is dispelled.[40] This statement shows how ideas of progress are not unproblematic expressions of freedom but core components of colonial visions of unidirectional change wherein a community of the free establishes its democratic rule over an unfree, unenlightened people.

The refutation of the humanist pretensions of liberal-democratic ideology forces us to look for alternative political concepts. For Netanyahu, democracy means the "[v]ictory of liberty over tyranny, victory of life over death, victory of good over evil." The history of liberal modernity shows us that there is no neat definition for the binaries that are mentioned. What does "liberty" mean when it comes at the cost of the annihilation of Palestinians? What does "life" mean when it is inextricably

38 Ibid.

39 Ilan Pappe, *Ten Myths About Israel* (London/New York: Verso, 2017), p. 50.

40 Benjamin Netanyahu, "Speech at the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America in New Orleans," *Prime Minister's Office*, 8 November 2010. Available at: https://www.gov.il/en/pages/speechga081110

intertwined with the "death" of Palestinians? Our notions of "good" and "evil" need to be reconstructed from the bottom-up, taking into account the popular struggle against colonialism and imperialism. This reconstruction must begin by according Operation al-Aqsa Flood the political dignity it deserves: the October 7 attack wasn't as an outburst of atavistic anti-Semitism but a militant act that disrupted the narcissistic self-security of the Zionist state, thus clearing the space for a new life. Amilcar Cabral expresses this anti-colonial vision of freedom eloquently:

> At the end of the day, we want the following: concrete and equal possibilities for any child of our land, man or woman, to advance as a human being, to give all of his or her capacity, to develop his or her body and spirit, in order to be a man or a woman at the height of his or her actual ability. We have to destroy everything that would be against this in our land, comrades. Step by step, one by one if it be necessary—but we have to destroy in order to construct a new life... This is our work, comrades. If you won't understand this, you can't understand anything.[41]

41 Amilcar Cabral, *Resistance and Decolonization,* trans. Dan Wood (London/New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), p. 77.

Chapter 2

Palestine in the Global Intellectual Conjuncture: Marxism and Post-Colonialism

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, "[a] philosophy is first of all a particular way in which the arising class becomes conscious of itself."[1] Insofar as class struggle encompasses the varied dynamics required for the constitution of a new hegemonic bloc, philosophy has to simultaneously function as "a totalization of knowledge, a method, a regulative idea, an offensive weapon, and a community of language."[2] Given that philosophy arises from the historical destruction of social formations whose developmental potential has been exhausted, its establishment as the general cultural milieu of a specific class is rare. Among these periods of philosophical creation is included Marxism, which forms "the humus of every particular thought and the horizon of all culture"[3] as long as capitalism exists. There is no going beyond historically given philosophies "so long as man has not gone beyond the historical moment which they express."[4] Extending this line of argument, Sartre remarks: "I have often remarked on the fact that an 'anti-Marxist' argument is only the apparent rejuvenation of a

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. H. E. Barnes, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 4.

2 Ibid., p. 6.

3 Ibid., p. 7.

4 Ibid.

pre-Marxist idea. A so-called 'going beyond' Marxism will be at worst only a return to pre-Marxism; at best, only the rediscovery of a thought already contained in the philosophy which one believes he has gone beyond."[5] This doesn't mean that Marxism is a dogmatic doctrine that needs to be obediently followed. On the contrary, Sartre wants to emphasize that, as long as we remain trapped within the capitalist epoch, we can't ignore the Marxist method. The insights gleaned from Marxism have to be critically debated and deepened through an open-ended process of creative development that is cognizant of changing realities. It is the contention of this book that post-colonial philosophy's anti-Marxist hostility with regards to the Palestinian question constitutes a blinkered approach that forces it to regress to pre-Marxist ideas. The self-assured strength of post-colonialism "merely reproduces the certitudes of the class which supports it,"[6] namely a post-Fordist bourgeois alliance that prefers the powerless transgressions of abstract internationalism over the concrete politics of national liberation.

Any analysis of Palestine in the global intellectual conjuncture has to refer to the theoretical modalities through which its discursive circulation is secured. This endeavor, however, transcends a mere enumeration of the diverse ways in which Palestine is passively registered as an object of analysis. Rather, it involves an essentially *self-reflexive* dimension, wherein attention is paid to the ability of a theory to produce practical effects in the conjuncture in which it is situated. How do Marxism and post-colonialism fare in terms of their self-reflexive capacities? Grounded in the workers' movement, Marxism has always subjected itself to self-critical scrutiny. This has taken the form of the self-consciousness of structural conditioned-ness, the recognition of the historical mechanisms that constitute the dynamic origins and source of vigor for Marxist thought. Insofar that Marxist scientific practice "is not a faculty of reflection, which is free to lose itself or find itself according to this or that method, but is an activity, a process that begins from determinate conditions and produces knowledge,"[7] it feeds on the social practice of society as a whole. This dependence on practice has manifested itself in the three historical referents of Marxism: 1) actually existing socialist states; 2) wars of national

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 5.

7 Jason Read, "The Order and Connection of Ideas: Theoretical Practice in Macherey's Turn to Spinoza," *Rethinking Marxism 19,* no.4 (2007), p. 505.

liberation; and 3) organized workers' movement. What is important to note here is that all three of these referents are internally divided; they don't provide a homogenous base of ideological purity for Marxist theory. In the case of actually existing socialist states, there has been significant debate regarding their class character and transitional policies. Socialist Arab states like Iraq, Syria, and Egypt implemented massive land reform measures, nationalized industry and financial institutions, constructed a system of universal healthcare and education, followed a self-sufficient policy of import-substitution industrialization and undertook public investments in heavy industry. Due to the substantial change it effected in comparison with the colonial pattern of income distribution, the Arab socialist period was called the "beautiful times" (*Alzaman Aljamil*).[8] However, the political dominance of military officers and the intermediate stratum—consisting of professionals, small capital holders, and small land-holding peasantry—meant that the wage-labor relationship (the centrality of workers' control in the labor process) wasn't realized. That's why Ali Kadri notes that "Arab socialism was in retrospect capitalism held in suspension by Soviet support and also because it did not sufficiently bond together the national front in anti-imperialist struggle."[9] Wars of national liberation have always been dominated by the question of the extent of their progressive role, so much so that entire movements have been subjected to diverging characterizations. On 27 May 1948, the Soviet Ambassador Andrei Gromyko decried the decision of Arab countries to send their armies to fight Israel, since the latter represented a "national liberation movement."[10] This chauvinist mischaracterization of Zionism gave rise to a concomitantly distorted workers' movement. Consider, for instance, Yishuvism: an ideology that asserts that Jewish workers in Palestine are not colonizers but builders of a socialist Jewish society in Palestine.[11] This held that the Jewish community in Palestine is playing an advanced function by fomenting class struggle and contradictions within Palestine's supposedly stagnant Arab society. What the

8 Ali Kadri, *The Unmaking of Arab Socialism* (London/New York: Anthem Press, 2016), p. 29.

9 Ibid., p. 42.

10 Ahmad H. Sa'di, "Communism and Zionism in Palestine-Israel: A Troubled Legacy," *Holy Land Studies* 9, no.2 (2010), 172.

11 Ibid., p. 176.

internal division of socialist referents demonstrates is that Marxism is not an ideological or programmatic label but a creative method that allows the mapping out of contradictions.

These practical ensembles function as the basis for the discursive structure of Marxism, which aggregates, disaggregates, and re-aggregates its theoretical coordinates within certain basic but continuously accumulating contours. Politico-theoretical openness is maintained through the pursuit of a determined practical line. Che Guevara explains this schema through the notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat': "On the most basic level, our country has what is scientifically called the dictatorship of the proletariat, and we do not allow anyone to touch or threaten the state power of the proletarian dictatorship. But within the dictatorship of the proletariat there can be a vast field for discussion and expression of ideas."[12]

Post-colonialism is diametrically opposed to the Marxist insistence on a genealogical politics of historical self-consciousness. It revels in the amnesiac celebration of oppositional discourse, which, instead of following an organized political orientation, bases its existence on repeated transgressions of any systematic discourse. Radical anti-essentialism, the abandonment of any specific theoretical intervention in favor of the celebration of chaotic plurality, is elevated into the only legitimate form of criticism. The fluidity of anti-doctrinal denunciation comes to replace the affirmative enunciations enabled by the operational procedures of specific political thoughts. Since post-colonialism is fixated on the subversion of discursive stability, it is unable to move beyond the negative moment of counter-hegemony to the positive moment of hegemony, which requires an engagement with a theory's ability to assess its own politico-practical abilities in the field of class struggle. Countering the inherent ideological forgetfulness of post-colonial theory, Christina Petterson argues that its emergence "could be viewed as marking the moment in which the Third World moved from an affiliation with the second world [Soviet Union] to the first [Euro-Atlantic core capitalist countries]."[13] This shift in affiliation is intertwined with the decline of the socialist sphere and the crisis

12 Che Guevara, *Che Guevara talks to Young People* (Toronto: Pathfinder Press, 2000), p. 93.

13 Christina Petterson, 'The Second World: Cold War Ideology and the Development of Postcolonial Criticism,' Unpublished manuscript.

of peripheral auto-centric developmentalism. These circumstances laid the foundation for the emergence of neoliberal globalization and the establishment of a migrant Third World petty-bourgeois and technocratic segment within the metropolitan academia.

The gradual unraveling of the three historic compromises of the post-WWII era—Sovietism, social democracy, and national liberation movements—found a parallel reflection in the state of the Palestinian struggle. With the emergence of post-colonial studies during the 1980s, an inadvertent mirroring of the disarray faced by the Palestinian people became apparent. In the aftermath of the devastating Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982, the expulsion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon, and the tragic Sabra and Shatila massacre, the Palestinian cause encountered formidable trials. The American empire employed its imperial machinery to relegate, delegitimize, and vilify the PLO. This encompassed designating the PLO as a terrorist organization, the closure of its UN offices, the rejection of negotiations with PLO representatives by the US government, and even forcing the US ambassador to the UN to step down due to interactions with a PLO representative. The weakening of the traditional anti-systemic forces at the hands of the Global North was mirrored by post-colonial theory in its foundational anti-Marxism, a comprehensive disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a resultant glorification of liminality, hybridity, migrancy, and multi-culturality; an aggressive rejection of totalizing social explanations, and the denigration of organized politics.

The (Anti)Politics of Exilic Subjectivity

The weaknesses of post-colonialism are exemplified by Edward W. Said, whose humanist, secularist, and cosmopolitan credentials push the boundaries of post-colonial studies to their outermost limits. Said practices a form of detached critique wherein an independent and oppositional subjectivity has to gather resources from a variety of sites without normative obligations to any one system. This represents the occupation of an exilic position: the shaky grounds of disrupted identity alert the detached critic to the instability of history and time, reminding them that reality is constituted by a cacophony of forces that can't be channeled into a single theoretical tunnel. Consequently, hostility toward an unjust

status quo manifests as a generalized disinterest in "theory," "grand theory," "disciplinary knowledge," etc. These conceptual narratives are dubbed as ideological tools aimed at offering an overweening explanatory framework for history and identifying the subjects capable of challenging the existing oppressions. "All such systems are rejected, in the characteristic post-modernist way, so that resistance can always, only be personal, micro, and shared only by small, determinate number of individuals who happen, perchance, to come together, outside the so-called 'grand narratives' of class, gender, nation."[14]

When applied to the study of imperialism, the exilic disposition means that one has access to both sides of the imperialist divide, which allows the critic to move beyond their parochial cultures and see the West and non-West as globally connected entities. This is a contrapuntal reading of imperialism. The musical metaphor of counterpoint entails two superimposed melodies, where their blend is regarded as an incidental harmony between two distinct melodic lines, rather than a forced fusion imposed by an overbearing sound. Along these lines, imperialism is imagined as the interaction of "various themes" with "only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one."[15] In the "resulting polyphony," Said notes, "there is concert in order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work."[16] Imperialism is crisscrossed with multiple "interdependent histories and overlapping domains," and with the "continuous history of struggle."[17] This is the atonality of the imperialist ensemble, which doesn't follow any singular compositional rule. Given the dynamism of the global imperialist environment, it can't be reduced to sociological-economic facts of exploitation and domination. There is no overarching theoretical

14 Aijaz Ahmad, "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said," *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no.30 (1992), p. 109.

15 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage Books: New York, 1994), 51, cited in Jeanne Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory* (Rowman and Littlefield: London, 2022), p. 56.

16 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p.56.

17 Edward W. Said, "Culture and Imperialism," in David Barsamian (ed.), *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with Edward Said* (New York: Haymarket, 2010), 78, cited in Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, p. 56.

principle that can capture imbrications, confrontations, rebellions, interactions, and aggressions that generate the complex and uneven history of the West and the non-West. Commenting upon the untidiness of history, Jeanne Morefield writes:

> [W]riting contrapuntal history—thinking and reading contrapuntally—is never merely about articulating a set of propositions that one is "simply for or against." Rather, the internally dynamic, atonal, hybrid, riotous circulation of culture and resistance within the contrapuntal ensemble means that the interpretive impulses of counterpoint have to be similarly multivocal and similarly atonal. In political terms, this means that because men and women in the global North and the global South "belong to the same history," if we chose to listen to just one theme from that complex ensemble—one history, one explanatory factor, one social theory—then we lost sight of the transformative potential that weaves its way through the shared whole.[18]

Considering the polyphony, hybridity, connections and shared history of the imperialist ensemble, it should be conceived as "both post-imperial and not post-imperial. It is also an infinitely richer world—containing infinitely more knotty forms of domination, injustice, resistance, and shared experience—than Enlightenment cosmopolitanism can envision or describe."[19] The relationship between the West and the non-West is one of "suspended animation,"[20] characterized not by the simple imposition of one view upon another but by the fissured history of continuous contestations and shared lineages. "The problem," Said remarks, "is to keep in mind two ideas that are in many ways antithetical—the fact of the imperial divide, on the one hand, and the notion of shared experiences, on the other—without diminishing the force of either."[21] Reflections upon the atonality of imperialism should move beyond the merely economic aspects of the relation to scrutinize the complex ideological formations where the colonizer and the colonized can be seen in their unpredictable and multi-layered process of mutual constitution. This is visible in Said's concept of "imaginative geography,"[22] whose con-

18 Morefield, *Unsettling the World,* p. 75.

19 Ibid., p. 84.

20 Ibid., p. 65.

21 Edward W. Said, "Always on Top," *London Review of Books*, 20 March 2003. Available at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v25/n06/edward-said/always-on-top.

22 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books: New York, 1979), pp. 49-73.

ceptual reach he ultimately extended to convey the idea that the privilege to reside or labor on a piece of land is essentially determined, debated, and even temporarily settled through narrative.[23] The legal ownership of land typically falls into the hands of individuals who can demonstrate a connection through inheritance or prior occupation. Both of these claims are supported by narratives that emphasize one version of history over another. In the end, the legal system tends to align itself with the narrative that garners the broadest support and acceptance. This idealist thinking leads him to reverse the relation between imperialism and colonialism. Typically, colonialism is believed to have preceded imperialism, involving a process of private enterprises and holding companies spanning from the 15th to the 19th century. During this period, resource extraction, labor exploitation and settler-colonialism were facilitated through bureaucracies, local elites, and occupying armies. Imperialism developed in the late 19th century as an indirect form of international domination, pursued through trade agreements, sanctions, and austerity packages. For Said, however, imperialism is not an updated version of colonial coercion and looting but a primitive thirst for racial conquest: "a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples."[24]

Said's writings on Palestine carry the imprint of his exilic disposition. He is not concerned with finding philosophically cogent resolutions of political, cultural, and economic injustices. These "meta-interpretative explanations"[25] are replaced by an experimental approach that resists any methodological entrapment. Said's focus on the Palestinian issue is immersed in the midst of real-world political dynamics. It delves into the tangible aspects of injustice in politics, explores the narratives that shape identities within this political context, and engages with the intense and passionate discussions where activism, persuasive language, and proposed remedies all revolve within the sphere of power politics. Assertions regarding justice and injustice are recognized as ideological claims that need to be unpacked accordingly. This unpacking translates into an "unhoused perspective where we can observe politics and culture not just as

23 Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* pp. xii-xiii.

24 Ibid., p. 10.

25 Morefield, *Unsettling the World,* p. 46.

problems to be solved but as a 'series of reflections' to be engaged."[26] The unsettled state of exile doesn't restrict itself to pointing out the tensions, dispossessions, and separations that weigh the present. It is also attentive to instances in history where peaceful coexistence has occurred. Over the ages, Palestine has been home to various inhabitants, including Canaanites, Moabites, Jebusites, and Philistines in ancient times, as well as Romans, Ottomans, Byzantines, and Crusaders in more recent history. The multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational character of Palestine belies any notion of purity or homogeneity.

The position of exilic disruption promotes a compassionate sense of historical connections wherein the co-constituting connections of Israel and Palestine impart a similar fluidity to the peace process. Insofar as imperialism produces a complexly entwined maelstrom of polyphonous identities, a just peace has to reflect that dynamic atmosphere. The development of Palestinian and Israeli identities has been intertwined as a result of myriad historical events. These include the colonialist policies during the mandate period, the large-scale migration of Holocaust survivors from Europe, the Palestinian exodus of 1948, the 1967 war, the eruption of Intifadas, the emergence of Hamas, the formation of the Palestinian Authority, the continuing land confiscations, and the geographical changes and displacement driven by settler colonialism. The historical suffering experienced by dispossessed Palestinians is deeply connected with the historical trauma of Jewish Holocaust survivors. These material interfaces prepare the ground for a composite identity, which is characterized by overlaps and open-endedness. This composite identity is a long-term process based on epistemic irresoluteness, the willingness to acknowledge identities as incomplete stories without any definitively delineated closure. The existence of the other has to be treated as a secular fact without any essentialist or theological trappings. Contrapuntal connections between Jews and Palestinians gesture towards a secular solution: the establishment of a unitary state that guarantees the Right of Return for both Jews and Palestinians in an architecture of common secular rights. This fluid project requires the "crucial role of education" in upending the "constitutively bellicose" and Orientalist "clash of civilization" ideology.[27]

26 Ibid., p. 50.

27 Edward W. Said, "A Method for Thinking About a Just Peace," in Pierre Al-

Said's sidelining of the supposedly univocal metric of theory in favor of exilic polyvocality means that his opposition to the imperialist ensemble is based on educational consciousness about the connectedness of the world. As a result, his politics becomes centered around the hegemonic role of symbols and ideas. In fact, Said's originality lies in offering a culturalist alternative to materialist political economy.[28] By regarding imperialism as the philosophy of colonial practice, he accords a central role to the "battle over images and ideas,"[29] which is responsible for challenging the classificatory grids preached by the imperialist will. The lack of sufficient attention to the economic and geopolitical aspects of anti-imperialist struggle renders Said's vision strategically deficient. Consider, for instance, his celebration of the Bandung Conference: "By the time of the Bandung Conference in 1955 the entire Orient had gained its political independence from the Western empires and confronted a new configuration of imperial powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Unable to recognize 'its' Orient in the new Third World, Orientalism now faced a challenging and politically armed Orient."[30] The language of a uniform "Orient" masks the actual dynamics of Third World resurgence, which was underpinned by the revolutionary echoes of the Soviet Union. Aijaz Ahmad elaborates:

> One may also quite legitimately ask: what is it, according to Said, that had rendered the Third World so 'armed' and 'challenging'? Most of Orientalism was written during 1975-76, Said tells us in his acknowledgements. There were then, and had been for many years before that, many kinds of arms in many regions of Asia, Africa and the Middle East: in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, which were liberated during those years, as well as in all the Portuguese colonies in Southern Africa, which were also liberated; in the Arab world, when the Egyptian armies crossed the Suez in 1973, and generally in the hands of the Palestinians; and in the hands of the ANC for the liberation of South Africa. Those had been, overwhelmingly, Soviet arms. That may be easy to forget now, in this new epoch of global perestroika; but that lapse of memory as early as 1975–76 is surprising. Within the Arab world, that view of the Soviet Union

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lan and Alexis Keller (eds.), *What Is a Just Peace?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 194, cited in Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, p. 49.

28 Vivek Chibber, "Orientalism and its Afterlives," *Catalyst* 4, no.3 (2020).

29 Edward W. Said, *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map (*New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), p. 98.

30 Said, *Orientalism*, p. 104.

> as an imperialist power had surely by then become quite widespread, endorsed not by the PLO but by the partnership between Anwar Sadat and the Saudi monarch.[31]

The absence of a sustained and systematic focus on the material circuits through which the imperialist ensemble operates led Said to the over-inflation of the importance of ideas. His book *The Question of Palestine*, for instance, was unique due to the blurring of distinction between imperialism as the political philosophy of territorial expansion and colonialism as its actual practice. According to Said, acquiring and maintaining control over an imperium involves managing a territory, which encompasses a range of activities. These activities include constituting a geographical region, accumulating its population, exerting authority over its thoughts, individuals, and its terrain, adapting people, land, and ideas to the goals of a "hegemonic imperial design; all this as a result of being able to treat reality appropriatively."[32] "Thus," Said remarks, "the distinction between an idea that one feels to be one's own and a piece of land that one claims by right to be one's own (despite the presence on the land of its working native inhabitants) is really nonexistent, at least in the world of nineteenth-century culture out of which imperialism developed."[33] This is what leads Timothy Brennan to write that the "book's pedagogical gathering of data about Israel's prehistory, the genesis of Zionism as an ideology, British (and later American) imperial patronage, Jewish terrorist organizations, and Palestinian claims to the land" was overshadowed by its theoretical novelty about the significance of narratives. "More than anything, the book was saying that ideas, images, and stories do not reflect reality in a secondary way but are its very ligaments. He repeated the claim often in different ways: 'the massive architectural, demographic, and political metamorphosis' of Palestine by Israel took place first as a projection. Middle East reality followed upon, and was brought to realization by, images... The implicit injunction was: and therefore we need our own."[34] This counter-narrative was "Palestinian-

31 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* (London/New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 291-292.

32 Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 73.

33 Ibid., p. 73.

34 Timothy Brennan, *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said* (New York: Farrar,

ism," which contrasted the inclusiveness and fluidity of a loosely formed Palestinian identity to the rigid nationalism of the Zionist regime. Resistance had to be undertaken by "flexible, mobile political forces who relied more on initiative, creativity, and surprise than they did on holding fixed positions."[35] The symbolic value of Palestine as a condensation of global movements against hierarchies, inequalities and oppressions became a central dimension of the liberation struggle. In the words of Said:

> No one who has given his energies to being a partisan has ever doubted that "Palestine" has loosed a great number of other issues as well. The word has become a symbol for struggle against social injustice... There is an awareness in the nonwhite world that the tendency of modern politics to rule over masses of people as transferable, silent, and politically neutral populations has a specific illustration in what has happened to the Palestinians—and what in different ways is happening to the citizens of newly independent, formerly colonial territories ruled over by antidemocratic army regimes. The idea of resistance gets content and muscle from Palestine; more usefully, resistance gets detail and a positively new approach to the microphysics of oppression from Palestine. If we think of Palestine as having the function of both a place to be returned to and of an entirely new place, a vision partially of a restored past and of a novel future, perhaps even a historical disaster transformed into hope for a different future, we will understand the word's meaning better.[36]

From the foregoing, we can observe that post-colonialism's rejection of politico-theoretical systematicity gives rise to a practice that can only discern uncoordinated antagonisms in the imperialist ensemble. By focusing on the co-development of the West and the non-West in a contradictory framework of becoming, a contrapuntal reading is supposed to correct the univocal conceptual apparatuses that see the world in terms of structurally static entities. However, the problem with this outlook is that the multivocal excess of unruly connections, coexistence, and exploitation is not practically grounded in the localized points of a situation. Rather, it is advanced as an abstract proposition about the over-all fluidity and fragility of imperialism. Consequently, anti-imperialist strategy becomes centered around ethical and political reflection on historical and discursive misrepresentations. The formation of different

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Straus and Giroux, 2021), p. 209.

35 Edward W. Said, *The End of the Peace Process* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 278, cited in Brennan, *Places of Mind,* p. 333.

36 Said, *The Question of Palestine*, p. 69

interpretative connections, the drawing of new conclusions and the recognition of historical facts is proposed as the central counter-response against the totalizing and universalizing philosophies of the ruling class. Slow reflection loosens the fixed boundaries of identity, tradition, doctrines, theories etc., opening a space for "collective human existence" and the "hybrid counter-energies" that emerge from the dynamic imperialist environment.[37] Imperialism not only subjugates people but also remounts them in new connections, new interactions and new modes of resistance.

Humanist reflection requires that these shared networks of history, territory, memory etc., be acknowledged from an exilic standpoint of detachment. This detached attitude sees the atonal overlaps of the imperialist ensemble not as components of a unified political programme but as facts of worldliness that gesture towards undecided spaces of connection and coexistence. Hence, the furthest extension of post-colonial theory in the direction of secularism, universalism, and humanism leaves us with an oppositional form of analysis that is content to merely point out how imperialism festers contradictions that affect all of humanity. What is left out of this interpretive reflection is a strategic focus upon the practical sites of those contradictions, where we come to know the precise mechanisms through which the antagonisms of imperialism are harnessed to construct a new order. This is the transition from a consciousness of the polyvocal excess of history to an investigation of how that excess is produced, managed, displaced, and transformed in specific conjunctures.

Marxist Dialectic

Here, it will be useful to refer to the work of Lebanese Marxist Mahdi Amel, who goes beyond post-colonialism in grounding the contradictions of imperialism in the structuring dynamics of the colonial relation. He, too, begins with the global interlinkages constructed by imperialism. "By tying the becoming of colonized countries to the movement of Western capitalism's own historical evolution," writes Amel, "[w]estern capitalism simultaneously linked its own becoming to the movement of these [colonized] countries' historical evolution."[38] Western capitalism became

37 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 335.

38 Mahdi Amel, *Arab Marxism and National Liberation: Selected Writings of Mahdi Amel,* ed. Hicham Safieddine, trans. Angela Giordani (Boston/Leiden: Brill,

intertwined with the histories of its colonies when it connected their histories to its own. This inherent structural connection between these two paths of development transformed human history into a unified movement that is difficult to separate or break down into distinct parts. During the 19th century and till the outset of the 20th century, imperialist unification was one-sided, as it was metropolitan capitalism that was acting upon the rest of the world in quest for profit-maximization. "The rest of the world was nothing more than a field on which history acted, not where history was made."[39] The expansion of capitalism in the North was driven by its internal laws of motion, with the impact of colonized countries being registered only passively as a contributing factor in the exploitation chain. With the outbreak of the wars of national liberation, the colonized peoples entered the arena of history as subjects of political struggle rather than objects of economic exploitation. Metropolitan capitalism could no longer implement its developmental trajectory upon the Global South in a unidirectional manner. "It thus simultaneously became possible to consider the two trajectories of becoming within a contradictory or dialectical unity, bound in a relationship of mutual transformation, within the movement of a single struggle."[40]

Even as Amel notes that imperialism creates connections and possibilities, he emphasizes an element of impossibility that inheres within those connections: "It…became impossible to define the structure of the colonized countries' specific trajectories of becoming except within the colonial relation. What was possible before this relation became impossible after."[41] The uneven and complex geography of imperialism—its multiple antagonisms and differences—are "bound in the unity of contradictions."[42] This is the "scientific-historical rule of the uneven development of contradictions within a structural unity."[43] Post-colonialism is only able to focus on the dimension of unevenness to the neglect of the structural unity within which such differentiation and contradiction is pro-

2021), p. 25.

39 Ibid., p. 23.

40 Ibid., p. 24.

41 Ibid., p. 25.

42 Ibid., p. 63.

43 Ibid.

duced. Only the Marxist dialectic has the capacity to unveil the configuration of the colonial relationship as a complex interplay of two distinct yet interconnected structures in a constant state of differentiation within the framework of their unity. Each structure undergoes this process of differentiation as it relates to the other, and this dynamic operates within both structures as they continue to evolve. Hence, the contradictions and struggles of imperialism operate within a structural unity defined by two aspects: 1) the existence of two systems of production, metropolitan and peripheral, within a single unit of mutual dependency; and 2) the development of this structural unit as a relationship of inequality. This framework of dependency and inequality articulates three contradictions.[44] First, we have the "basic contradiction" within each particular structure, both the metropolitan and the peripheral. It represents the inherent tensions, conflicts, and contradictions that exist within these individual social formations. For example, within capitalism, there are contradictions between capital and labor, economic inequality, and class struggle. In peripheral capitalist formations, there are contradictions related to dispossession, a large reserve army of labor, etc. Second, we have the complication of the basic contradiction by the establishment of a dominant structure, namely metropolitan capitalism. Third, we have the "primary contradiction" in each structure that reflects the historical unity of the contradictions that traverse the colonial relation. Through the analysis of these complex contradictions, we reach a form of structural unity that is dependent on differentiation between the core and peripheral components of that imperialist unity. "There is no separation between these structures, even if there is—or, more precisely, because there is—differentiation between them."[45] The colonial social formation "is in unison with and belongs to the capitalist system of production insofar as it differs from that system in both its structure and evolution."[46]

Revolutionary Solidarity

The comprehension of history in a structurally determined framework is avoided by present-day international organizing around Palestine.

44 Ibid., p. 64.

45 Ibid., p. 65.

46 Ibid., p. 47.

Activism revolves around a disembodied and deterritorialized form of internationalism based on the consciousness of the individual actor. Travel activism—visible in the propping up of First World nationals as "global citizens," "civil missions," and "humanitarian witnesses"—leads to a pre-political form of resistance that ignores the collective foundations of the Israeli settler-colonial state.[47] While witnessing or supporting Palestinians at Israeli checkpoints or during their land cultivation in the face of settler threats holds moral significance, these actions alone do not contribute to a collective effort aimed at dismantling systems of power. Moreover, they inadvertently perpetuate the unequal value placed on First World nationals within a cultural framework that emphasizes individual sacrifice and prioritizes humanitarian governance over challenging racialized hierarchies. As Linda Tabar remarks: "The concept [of internationals] generalizes and universalizes the experiences of European and North American relatively privileged, mobile, often white and male subjects, occluding hierarchies, power relations and the material realities of the majority of people around the world who cannot cross borders, like native Palestinians, who are imprisoned in smaller and smaller parts of their own land."[48]

The disembodied and deterritorialized acts of resistance that mirror the post-colonial conceptual schema of unsystematic and pluralized counter-hegemony stand in contrast to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles broadly rooted in Marxist revolutionary solidarity. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), for example, saw their struggle as intricately linked to the global battle for freedom and human dignity fought by oppressed communities everywhere. Palestinian guerrilla factions didn't just train their fellow Palestinians but extended their expertise to a wide array of groups. This included the Black Panthers, Eritreans, Yemenis, Gulf Arabs, Kurds, and other individuals fighting for their freedom, who came to their camps seeking guidance. Liberation movements and activists from different parts of the world, such as Oman, South Africa, and Bangladesh, either aligned themselves with the PLO in Lebanon or received military education and material aid from them. Leftist artists and groups from Third World countries collaborated

47 Linda Tabar, "From Third World internationalism to 'the internationals': the transformation of solidarity with Palestine," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no.2: p. 8.

48 Ibid., p. 2.

with the PLO Film Unit, contributing to the production of militant cinema and documentation of liberation struggles.[49] This form of solidarity constituted a unique approach that centered on advancing these movements through revolutionary actions, encompassing armed struggle, resource-sharing, knowledge dissemination, and active engagement in local resistance. These efforts significantly heightened political consciousness regarding the interconnected nature of their battles against colonialism and the capitalist-imperialist systems of oppression.

Marxist anti-colonialism highlights the complex layers of contradictions involved in the Palestinian question. Israeli Zionism poses a national-patriotic danger to the Arab peoples, opposing them vertically. Western imperialism segments the Arabs horizontally along class lines. That's why the issue of national sovereignty, cohesiveness, and socio-economic stability is expressed through the classes that can act as conduits for their realization and those that act as obstacles in that task. In the words of Fawwaz Trablusi:

> True, Zionist colonization antagonized virtually all classes of the surrounding countries and the Palestinian people, as a people. Nevertheless, the reactions of each and every class to this national threat were ultimately determined by its position in society. There is no national struggle which is equally in the interests of all classes of a nation. The way in which this struggle is conceived, waged, and finally resolved is governed by the nature of its class leadership. Inasmuch as the people of Palestine were under the leadership of the same classes that led the national Arab struggle, they could not escape the logic of the situation. The whole Marxist position on the national question rests on the assumption that every class has national interests different from the national interests of other classes.[50]

The Arab world's economic fragility and its submission to the global capitalist economic system was an economic prerequisite for the division and dominance of Arab territories by imperialist forces after World War I. This, in turn, served as the foundation, both politically and economically, for the Zionist colonization of Palestine. Before the onset of the industrial revolution in England and Europe and after the Middle East's role as a significant hub for trade had significantly diminished due to European naval advancements, the surplus agricultural produce from

49 Ibid., p. 4.

50 Fawwaz Trabulsi, "The Palestine Problem: Zionism and Imperialism in the Middle East," *New Left Review* 57 (1969).

peasant farming was either appropriated and consumed by local ruling elites or sent to the Ottoman capital. There was no continuous process of consolidating productive investments, and manufacturing was confined to localized artisanal and handicraft levels, lacking industrialization. Interaction between the burgeoning capitalist economies in the West and the traditional Middle Eastern economies occurred primarily through trade, occasionally accompanied by military expeditions and aggressions. This early framework for exchanging Western manufactured goods, particularly textiles and hardware, for Middle Eastern raw materials used in emerging industries paved the way for the pattern of imperialist inequalities witnessed during the latter part of the 19th century.[51] Following the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the collaborative dominance of the region by Britain and France was achieved through its fragmentation into various legal entities. These divisions were artificially crafted to align with the needs of imperialist exploitation and the allocation of influence zones. This dominion was upheld through a partnership between imperialist powers and local classes. When regional nations gained political independence and American neo-imperialism took the place of Franco-British imperialism, the crucial element securing the bonds of reliance that link the Middle East to the global imperialist market and perpetuate its subordination to the principles of imperialist exploitation is the alliance between US imperialism and the ruling Arab elites.

For Israel, the defeat of the Arabs in 1948 had to be succeeded by a recognition of its colonial possessions by international powers and the enforced docility of Arab states with regard to this arrangement. The latter part of the strategy was ensured by the former, since the subordination of Arab regimes to the West created a fragile, underdeveloped Arab region unable to question the plundering enacted by Zionist settler-colonialism. "The Zionist status quo became inseparable from the imperialist status quo in the Middle East." When commenting on the economic ability of Arab states to resist Israel, Joe Stork writes: "The limited application of economic warfare by the Arab regimes during and after 1948 must be related to the class character of those regimes, the limited economic resources at their disposal, and their even more limited

51 Joe Stork, "Economic Dimensions of Arab Resistance to Zionism: A Political Interpretation," in A.W. Kayyali (ed.), *Zionism, Imperialism and Racism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 209.

control over those resources. In almost every instance, the regimes were composed of and represented the interests of the landed oligarchies and bourgeoisie who had come to power under (British) colonial tutelage."[52] It is instructive to consider here the position of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which has served as the main leftist group in terms of membership, popular support, and international recognition and was the first competitor for Fatah. The PFLP recognized the internal contradictions of the Arab region when, in addition to Israel, the world Zionist movement, and world imperialism, it listed Arab reactionary forces as the enemies of the Palestinian people.[53] These forces "outwardly support superficial national movements" but were "inevitably against any national liberation movement which aims at uprooting colonialism from our soil and building an independent economy which will serve the interests of the masses."[54] An effective Palestinian movement had to consider the turbulences of intra-Arab political economy, foregrounding "the inter-connection between the Palestinian question and the Arab question."[55] This interconnection took the historically specific form of "the "Arab Hanoi" motto, an Arab revolutionary base from which to mount attacks against Israel, in accordance with Vietnamese, Cuban, and Chinese experiences.[56] The formation of this strategic base was dependent upon the availability of friendly states for the Palestinian people. The role of the "progressive" Arab regimes of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria was unique in this respect. The PFLP characterized these as class alliances of workers and peasants, under the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie, "against colonialism, Arab reaction and Israel."[57] These states made advancements by undermining "feudalism and capitalism and their exploitation of the masses" but reproduced the narrow petty bourgeois interests in the industrial, agricultural, and trading sectors, thus producing "a new class of military men, politicians and administrative person-

52 Ibid., p. 220.

53 Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), *Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine* (Utrecht: Foreign Languages Press, 2017), p. 35.

54 Ibid., p. 36.

55 Ibid., p. 69.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., p. 76.

nel."[58] As a result, they didn't lend support to a "radical revolutionary strategy which seeks a long-term popular liberation war waged by the masses."[59] Relations with them had to be both "alliance and conflict."[60] This represents a conjunctural analysis of the structural unity of historical contradictions, combining an emphasis on the emancipatory possibilities of polyvocal antagonisms with an appreciation of systemic limitations. As the PFLP says: "The main line of conflict defined by this strategy is not a straight geometric line with two conflicting forces standing on either side. It is in reality a crooked dialectical line on each side of which stands a group of allied forces co-existing under the shadow of this alliance."[61] Due to the complex and multi-layered nature of the analysis, PFLP inevitably found itself in situations burdened with contradictions. The Baathist regime in Syria, for example, supported the PLO from a narrow perspective of national power, so that it could use Palestinians as a military and diplomatic bargaining chip vis-à-vis the Americans and Israelis. Due to the Camp David Accords in 1979, which created a separate peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, Syria realized that it didn't have any possibility of reaching an all-round settlement involving all the actors of the conflict. That's why it began developing closer relations with Palestinians, evident in the relocation of the PFLP headquarters to Damascus. In order to counter PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat's diplomatic strategy of rapprochement with Amman and Cairo against the backdrop of the Reagan plan in the mid-1980s, Syria backed proxy factions whose goal was to militarily create an alternative PLO. Despite its shared criticism of Arafat's reformist strategy, PFLP didn't support any external intervention. Instead, it foregrounded Palestinian autonomy. "Like the other main Palestinian factions forming the core of the PLO," writes Francesco Saverio Leopardi, "the PFLP historically refused to settle intra-Palestinian feud by military means and prioritized preserving the Palestinian national movement independence vis-à-vis the Arab regimes… Therefore, if on the one hand it shared the criticism of the Fatah leadership on which the revolt was based, on the other, it could not afford to endorse the set-

58 Ibid., p. 78.

59 Ibid., p. 80.

60 Ibid., p. 82.

61 Ibid., p. 107.

tlement of intra-Fatah division through military means."[62]

The attrition of the regimes of populist nationalism and the downfall of the USSR opened the channels for the US to carry out unrestricted globalization in the Arab region. Pan-Arab economic statism was replaced by the oil manna. While the oil trade financed certain large-scale public transfers, it was on the whole frittered away in the wasteful expenditure of the ruling classes and the subsidization of a state that lacked linkages with internally unified economic sectors. This was an inevitable result of the ultra-conservative influence of the Gulf countries, which acted as transmission belts for the spread of US-centric globalization. The regionalization/integration of the Arab world was replaced by the illusory strength of political Islam, conveniently mobilized by parasitic comprador bourgeoisies for their own benefit. In the current period, the unipolar dominance of the American empire is being challenged by the rise of China. Unlike USA's free market capitalism, the structure of the Chinese economy is such that it doesn't need to exploit foreign markets, territories, resources and labor.[63] In 2019, the total assets of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were reported to be at 167% of the country's GDP, a significantly higher proportion compared to any other nation. In contrast, major capitalist economies typically have public assets comprising less than 60% of their GDP. Notably, China consistently allocates approximately 17% of its annual public investment relative to GDP, a figure that dwarfs the 3–4% seen in the United States and the United Kingdom. This highlights the uniqueness of public ownership in China.[64] The dominance of the state in the ownership of important banks and industries means that profit-maximization is not the main driver of the Chinese economy. That's why China's involvement in the Middle Eastern region reflects a peaceful attitude. Its brokering of the Saudi-Iran détente has performed two main functions. First, it has ended the isolation of Iran, which has been aiding the Palestinian cause ever since Egypt lost its position as the leader of the Arab world. At the same

62 Francesco Saverio Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and its Decline: Loyal Opposition* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 75.

63 Carlos Martinez, 'Neither Washington nor Beijing?,' in *The East is Still Red: Chinese Socialism in the 21st Century* (Glasgow: Praxis Press, 2023).

64 Michael Roberts, "China as a transitional economy to socialism?," *Journal of Global Faultlines* 9, no.2 (2022), p. 189.

time as Anwar Sadat signed a peace deal with Israel in 1979, an Islamic revolution was reverberating through Iran. The vacuum left by the demise of Marxist anti-colonialism and other secular forms of opposition was filled by the revolutionary Shia liberation theology of Iran. During the 1990s, Iran's support for the Palestinian cause extended beyond diplomatic efforts and encompassed military assistance. Iran has consistently played a key role as the primary supporter of armed Palestinian resistance groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Additionally, Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, which was established with Iran's assistance from its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has played a crucial role in training and enhancing the military capabilities of Palestinian factions. Second, the Saudi-Iran détente has neutralized the US-Zionist strategy of dividing Arabs and Iranians, Sunnis and Shias. Israel's negative reaction[65] to the rapprochement of West Asia's arch-rivals is understandable, given that such rivalries are essential for weakening the potential supporters of the Palestinian cause. While the reduction of regional tensions doesn't directly translate into the instantaneous growth of anti-imperialist politics, such possibilities are latent within multipolarity i.e. the process of narrowing the options of western imperialist capitalism and making economies more national and therefore more susceptible to democratic pressures. This multi-step path of national liberation underscores a point made at the beginning of the article, namely that Marxism is not an ideological dogma to be upheld in a frozen manner but a method that allows the identification of the sites where concrete contradictions can be molded. In addition to the promotion of regional peace in the Arab world, China has directly voiced its concerns about American "piecemeal crisis management" in the creation of a just peace in Palestine, asking the US to realize that the lives of Palestinians Muslims are as valuable as the lives of Israeli Jews.[66] For years, China has sought to balance its historical position as a leader with influence in the Global South against its economic interests, including those tied to Israel. "That balancing act,"

65 Isabel Debre and Samy Megde, "Saudi Deal with Iran Worries Israel, Shakes up Middle East," *The Associated Press,* 11 March 2023. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/saudi-iran-diplomatic-relations-middle-east-d78f3ceac0561f4fb20301e4f32eef88.

66 Ramzy Baroud, "'No Safety Nets'—China, Israel and Palestine in the New Global Cold War," *Orinoco Tribune,* 5 June 2023. Available at: https://orinocotribune.com/no-safety-nets-china-israel-and-palestine-in-the-new-global-cold-war/.

writes Ramzy Baroud, "began eroding soon after the start of the war," with Chinese foreign policy articulating a "strong stance against the war, the massive human rights violations and the urgent need for a ceasefire."[67] As China and other states in the Global South upend the hegemony of late stage Western imperialism, it is essential that the Palestinian movement navigate through these global transitions and find concrete moorings for a project of revolutionary solidarity.

67 Ramzy Baroud, "'Beijing Declaration' on Palestine—Can Chinese diplomacy replace the US?," *The Palestinian Information Center*, 30 July 2024. Available at: https://english.palinfo.com/opinion_articles/beijing-declaration-on-palestine-can-chinese-diplomacy-replace-the-us/.

Chapter 3

The Politics of Abstract Negativity: A Critique of Slavoj Žižek

After Operation al-Aqsa Flood, Slavoj Žižek denounced the "barbarism" of Hamas by writing that the choice is not between Palestinian anti-colonial violence and Zionist settler-colonial violence but "between fundamentalists and all those who still believe in the possibility of peaceful coexistence."[1] Countering those leftists who see the explosion of militant struggle as "a moment of truth, when liberal-pacifist illusions about the occupation are upended," he sees "in it a catastrophe, not only for Jews and Palestinians but for the world."[2] Like a true liberal, he says that "it is all too easy to dismiss the state of Israel as a result of the colonization of the Palestinian territory... both Palestinians and Jews have a right to live there, and that they are condemned to live there together."[3] He advises all those who are enthusiastic about liberation to think about what will happen if Hamas wins the fight: "what if the reality

1 Slavoj Žižek, "The Real Dividing Line Between Israel and Palestine," *The Japan Times*, 16 October 2023. Available at: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/10/16/world/israel-palestine-fundamentalists/

2 Slavoj Žižek, "What the Left Gets Wrong about Gaza and 'Decolonisation,'" *New Statesman*, 20 December 2023. Available at: https://www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2023/12/israel-gaza-palestine-peace

3 Ibid.

is that after the revolution there is nothing to eat?"[4] The implication of this is that both Palestine and Israel should come together to appreciate the long-term "democratic" perspective that has been outlined by Žižek. This "democratic" perspective, in fact, is one that is rooted in European values. Žižek says that "Europe has to find its own voice" with regard to the Palestine issue instead of joining the "global outcry."[5] "It can do it, because it was able to do it for decades, always ready to see the complexity of the situation and to listen to all sides. It would be a shame to leave this role to Putin and China."[6] In the end, we end up with a patronizing, Eurocentric liberal who hitches the fate of Palestine to the exceptional moral conscience of imperialist states. Žižek's political interventions regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict are similarly shameful. In an interview with Piers Morgan, Slavoj Žižek asks the West to give nuclear weapons to Ukraine in its fight against Russians, who are "no less than Arabs" when it comes to religious fundamentalism.[7] Earlier, he had called for a "stronger NATO" in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so that "European unity" could be preserved.[8] How to make sense of Žižek's awful political position? Isn't he considered as the "most dangerous philosopher in the West"?[9] I believe that the ideological blindness of Žižek can be traced to an invariant philosophical system of abstract negativity that imposes prescriptions upon political processes instead of learning from them.

4 Ibid.

5 Slavoj Žižek, "Israel-Palestine Conflict: Who Is to Blame?," *New Statesman*, 19 October 2023. Available at: https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2023/10/israel-palestine-blame.

6 Ibid.

7 Euromaidan Press (@EuromaidanPress), "Putin, a Dark Conservative Religious Fanatic, Must Be Stopped ASAP, and the West Should Even Provide Ukraine with Nuclear Weapons If Necessary, Believes Slovenian Leftist Philosopher Slavoj Žižek," *X*, March 18, 2024. Available at: https://x.com/EuromaidanPress/status/1769801014356451544.

8 Slavoj Žižek, "Pacifism Is the Wrong Response to the War in Ukraine," *The Guardian*, June 21, 2022. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jun/21/pacificsm-is-the-wrong-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine.

9 VICE, "Superstar Communist Slavoj Zizek Is The Most Dangerous Philosopher in the West," 2013. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS_Lzo4S8lA.

Individualist Revolt

In order to explain the nature of the revolutionary act, Žižek takes recourse to the film *Fight Club*. The film's narrator (Edward Norton) beats himself in front of his boss in response to the latter's tacit hostility. This masochistic violence turns the narrator into an empty, wounded entity with no hopes of reintegration into the social bond. I no longer fit into the stable identity that had been prepared for me by the ruling class. Instead, I become an unrecognizable entity who has beaten out all its engagements with the symbolic order. The self-beating of the subject enacts a "scatological (excremental) identification, which equals adopting the position of the proletarian who has nothing to lose. The pure subject emerges only through this experience of radical self-degradation, when I let/provoke the other to beat the crap out of me, emptying me of all substantial content, of all symbolic support that could confer on me a minimum of dignity."[10] What Žižek ignores is that the act of self-emptying is itself a search for authenticity.[11] The film's terroristic rebellion against corporations is framed as a counter-attack against the emasculation brought about by consumerist culture. "We are a generation of men raised by women," the character Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) asserts. What is being targeted is not so much capitalism as a social structure but feminization as an ideological contaminant. That's why the narrator sets up fight clubs where people can beat each other up and thus feel real pain. Even though Žižek admits that this strategy of masochistic violence "is risky and ambiguous (it can easily regress into a proto-fascist macho logic of violent male bonding)," he asks us to assume "this risk...[as] there is no other direct way out of the closure of the capitalist subjectivity."[12]

The elimination of any viable political alternative to masochist disidentification is based on the assumption that there is a nucleus of radical negativity that needs to be recovered in order to challenge the status quo.

10 Slavoj Žižek, "The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link," in Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis A. Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *Perversion and the Social Relation: Sic IV* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 117.

11 Sally Robinson, "Feminized Men and Inauthentic Women: Fight Club and the Limits of Anti-Consumerist Critique," *Genders* 53 (May 2011). Available at: https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2011/05/01/feminized-men-and-inauthentic-women-fight-club-and-limits-anti-consumerist-critique.

12 Žižek, "The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link," p. 116.

This assumption is made possible through the philosophical equivalence of masochistic violence with the death-drive, which signifies not a craving for death but the way in which life is defined by the constitutive impossibility of a harmonious closure. Life constantly fails to live up the ideals of success. When this failure, this gap between me and the symbolic order, is courageously assumed, I undergo "subjective destitution,"[13] the process whereby the desire for wholeness is replaced by the knowledge "that no matter how well planned and meant an idea or a project is, it will somehow turn out wrong... we resign ourselves to the permanent threat of destruction, which is a positive condition of our freedom."[14] In other words, the impossibility/lack that defines human capacity is taken as the sole ground for politics. "[W]e cannot get rid of a constitutive impossibility, but we can re-inscribe it in a different way."[15] Žižek illustrates this through the example of "democracy": "no one can legitimately make a direct claim to power, the place of power is in principle empty, it can only be temporarily occupied by democratically elected persons."[16] The "Real" of negativity that Žižek considers as a general philosophical principle of politics is appropriate only for the individual level, where the overturning of hegemonic ideology leads to something that is less than an individual. The separation of the subject from social links is a negative act since it deprives the subject of the security offered by identity. This is exemplified by the masochistic violence of *Fight Club*. However, when the collective context of individual disidentification is overlooked, we end up with the abstract celebration of negativity that makes it susceptible to hegemonic absorption. The supposedly radical negativity of the violence practiced by fight clubs morphs into the essentialist search for authenticity, which can take conservative-masculinist forms.

There is no guarantee that subjective destitution will light up a revolution. Comfortable in the philosophical presumption that the end des-

13 Slavoj Žižek, "Subjective Destitution in Art and Politics: From Being-towards-Death to Undeadness," *Enrahonar: An International Journal of Theoretical and Practical Reason* 70 (March 31 2023): pp. 69–81.

14 Slavoj Žižek, "Hegel: The Spirit of Distrust," in Slavoj Žižek, Frank Ruda, and Agon Hamza (eds.), *Reading Hegel* (Cambridge/Medford: Polity Press, 2022).

15 Slavoj Žižek, "The Vagaries of the Superego," *Elementa: Intersections between Philosophy, Epistemology and Empirical Perspectives* 1, no. 1–2 (2022): p. 25.

16 Ibid.

tination of all endeavors is an all-encompassing impossibility, we ignore the obstacle posed by the material structures of society. That's why the negative gesture that unleashes inconsistency and impossibility is true only for the individual subject. At the level of collective politics, a revolutionary movement can cut the proletariat from its class designations, but this hardly means that we end up with the sheer negativity of chaos. Mohammad Reza Naderi notes that "to decouple the masses from their class status is not to fall on nothingness, as in the case of the decoupling of the 'imaginarized' subject from its symbolic status (which leaves us in nothingness). It leaves us with an enduring material instance."[17] When an inconsistency is revealed in this material instance, we don't plunge into anarchy. Instead, "what we get is... a situation in which what functioned as the inconsistent exception to 'a' consistency is now available for a new (constrained, but real) consistency. The abolition of the State does not lead us to total chaos; it leads us to relative chaos, in which a new orientation is hard but still possible."[18] At the collective level, the negativity of subjective destitution is subordinated to the materiality of class struggle, whose course is not bound by the constitutive impossibility delineated by Žižek's philosophical narrative. Žižek constructs a new subject of radical negativity whose nothingness is the essence to which all political sequences inevitably return. Class struggle, on the other hand, is a non-subject wherein "negative" and "positive" only have relative meaning. As an apparatus, mechanism, and process, class struggle is the laboratory in which different instances of the social totality come together to experimentally produce something new. The workers' movement is dictated not by the persistence of abstract negativity but by the concrete modalities in which different conjunctures negotiate their contradictions. Panagiotis Sotiris elaborates:

> [I]t is the very process of creating forms of political agency and intervention that conditions political subjectivity, in a non-linear manner that includes constant confrontation with the terrain of the struggle, the continuous production of new knowledge, and recurring processes of self-criticism and correction. It is a collective process of producing militant subjectivities, based not on a variation of the 'sovereign' reflexive subject of the Enlightenment tradition but on the constant apprehension of the limits and displacements of po-

17 Mohammad Reza Naderi, *Badiou, Infinity, and Subjectivity: Reading Hegel and Lacan after Badiou* (London: Lexington Books, 2023), p. 136.

18 Ibid.

> litical subjectivity and of the need to subject oneself to processes of collective engagement and intervention.[19]

Thus, the Real is constituted by the complex structure of the social totality, the manner in which the economy acts through the overdetermined interaction of distinct instances. What Žižek regards as the truly radical act of negativity, around which the individual organizes its subjective destitution, "cannot itself be considered a subject... instead, it must be thought of as a structure or, more precisely, an indication of another structure presented in the form of its absence next to the...structure [of negativity]."[20] Therefore, negativity can never be turned into an abstract philosophical principle; it is always a modality of the system of society in whose reproduction it participates. This social system is not an expression of an originary essence but the conflictual articulation of different instances. In this non-contemporaneous present, what is primary is not abstract negativity but the "differential times of different class projects."[21] Any appearance of unity has to be concretely achieved through the construction and strengthening of hegemonic apparatuses. These apparatuses introduce a change in the balance of forces contained within the interpenetrative interaction of economic, political, ideological and other instances—with the economy exerting a determining influence. Capitalist society here is regarded as a social formation of conflicting, differential, and multilayered forces constantly in flux. The structure of society is immanent within that uneven balance of forces, rather than transcendent on them, even if that transcendence is one of chaotic negativity. Non-contemporaneity disrupts any philosophical attempt to monopolize the truth of politics. Any such truth is a provisional product of the class struggle. That's why Natalia Rome is right in saying that Žižek's theory is "on the side of philosophical idealism: first, because it makes psychic causality a metaphysics of historical life, and second, because in doing so, it restores the homogeneity and uniqueness of the discourse of the Philosophy of History in terms of Absolute Knowledge."[22]

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19 Panagiotis Sotiris, *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), p. 518.

20 Won Choi, *A Structuralist Controversy: Althusser and Lacan on Ideology*, PhD Dissertation, Loyola University Chicago, 2012, p. 179.

21 Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), p. 285.

22 Natalia Romé, *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time* (London: Row-

Quantum Speculations

Žižek thinks that the concrete politics of revolution, which he labels as "revolutionary destitution," is inferior to subjective destitution.[23] The former still presupposes History as a consistent Big Other, as a "finite material reality" that one has to engage with for the revolutionary cause.[24] Subjective destitution, by contrast, is the assumption of the "antagonism/tension in the very heart of the Void which causes the emergence of material reality out of the Void."[25] The reference to the tension of the void takes us to Žižek's dubious use of quantum mechanics. In classical physics, the act of measurement is regarded as the passive registration of the pre-existing properties of a system. However, in quantum mechanics, the act of measurement appears to assume a more active role. The quantum system exists in a superposition of all possible states until measured. When a measurement is made, the system "collapses" into one of these states according to the probabilities determined by the system's wave function. According to Žižek, quantum waves stand for a "proto-reality": "prior to fully existent reality, there is a chaotic non-All proto-reality, a pre-ontological, virtual fluctuation of a not yet fully constituted real."[26] This means that the most basic level of reality itself is incomplete and indeterminate, just like the incompleteness of the subject of radical negativity. Žižek illustrates this indeterminacy through the example of the Higgs field. The Higgs field is a mechanism to explain why some particles have mass while others do not. When the Higgs field is "switched off," particles will no longer interact with it to acquire mass, potentially leading to a universe where particles are massless. When the Higgs field is "switched on," there occurs the spontaneous breaking of electroweak symmetry and causes the acquisition of mass by elementary particles. What is important to note here is that "it is energetically favorable for the Higgs field to be switched on and for the symmetries between particles and forces to be broken."[27]

man & Littlefield, 2021), pp. 30, 31.

23 Žižek, "Subjective Destitution in Art and Politics," p. 80.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Slavoj Zizek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London/New York: Verso Books, 2012), p. 912.

27 Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok, *Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang*

Hence, the symmetric phase of the Higgs field is a "false" vacuum as the energy expenditure is not the lowest. The lowest energy expenditure is reached when the electroweak symmetries are broken; this gives rise to the "true" vacuum. Žižek uses this fact to outline a general metaphysical principle: "This is why 'there is something and not nothing': because, energetically, something is cheaper than nothing."[28] There can be no pure void or nothingness of absolute repose because nothingness is inconsistent with itself, with this inconsistency giving rise to something. Nirvana-like nothingness is physically impossible for human beings. This gap between false vacuum and true vacuum allows Žižek to assert that "[w]hat, ultimately, 'there is' is only the absolute Difference, the self-repelling Gap."[29] The abstract negativity of the human subject—the impossibility that constitutes it—is cosmologically substantiated through the impossibility of an absolutely peaceful nothingness. Nothingness itself fails to be nothingness and this failure gives rise to something.

Adrian Johnston has written about how it is empirically and experimentally impossible "to carry out an exhaustively thorough reduction of the mid-sized structures and dynamics of human-scale reality to the unimaginably minuscule teeming multitudes of quantum objects and processes."[30] This means that Žižek's use of quantum mechanics is ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically arbitrary. What this kind of empty speculation generates is a metaphysical perspective for understanding the world:

> [U]sing "homologies" resting on broad, vague notions of "cheapness" and "energy" to facilitate effortless movement between the "economies" of the ontological, the natural, the libidinal, and the political seems as though it leads right back to the old onto-theological vision of being as an organic Whole of smoothly enmeshed microcosms and macrocosms, a seamless, enchained continuum of recurring patterns embedded within each other in a fractal-like fashion.[31]

Even if we admit the validity of Žižek's ambition to create a global

(London: Phoenix 2008), 82, cited in Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 944.

28 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 955.

29 Ibid., p. 378.

30 Adrian Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (London: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 170.

31 Ibid., p. 169.

philosophical system, his interpretation of quantum mechanics shows many deficiencies. Žižek's use of quantum mechanics is dictated by the attempt to generalize the workings of subjectivity to reality itself. He calls this a "weak anthropic principle" that asks what structures the Real contains so that it can allow for the emergence of subjectivity.[32] This principle is applied in order to pre-empt a supposedly "naïve" ontology of "spheres or levels."[33] The existence of hierarchical levels within nature is "commonly accepted not only by contemporary well-known scientists... but also by contemporary elementary school students."[34] This scientific consensus about the hierarchy of matter accounts for the dialectical philosophy of Marxian materialism, which is "grounded in human corporeal existence within the physical world, in a context of emergence, or integrated levels."[35] But insofar as Žižek relegates this perspective as pre-modern naivety, his interpretation of quantum mechanics shows a subjectivist bias, in that it is colored by the goal of extending a general schema of human subjectivity to the entire universe.

As per Sean Carroll's many-world interpretation (MWI), the role of measurement in quantum mechanics does not signify the transformation of a fissured proto-reality (quantum wave oscillations) into the stable world of classical physics. On the contrary, measurement is the process wherein the quantum state is changed into different states on each branch of the new wave function. Branching happens when microscopic processes are "amplified to macroscopic scales: a system in a quantum superposition becomes entangled with a larger system, which then becomes entangled with the environment, leading to decoherence."[36] Thus, in this view, "a measurement is any interaction that causes a quantum system to become entangled with the environment, creating decoherence and a branching into separate worlds, and an observer is any system that

32 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing,* p. 905.

33 Ibid., p. 909.

34 Rogney Piedra Arencibia, "Ilyenkov's Dialectics of the Ideal and Engels's Dialectics of Nature," *Historical Materialism* 30, no.3 (2021), p. 17.

35 John Bellamy Foster, "The Return of the Dialectics of Nature: The Struggle for Freedom as Necessity," *Monthly Review* 74, no.7 (2022). Available at: https://monthlyreview.org/2022/12/01/the-return-of-the-dialectics-of-nature/.

36 Sean Carroll, *Something Deeply Hidden: Quantum Worlds and the Emergence of Spacetime* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2019), p. 231.

brings such an interaction about."[37] Human beings have no special significance here. They are part of the whole wave function that branches into separate worlds. In the words of Carroll:

> Decoherence causes the wave function to split, or branch, into multiple worlds. Any observer branches into multiple copies along with the rest of the universe. After branching, each copy of the original observer finds themselves in a world with some particular measurement outcome. To them, the wave function seems to have collapsed. We know better; the collapse is only apparent, due to decoherence splitting the wave function.[38]

Given the significance of the branching of the wave function, we don't need to foreground human consciousness in any way. The observer can "be an earthworm, a microscope, or a rock. There's not even anything special about macroscopic systems, other than the fact that they can't help but interact and become entangled with the environment... Conscious observers branch along with the rest of the wave function, of course, but so do rocks and rivers and clouds."[39]

When it comes to the Higgs field, Žižek's philosophical desire to establish a homological correspondence between human subjectivity and the universe makes him overlook the fact that the tension-riven nothingness of the void can very well do without humans. The Higgs field can be compared with human subjectivity only because Higgs has settled on the value it has, which has enabled the formation of life-compatible structures. But it is possible that the Higgs field is metastable, that there is another vacuum state that requires even lesser energy requirements.[40] This means that humans are living in a false vacuum. The true vacuum, then, no longer corresponds to a world where subjectivity is possible. This invalidates any attempt to institute a homological relation between the Higgs field and subjectivity. What it invites us to consider, on the other hand, is the possibility of new forms of matters that are not bound by the limits of human subjectivity.

Sidney Coleman and Frank De Luccia note that "in a new vacuum

37 Ibid., p. 137.

38 Ibid., p. 134.

39 Ibid., p. 137.

40 Katie Mack, *The End of Everything (Astrophysically Speaking)* (New York: Scribner, 2021), p. 142.

there are new constants of nature; after vacuum decay, not only is life as we know it impossible, so is chemistry as we know it. However, one could always draw stoic comfort from the possibility that perhaps in the course of time the new vacuum would sustain, if not life as we know it, at least some structures capable of knowing joy. This possibility has now been eliminated."[41] The elimination of this possibility opens a materialist viewpoint that is predicated upon the universal interconnectedness of all forms of motion of matter. In a discussion with Žižek, Carrol articulated this when he remarked:

> The basic idea is that the universe evolves from a very orderly low entropy early state to very disorderly messy future, along the way complex structures appear... and the implication is that something there in the law of physics and dynamics, there exists the potentiality for something interesting to happen. And even though they weren't intrinsically embedded in the initial conditions they came to be because of the structure of the dynamics along the way.[42]

This is an underdetermined philosophical view that, in contrast to Žižek's valorization of the gap, allows scientific knowledge to autonomously reach conclusions about the contingent processes that complexify things into ramified structures. It also ensures an essential diversity of scientific procedures, instead of the universalization of an overblown quantum ontology. Kaan Kangal aptly writes: "Since different levels of complexity of motion constitute a hierarchy of levels of organization of matter...nature needs to be considered a hierarchically ordered and internally differentiated unity. It is this unity that figures as the precondition for the convergence of particular sciences. Unified knowledge of nature presumes an interconnected unity of differentiated and uneven historical development of discrete sciences."[43]

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41 Sidney Coleman and Frank De Luccia, cited in Mack, The End of Everything, p. 154.

42 Robinson Erhardt, "Slavoj Žižek & Sean Carroll: Quantum Physics, the Multiverse, and Time Travel," 23 July 2023. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=735mYcl3Lrg.

43 Kaan Kangal, "Engel's Emergentist Dialectics," Monthly Review 72, no. 6 (2020). Available at: https://monthlyreview.org/2020/11/01/engelss-emergentist-dialectics/.

Leninist Pathways

What alternative do we have to Žižek's theoretical system? Here, it is instructive to consider his interpretation of Lenin, which can point us towards a politically viable form of Marxist theory. Žižek notes that the classic Leninist reply to the demand for freedom essentially consists in this: "Freedom—yes, but for WHOM? To do WHAT?"[44] This reply implies that criticism will not be tolerated if it is counter-revolutionary. Žižek criticizes this perspective for its obliviousness towards indeterminacy: instead of appreciating how the "objective consequences" of one's acts are not fully determined in a law-like way, the Leninist reduces those acts to fully constituted contexts that have been established beforehand through authoritarian power. As Žižek writes, "I decide what your acts objectively mean, since I define the context of a situation (say, if I conceive of my power as the immediate equivalent/expression of the power of the working class, then everyone who opposes me is 'objectively' an enemy of the working class)."[45] In opposition to this full contextualization, "one should emphasize that freedom is 'actual' precisely and only as the capacity to 'transcend' the coordinates of a given situation... to redefine the very situation within which one is active."[46] When socialist states are analyzed from this vantage point of limitless freedom, they come off as dead regimes whose only reason for legitimacy is the fact that they exist, hence the deplorable term "Really Existing Socialism," which Žižek considers as "a proof of Socialism's utter failure."[47] Repudiating the state socialist legacy, Žižek proceeds to reconfigure classical Leninism to extract a more radical message from him. This message consists of the "fundamental revolutionary Choice": "the truly free choice is a choice in which I do not merely choose between two or more options WITHIN a pre-given set of coordinates, but I choose to change this set of coordinates itself." Thus, Lenin's criticism of "formal" freedom means not the repression of supposedly counter-revolutionary activity but the maintenance of the "possibility of the TRUE radical choice": "formal" freedom is the freedom of choice WITHIN the coordinates of the existing power

44 Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 114.

45 Ibid., pp. 114, 115.

46 Ibid., p. 115.

47 Ibid., pp. 121, 122.

relations, while "actual" freedom designates the site of an intervention which undermines these very coordinates."

The theme of the preservation of the true Choice takes us back to Žižek's philosophization of a permanent gap: politics ultimately consists in taking the greatest care to prevent the closure of this gap or impossibility. Revolutionaries have to be constantly aware of this constitutive impossibility. As Žižek writes, "the subject, although fully aware of his/her incompetence to exert authority, assumes it not with a cynical distance but with full sincerity, ready even to sacrifice his/her life for it if needed."[48] However, the problem with this is that it confines politics to a model of subjective intentionality, wherein the individual has to remain aware of the gap that constitutes them. This is inevitable in Žižek's philosophy because he regards the "objective necessity of history" as a fiction that can be reduced to the ontological theme of lack/failure/impossibility.[49] The proletariat can only play a strictly negative role: "while other classes can still maintain the illusion that 'Society exists,' and that they have their specific place within the global social body, the very existence of the proletariat repudiates the claim that 'Society exists.'"[50] The working class is revolutionary only because they are dislocated, because they can't realize their identity in society. Class struggle is not an objective fact but an index of the impossibility of a fully constituted society, the failure to attain wholeness.

Class struggle will appear negative only if we restrict ourselves to the individual act of disobedience and disidentification. Žižek does this through extrapolation: just as the individual fantasy masks the impossibility of absolute satisfaction, the "social fantasy" hides the impossibility of a harmonious "social totality."[51] Within Žižek's worldview, the level of collectivity possesses no unique political function, as the ultimate task of revolution is handed over to the epistemic abilities of individuals knowledgeable about the fundamentality of lack. This is hardly different from mainstream liberal pacifism. A *New York Times* editorial, for instance,

48 Žižek, "The Vagaries of the Superego," p. 21.

49 Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London/New York: Continuum: 2006), p. 69.

50 Ibid., p. 111.

51 Ibid., p. 89.

hopes "that there are still enough people who see the futility and horror of the endless cycle of violence on both sides."[52] It asks us to search for a "foundation for future negotiations," "to think beyond the fighting, if only because the terrible cost it is exacting demands sanity."[53] In other words, a form of thinking that wants to guarantee the stability of peace, attaching it to a nucleus of individual "sanity" that transcends the materiality of political struggles.[54] This individual "sanity" towers above both Israel and Palestine, haranguing both of them for engaging in violence instead of talking with each other. Žižek thus does this by imagining a phone call between Hamas (H) and Israeli hardliners (IH) at some point before the genocide started:

> IH: "Hi, do you remember we discreetly supported you against PLO? Now you owe us a favour: why don't you attack and slaughter some Jews close to Gaza, they are in any case Arab friends, peaceniks, we don't need them. We have here two problems: civil protests against us, and the all too slow ethnic cleansing of the West Bank. The world will be shocked at your brutality, and we will be able to play a victim again, get national unity and escalate ethnic cleansing in the West Bank."
>
> H: "OK, but we need a counter-favour. In revenge for our slaughter, promise that you will bomb civilians in Gaza, killing thousands, especially children—this will give a boost to anti-Semitism all around the world, which is our true goal!"
>
> IH: "No problem, we—Israel—also need more anti-Semitism in the world to be able to continue to play the role of a victim, a role which legitimises us to do what we want!"
>
> H: "So let's hope this is the beginning of a beautiful hatred!"[55]

Žižek regurgitates the familiar liberal complaint that Hamas *knowingly* sacrificed Gazans to Israel by launching an attack on the latter. As the *New York Times* editorial puts it: "Hamas knew full well that a murderous attack on Israeli civilians would ensure a massive retaliation

52 The Editorial Board, "The Only Way Forward," *The New York Times*, 25 November, 2023. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/25/opinion/israel-gaza-peace-ceasefire.html.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Slavoj Žižek, "AN IMAGINED PHONE CALL," Substack newsletter, *ŽIŽEK GOADS AND PRODS*, 5 December, 2023. Available at: https://slavoj.substack.com/p/an-imagined-phone-call.

against the helpless civilians of Gaza, including innumerable children."[56] Here, knowledge functions as a relationship of cognitive *adequacy* between the rational knower and the object to be known. Once the conflictuality of national liberation has been reduced to a case of misunderstanding, knowledge becomes capable of mapping the reality of social formations in a comprehensive manner. The light of knowledge can illuminate hidden aspects that weren't yet known to the observers. When an entity comes in possession of the requisite piece of knowledge, it only needs the moral will to act upon it. So, the liberal complaint becomes: just if Hamas carried out things according to the accurate knowledge it has of the situation, then everything would become right.

In this way, epistemic structures of knowing are reduced to representational depictions of certain essential attributes that lie within the social formations under consideration. The resolution of colonialism is secured by the epistemic extraction of the lack that inheres in all of us. Politics evaporates in the de-politicizing abstraction of subjective destitution, the moment in which all of us are aware of the necessary incompletion of humanity. Dialogue flows freely, as there is no unavailability of knowledge. All knowledge lies encapsulated in the experience of subjective destitution. The peace process between Israel and Palestine, then, is no longer an investigation into the *concrete* conditions of peace but a recovery of the abstract negativity present at the core of humanity. When people become cognizant of this hidden lack, they no longer need to attack each other; they just need to converse on the basis of the knowledge they now possess. In his book *Universality and Identity Politics,* Todd McGowan, a fellow Lacanian psychoanalyst, produces a similar idealist theory. He thinks that communist revolutions failed "because of their fundamental misconception about what universality was."[57] They conceived of universality as a project of total belonging, where there should be no possibility of a gap or lack. McGowan revises the misperception of these communists by declaring that universality consists only in non-belonging, in the failure to gain a sense of wholeness. Since the old revolutionaries of the 20th century failed to comprehend this psychoanalytic insight, they

56 The Editorial Board, "The Only Way Forward."

57 Todd McGowan, "Introduction: Finding Universality," in *Universality and Identity Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

ended up creating the "formula for the gulag."[58] In *Enjoyment Right and Left,* McGowan continues with this inflated use of psychoanalysis by propounding a universal principle: "When one enjoys power, one enjoys giving it up."[59] This principle is then used to explain various historical events: "When we look at the catastrophic decisions of political leaders in modern world history—Robespierre's turn against Georges Danton and Camille Desmoulins, Lincoln's policy of appeasement with the white South, Lenin's appointment of Stalin as General Secretary, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, or Putin's war in Ukraine, just to name a few—it becomes clear that those in power do not enjoy retaining their power."[60] McGowan exemplifies the idealist tendency present in Žižek's theoretical system. The failure of revolutions is explained by their lack of comprehension of universality; successful revolutionaries are those who have imbibed the correct theoretical knowledge of universality. Power shifts are caused not by a multitude of global and local factors but by the desire of leaders to sabotage themselves. In this way, politics is reduced to the level of the individual, to the libidinal workings of the subject. Labeling this subject-centered model as an "empiricist conception of knowledge," Louis Althusser criticizes it as a "religious vision of the essence in the transparency of existence":

> The empiricist conception may be thought of as a variant of the conception of vision, with the mere difference that transparency is not given from the beginning, but is separated from itself precisely by the veil, the dross of impurities, of the inessential which steal the essence from us, and which abstraction, by its techniques of separation and scouring, sets aside, in order to give us the real presence of the pure naked essence, knowledge of which is then merely sight.[61]

For Žižek, the "dross of impurities" consists of the fanatics on both sides of the divide—Israeli hardliners and Hamas. Removing this dross will allow us to access the spirit of abstract negativity. Unlike fanatic projects that are intent on pursuing their goals without any regard for the necessary incompletion of humanness, moderates flexibly seek out

58 Ibid.

59 Todd McGowan, "The Power of the Good," in *Enjoyment Right and Left* (USA: Sublation Media, 2022).

60 Ibid.

61 Louis Althusser, "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy," in *Reading Capital,* trans. Ben Brewster (London/New York: Verso, 2015), p. 37.

nonviolent possibilities of conflict resolution. However, the point is that such possibilities don't exist. Knowledge fails, consciousness submits to the ostensible irrationality of bodily violence, because it knows that the colonizing subjectivity can't be peacefully convinced to give up its oppressive rule. Hamas undertook Operation al-Aqsa Flood because it understood that mere awareness regarding the possible behavior of the Israeli state will not change an iota of the Zionist genocidal machinery. Even if it had acted upon its knowledge of the situation and not executed the October 7 attack, that wouldn't have convinced the Israeli state to stop destroying Palestinian sovereignty. Genocidal instincts are hardwired into the structure of the Zionist settler-colonial state. There is no way in which knowledge of this zero-sum battle can be used to devise a strategy of moral reconciliation, where the colonized and the colonizer explore their common place of lacking or incompletion. Israel doesn't possess any conscience. Hamas knows this. It knows that thinking about the potential responses of Israel is futile because there is only one response, namely the colonial logic of elimination. Knowledge would be of utility if the colonial situation contained any ethical flexibility. But when the situation that is to be thought of does not contain any possibility of a higher reconciliation, then one needs to break free of that situation, create a new one, and produce new regimes of knowledge.

Does the failure of knowledge in the face of the colonial conjuncture translate into the triumph of a brute, unthinking practice? Does it turn knowledge into an illusion that can be done away with? No. It merely indicates the *heteronomy* of knowledge, its inscription into the space of politico-historical practices as a *secondary materiality*. Idealist politics, as we have seen, ignores this inscription; it assumes that declamations themselves are sufficient to change reality. Materialist politics, on the other hand, foregrounds the subterranean network of forces that structure idealist thinking. Thought never exists in the purity of its autonomy but always comes second, its cause being the historicity of the social formation. The envelopment of thought within the constraints of being means that knowledge is always exceeded by social structure—an *irreducible exteriority* of practice always structures the contours of theory. Knowledge can never be produced on its own; it always feeds on the practical relationships that the militant forges with the elements of society. If there is no practical structure of action, there is no knowledge. The dependence of

knowledge upon practice means that there comes a point when the existing knowledge can't frame the future course of action. Knowledge proves insufficient when confronted with a new reality, an impasse that outstrips its epistemic gaze.

The blockage of knowledge production is visible in the Palestinian conjuncture that prevailed prior to the October 7 attack. Theoretical activity couldn't produce any substantively new analyses or a radical political direction as long as the relations of forces remained the same. Palestinians did try to change these relations. They started the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, which was criminalized by the US and its European partners as "anti-Semitic." Thus, it was not sufficient to substantially change the status quo.[62] Nonviolent demonstrations and gatherings at the Israeli separation barrier, which were organized by young protesters in the beginning of 2023 and were previously referred to as the "Great March of Return" in 2018-19, were brutally suppressed by Israeli forces.[63] The strategy of peacefully appealing to the Jewish support base of Zionism proved incapable of producing durable political effects. Hebh Jamal elaborates:

> There has not been success in changing the perception of the Israeli public—to actually see us as humans and to accept we will not live in a cage. Whenever Israelis have an election, we brace ourselves because we know the only way you get polling numbers is by bombing, raiding, or arresting us senseless. Usually, when they bang the war drums, public support comes running. I am unsure how the colonized mind will decolonize itself to give us our freedom. It has not happened, and I don't think it ever will.[64]

When the practice of non-violence failed to shift the relations of forces, a different practice had to be deployed. The existing knowledge that Hamas possessed about the belligerent behavior of the Israeli state was based on a stagnant conjuncture, one in which Palestinian forces

62 Steven A. Cook, "The BDS Movement Has Already Lost," *Foreign Policy*, 19 May 2022. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/19/bds-movement-boycott-israel-palestine-harvard-crimson/.

63 Joseph Daher, "Gaza: We Must Defend Palestinians' Right to Resistance," *The New Arab*, 11 October, 2023. Available at: https://www.newarab.com/opinion/gaza-we-must-defend-palestinians-right-resistance.

64 Hebh Jamal, "Despite What You Think, Palestinians Are Not Celebrating Death," *MR Online*, October 10, 2023. Available at: https://mronline.org/2023/10/10/despite-what-you-think-palestinians-are-not-celebrating-death/.

weren't able to *direct* the dynamic of politics. This stagnation needed to be broken. But for the liberal-leftist intelligentsia, no such stagnation exists. Knowledge production is not a heteronomous activity but an inner essence that belongs to a discursive intellect. Conversations between Israel and Palestine can be initiated and maintained for however long one wants because there are no material constraints upon epistemic practice. By acknowledging these constraints, Marxist materialism articulates a different politics, one wherein the *failure* of knowledge is more important than the discursively enforced continuation of ineffectual dialogue.

A dialogue had to be *kickstarted* through the force of violence in order to produce knowledge. Kickstart mechanisms are another interesting metaphorical avenue to explore the shape of anti-colonial materialism. Kickstarting is used to manually initiate the engine's operation in the absence of electric starters, which can fail due to connection issues, faulty motors etc. In this scenario, a kickstart uses the rider's physical effort to turn the engine over, bypassing the need for electrical power. Mechanical systems are often simpler and more robust than electrical systems, making them less prone to certain types of failures. But this does not mean that electric starters are to be abandoned. In fact, quite the reverse. Electric starters offer numerous advantages, including convenience, integration with modern technology, and enhanced safety features. Kickstart is used only in specific situations when the possibilities offered by electrical starters cannot be used from the beginning. But this purely mechanical action can allow subsequent access to electrical advantages once the engine is running. A roughly similar relation prevails between knowledge production and social being. Given the status of knowledge as a form of activity inscribed in the materiality of the social formation, its epistemic generativity is always linked to the actualities prevalent in the political struggle. In the absence of new actualities, the movement of bodies has to kickstart a chain of consequences so that thinking can occur. Revolutionary theory is never devalued. Only the heteronomy of its production is noted. In the case of Israel-Palestine, the possibility of producing knowledge for a mutual dialogue is based upon the corporeal power of anti-colonial violence.

At the transindividual level, anti-colonial violence functions as a

positive project, which Lenin labeled as the "school of life and struggle."[65] Lenin saw capitalist society not merely as a social fantasy that masks an ontological impossibility but as a historical architecture that creates its own positive conditions of organization. He illustrated this through the example of the "factory": "Marxism, the ideology of the proletariat trained by capitalism, has been and is teaching unstable intellectuals to distinguish between the factory as a means of exploitation (discipline based on fear of starvation) and the factory as a means of organization (discipline based on collective work united by the conditions of a technically highly developed form of production)."[66] So, the factory is not just a social fantasy that prevents the eruption of radical negativity but a form of "schooling" that shapes the proletariat. Whoever does not understand this falls victim to "aristocratic anarchism" which childishly rails against the stifling effects of the factory.[67] A communist, by contrast, has to visualize the party itself "'as an immense factory' headed by a director in the shape of the Central Committee."[68]

Lenin uses a metaphorical formulation to outline the distinctiveness of communist social politics: "it would be more correct to compare the state of society in which we live now not with a jelly, but with metal that is being melted to prepare a more stable alloy."[69] This gives rise to the "iron battalions of the proletariat"[70]—a phrase that indicates the objectiveness of political sociality. Revolution includes not just the objectivization of a radical negativity but the subjectivization of an objective dialectic that exceeds the individual act of subjective destitution. Žižek is fixated upon the possibility of a transcendental gesture that breaks out of the situation. In revolutionary political sequences, this possibility is circumscribed by the materiality of mass struggle that imposes its own rhythms. In the documentary *A Revolt That Never Ends* Antonio Negri says, "Being part of a movement means accepting its weight... In the end, behavior in those

65 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 26* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 402.

66 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 7*(Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961), p. 389.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 26*, p. 218.

70 Ibid., p. 277.

situations is mass behavior. There is no possibility for anyone, including myself, to control historical processes."[71] The specificity of this objective dialectic of mass movements that exceeds the act of self-relating negativity forces us to institute a new problematic for Marxist materialism. Evald Ilyenkov outlines this problematic in the following way:

> [Marxism's] real subject is the entire historically (dialectically) developing process of social man's objective cognition of the material world of both natural and socio-historical phenomena, the process of the reflection of this world in the consciousness of individual man and mankind. The process whose result and goal is objective truth. The process which is realized by billions of people in hundreds of successive generations. The process which at every step is verified by practice, experiment, and facts, which is materially embodied... in the form of technology and industry and in the form of the real, social and political conquests consciously made by revolutionary forces under the leadership of their avant-garde—the party.[72]

The entire processual dynamic of human-natural interaction and organized political apparatuses forms the problematic of Marxism. This dynamic establishes "[l]aws which are independent of will and consciousness and which act in cognition with the force of objective necessity, while finally forcing a way through into individual thinking."[73] Taking into account these laws is necessary if we want to replace abstract negativity with the burden of conjuncturally specific articulations of social totalities.

Filmic Postscript

In order to explain the burden of conjunctures and the objectiveness of political sociality, I take recourse to the movie *Damsel.*[74] Against Žižek's dissipation of history as a fiction concealing the transcendental power of lack, *Damsel* portrays the materiality of historical structures and necessary immanence of resistance.

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71 *Antonio Negri—A Revolt That Never Ends*, 2023 [2004]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSyHJjoXmsE.

72 Evald Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism. Reflections on Lenin's Book: 'Materialism and Empirio-Criticism'* (London: New Park Publications, 1982), 65.

73 Ibid., p. 75.

74 2024, directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, United States.

The plot of *Damsel* is centered around the ancestral debt incurred by the royal family of Aurea after their first king led an unprovoked attack on the dragon residing in the kingdom and killed the dragon's three children. In order to ensure the safety of his kingdom, the king made peace with the dragon by sacrificing his three daughters. Thereafter, the sacrifice became a ritual that had to be regularly done in order to placate the dragon. The royal family of Aurea pays this debt through patriarchal tactics. They use their opulence to lure girls from poor kingdoms, marry them and then join together the cut hands of the newlyweds, thus making the dragon think that these women are of Aurean descent.

Elodie, the adolescent daughter of Lord Bayford, is deceived into marrying Prince Henry of Aurea so that she can be sacrificed to the dragon. Before she is thrown into the cave, she exists in the *normal* time of ideology. Her interaction with others consists of the smoothness of a harmonious narrative, wherein she imagines and enjoys herself as the wife of Prince Henry. All the characters of society are performing their required roles and working towards the fulfilment of personal goals. In other words, a seamless story is being told.

This story is articulated when Elodie is taken near the cave under the pretext that she is about to perform an ancient ceremony that commemorates the sacrifice made by the first king of Aurea. Here, the sacrifice of the king's three daughters to the dragon is represented not as a monstrous compulsion that has to be repeated but as an originary act of royal selflessness that has to be symbolically remembered.

Registering the first king's act of sacrifice in all its monstrous dimensions would have revealed that it was the outcome of a patriarchal, militarist attitude that led an unprovoked attack against the dragon. The security of the kingdom was used as a mythical cause to kill the dragon's children. This perspective punctures the story of sacrifice told by the royal family of Aurea. In the royal narrative, the kingdom is represented as a nucleus of nobility that was suffering from the predations of the dragon. The entire socio-natural ecosystem is made to revolve around the concerns of the royal family.

Though the sacrifice of the first king's three daughters is a result of the social structure of patriarchal militarism, the royal family narrates it as the personal heroism of the king, who cared only about his kingdom.

The purity of the king's self-sacrificial spirit preserves it throughout the ages as a tradition that has to be handed to individuals. Every trace of heteronomy is removed from the glory of the king's intention. The only thing left to do is to remember this glorious intention in all its unicity. On the other hand, if the original sacrifice is comprehended as a node in the power mechanism of a patriarchal, militarist kingdom, then it will have to be critically dissected and opened up for new operations. Once we look at the social interrelations behind the death of the king's daughters, we can discuss different methods of intervening in those interrelations, changing them, or destroying them.

The possibility of change exists only when we are dealing not with unified intentions but with the multiplicity of social relations. This multiplicity comes into play when Elodie is thrown into the dragon's lair. Within the cave, there is no friction-free movement of characters on the stage of a remembered history. All remembrance breaks down in the face of the terrible ordeal that Elodie suffers in order to escape from the cave. The memory of the mind is replaced by the grueling wounds of a tired body struggling for survival. Ideology loses its normality—the grandeur of royal history becomes burdened with the materiality of the cave, the claustrophobic, labyrinthine enclosure of patriarchal structures.

As Elodie explores the cave, the fancy clothes she had worn for the marriage are torn apart by the rough surroundings. She cuts her long hair and then uses it to tie a bag of healing silkworms. The invisibility of ideology—produced through the matrix of personal habits—disintegrates into its own bare materiality. In the time of normality, ideology is reproduced as a coherent narrative whose lineaments are embedded in the features of corporeal life, such as clothes, hair, etc. In the time of abnormality, ideology doesn't just vanish; its force continues to be felt, as is clear in the inhospitable cave in which Elodie is trapped. But the *consistency* of ideology decays; it no longer commands the normative legitimacy that it earlier possessed. And once the normative authority of ideology weakens, the path is open for a non-ideological mode of living.

Elodie's personal transformation attests to this critical operation of displacement. She can't immediately jettison the past that has landed her into the current predicament. The poverty of her kingdom, the masculinist willingness of her father to marry her to Prince Henry for the lucrative

bride price, the patriarchal militarism of the Aurean royal family—all these are *facts* of history that can't be erased. The resonance of these facts is etched on the body of Elodie. But these etchings can now be recognized for what they are—marks made by social structures of oppression. The scars on Elodie's body due to the dragon's fire, her torn clothes, her clipped hair—this is the force that strips ideology to its naked structurality. Without any symbolic system to confer normative consistency upon Elodie's markers of royal identity, they become exposed to the corrosive effects of the cave. Unlike a castle, the dragon's lair doesn't have the trappings of royal authority. There is no tightly knit fabric of communication that interlocks the subaltern's thoughts and feelings into the channels of status quo. There is no royal family to respect, no glorious narrative to be remembered, no repressive authorities to face—there is only the dragon and Elodie. Unlike Žižek's model of individual dis-identification, anti-ideological resistance in *Damsel* is the result of a radical shift in the collective environment of the subject. From the very beginning, the focus is on how changes in the trans-individual dynamic of socio-historic structures lead to changes in the consciousness of the oppressed.

The dragon, as a victim of the king's unprovoked aggressions, expresses the militant heft possessed by subalternized women. This subaltern mass has been integrated into the status quo through a surface measure, namely the ritual of sacrifice, which feeds on other poor women. In its dangerous isolation, the cave functions as the place where the aggressive energies of subalternity are concentrated, temporarily kept in check through the deceptions of the royal family. It is not the normal subaltern who obeys the injunctions of ideology, acclimatized to the atmosphere of society. Rather, it represents the home base of subalternity, the space where the oppressed coalesce into a quasi-society, a dragon that can unleash its anger upon royalty. But this anger doesn't yet constitute a new society; the cave remains a cave, a container of raw, concentrated militancy that cannot erupt into a whole world.

Thus, the lair of the dragon is a peculiar entity. It doesn't exist on the same level as the houses of other people. It exists underneath what usually passes as history; it is *ad-history*. The prefix "ad" conveys multiple meanings: 1) direction: moving toward something; 2) addition: bringing something to or adding something; 3) adherence: sticking to or attaching; and 4) proximity: being near or adjacent to. Ad-history is thus a

dynamic that supplements history, transforms it, by moving towards, by exploring its physiognomy, by scratching its raggedy body with probing hands. When Elodie falls into this ad-historical quasi-society, she experiences the same motion of probing displacement: her life falls apart into a bare structure of oppression that can be confronted, shaped, re-shaped, and eventually destroyed.

The operation of displacement is expressed in Elodie's final encounter with her father. When her father dies at the hands of the dragon after having had a change of heart and coming to rescue her daughter, his body lies on the floor of the cave. Elodie hastily looks at her father's dead body, redirecting her attention to his sword, which she then proceeds to pick up. Instead of dwelling on the death of the patriarch—emotionally reflecting on his final act of love—Elodie uses the remains of patriarchal society as a weapon, as a tool in her new trajectory.

She soon decides to talk to the dragon to convince her that they share similar interests as victims of the kingdom's patriarchal belligerence. Since the cave is not a haven of freedom but a quasi-society where the materiality of ideology can be worked upon, there is no possibility of liberation through peaceful talk. A mind that has been shaped for so long by the history of oppression cannot be immediately enlightened. The lack of knowledge is not just a mental error that can be pedagogically corrected but is a product of definite material conditions. In *Ethics,* Spinoza says that "falsity" cannot consist in an "absolute privation" or "absolute ignorance."[75] It is caused due to the specific interaction of our body with other bodies and things in the world. Take the following example: when we look at the sun, we might imagine it to be 200 hundred feet away from us, but this imagination in itself does not constitute a falsity. As Spinoza notes: "For even if we later come to know that it is more than six hundred diameters of the earth away from us, we nevertheless imagine it as near. *For we imagine the sun so near not because we do not know its true distance, but because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by the sun*."[76]

The false idea of the sun's distance does not disappear because it is actually how the mind *immediately* functions. When glancing at the sun

75 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics,* ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 53.

76 Ibid., pp. 53, 54; emphasis mine.

without the use of a scientific lens, our sensory idea will always make it seem as if the sun is not very far. In the realm of society, falsity possesses a similar weight of its own, denoting a specific modality of our body's interaction with other bodies and things. So, the dragon will not all of a sudden accept Elodie's words on their solidarity of interests. On the contrary, her body will continue to function under the regime of interaction instituted by the royal family: the rituals of the ancient debt, the repetition of the sacrifice, have convinced her that the royal family of Aurea is indeed sending its own daughters to her. But this is just an immediate perception that arises from her encounter with girls in the cave. The dragon is not able to look beyond the cave to identify the origins of these girls, the social histories that have led to their entrapment in the lair.

In other words, the false conception of the dragon denotes the interaction of her body, a specific modification of what her corporeal constitution is capable of. More particularly, falsity is a form of *incomplete* truth. Either multiple ideas are indistinctly mixed together or some parts are missing from the idea. In this case, the dragon has jumbled together the actual fact of the king's unprovoked aggression with the immediate perception of the girls that are sacrificed to her, failing to incorporate the missing knowledge of the royal family's deceptive strategy. So, falseness is not an independent quality of its own. It only represents the confusion or mutilation of true realities; the only problem is that these realities are constituted in a disjointed manner. Christopher Marcus Davidson explains: "A confused idea of a unicorn is not true, but the parts (horse and horn) we fuse together are not false, either. Since false ideas are either just part of a true idea, or are true ideas badly combined, other true ideas have little power to dispel what is true and real in the idea."[77]

Since falsity consists of a disjointed modification of truth, the only way in which it can be combated is through an alternative modification that impacts the body's reality. This alternative modification does not need to emulate the intellectualist model of enlightenment. One does not need to impart theoretically correct ideas to the person who has false ideas. This purely pedagogical model is based on the incorrect assumption that falsity comprises of an absolute ignorance, a gaping hole, that just needs to be filled with truthful knowledge. This is Elodie's thinking:

77 Christopher Marcus Davidson, *Ethics After the Genealogy of the Subject*, PhD Dissertation, Villanova University, 2014, p. 202.

she believes that the dragon just needs to be given correct ideas to end her ignorance. However, Spinoza refutes such an assumption by showing how an absolute falsity does not exist anywhere. There is no empty space where an enlightened person like Elodie can place her correct ideas. Every space is always occupied, filled with the history of social relations. Falsity is always a specific modification of these relations. As such, it is this specific modification that needs to be changed, instead of trying to fill an empty space. Spinoza takes the example of fear to show how falsity is countered in a non-intellectualist manner. He writes:

> It happens, of course, when we wrongly fear some evil, that the fear disappears on our hearing news of the truth. But on the other hand, it also happens, when we fear an evil which is certain to come, that the fear vanishes on our hearing false news. So imaginations do not disappear through the presence of the true insofar as it is true, but because there occur others, stronger than them, which exclude the present existence of the things we imagine.[78]

Fear, as a sensory state that decreases the body's power of acting, can be removed if something jolts us into a stronger imagination. This imagination can be produced both by convincing me, truthfully, that the evil is not imminent and by convincing me falsely of the same point. The means adopted to give the jolt does not matter. What matters is the re-modulation of the balance of forces within my body, so that it can once again become open to affecting others and being affected by them in a diversity of ways. A strong affect that has monopolized the field of affection has to be weakened by a stronger affect. As Spinoza puts it, "[a]n affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained."[79] The imagination of the mind errs when its area of operation becomes confined to a rigid field of affections. Thus, the dragon is unable to move beyond her lair to interact in a different manner. In order to crack open this rigid field of affections, we need a jolt that excludes the existence of those relations that are subjugating the body.

Elodie gives that jolt to the dragon when, after having failed to talk with her, she is forced to fight with her. In the course of the fight, she manages to severely injure the dragon by cleverly using the latter's fire. Standing in front of a weakened dragon, she says to her, "they fooled you.

78 Spinoza, *Ethics,* p. 118.

79 Ibid., p. 120.

You have been killing innocent daughters just like they did." The statement that declares transparency commands no legitimacy on its own. Its effects can seep into the mind only if the old structure of individuality has been destroyed, burnt by one's own fire. In order to constitute the feeling of solidarity within the subaltern mass, self-identity has to become wounded, suffering self-inflicted enervation. This self-destruction is not a carefully guided process that is intended to reveal an inner core of truth. Rather, it is an effect of the corrosive cave, where one's self grates against the structurality of ideology, without the mediation of symbolic networks.

While ad-historical spaces do not promise immediate liberation, they squeeze the subaltern into inhospitable isolation, quickening their social reflexes through the force of struggle. For Elodie, the imperative of survival, the desperation of escape, keeps dictating her actions, divesting her of her former self and pushing her into new alleys. On the walls of the cave, she discovers the names of the women who have been sacrificed to the dragon. She reads the map they have made and the remarks they have written to help future victims. In this way, Elodie enters into a subterranean quasi-society, one that is reproduced under the pressure of survival. The narrative that is written by this quasi-society of sacrificial women is radically opposed to the story told by the royal family of Aurea. Queen Isabelle narrates a grand tale of sacrifice, duty, and honor, bathed in the regalia of self-assured moral authority. The legitimacy of the Aurean narrative derives from the imposing castle, the majesty of the large rooms, the vastness of the gardens, the greenery of the landscape, etc. All these aesthetic features evidence the power of royal heroism, the capacity of patriarchal violence to imprint the world with the stability of Aurean wealth and identity. The universe of sacrificial women isn't one of their own making. It is an environment into which they are suddenly thrown. There is no overarching design of subjective destitution that they execute in a rigorous manner. There is only the exigency of sketching the contours of the cave in order to escape from the dragon. By not trying to shape the world according to the demands of an overweening royal authority, the quasi-society of sacrificial women allows the demands of reality to pervade one's own actions. Does this lead to a complete passivity? No. The envelopment of one's own self by the exigencies of reality creates a cognitive structure that can locate the weak links of that reality, interven-

ing in crevices that diverge from the standard routes. This crevice shelters plans for escape, as is clear from the depiction of the place where Elodie finds the engravings of past women. How does Elodie find this place? Running away from the fire-breathing dragon, she accidentally discovers the passage that leads to the chamber. The possibility of the occurrence of such accidents is itself constructed by the definiteness of exigencies, by an existential problematic that involves the question of one's survival.

Located in such a manner that it prevents the dragon's entry, the place where Elodie discovers the writings serves as a zone of rest, healing, and thinking. The stress of survival never vanishes. But insofar as the chamber blocks the dragon's entry, it allows a time when sheer desperation can give place to a dissection of the imperative of survival. In other words, thinking under duress, rather than being carried away by duress—though both exist in dialectical unity. Only if one is carried away by duress, feeling the utter distress of the situation, can one find the need to think that situation. This thinking is carried out not by a calm contemplation of a reality that lies in front of us but by one's local embedment in the structure of reality itself. The royal family of Aurea thinks in the atmosphere of controlled commemoration, coloring the world with the tradition of sacrifice. A clean legacy, a grand story—this makes up the hermetic circle from which the royal family directs the world. Elodie's thoughts emerge out of the rockiness of the chamber, from the pain spelt out on dark walls. There is no secure circle that guarantees the integrity of her thoughts. There are only the uneven boundaries of the chamber, which confront Elodie with the materiality of a history born in struggle. Elodie engraves her name on the wall of the chamber with a knife—a gesture that attaches her individuality to the political universe of oppressed women. Thinking with a knife—this is a materialist thought that resides not in the epistemic power of the individual but in the aggressive sharpness of a tool that cuts reality to reveal the truth.

For the dragon, the last of her species, her lair reminds her of the meagerness of her world, the death of her children, the memory of royal aggression. Psychological inhospitality torments the dragon's body, a torment that has been channeled by the royal family of Aurea into a patriarchal strategy of deception. This channel breaks down with the arrival of Elodie, who recomposes the psychological structure of the dragon, disentangling it from the ideology of royal sacrifice. Instead of killing the

dragon after defeating her in the fight, she heals her—an action that seals the solidarity of interest between the two of them. This solidarity could not have been realized through mere discussion. When the might of the dragon breaks, she faces a moment of extreme disruption. Her earlier routine of preying on sacrificial women is dislocated by the ingeniousness of Elodie. Once this dislocation occurs, she can no longer carry on as before. Elodie transforms this moment of dislocation into one of transformation by healing the dragon.

After healing the dragon, Elodie arrives at the castle, where Prince Henry is marrying the third girl. Dressed in dirt and rags, her entry at the scene of marriage causes consternation to the members of the royal family who are present there. Queen Isabelle's reaction is one of disgust and surprise; she doubles down on her claims to superiority, waxing eloquent about the spirit of heroism present in their royal story. Elodie remains unperturbed, never caring to respond to the queen. She just tells the bride to run away from Aurea. The calmness of Elodie does not represent the shell of self-assured contemplation within which the elite reside. Such royal pride is the enforcement of a prefabricated story upon the dynamics of the social world. Elodie does not participate in the imposition of such a story. Her calmness arises from the *non-story* of struggle, a movement that is tasked not with the coherent narration of the world but with a passivity to its structurality. Having confronted that structurality, coursed through it, Elodie has emerged stronger, together with the dragon. Calmness is the shape that structurality takes when its dimensions have been cut with the knife of struggle to carve a new structure.

When Queen Isabelle shouts to Elodie that no one should fear her just because she escaped from the dragon, Elodie coolly remarks that it is not she who should be feared. The dragon then emerges from the background, draping the oppressive rulers of Aurea in her angry fire. A mere escape would certainly have not meant much; it would have just converted Elodie into a survivor, an individual victim who would keep grappling with the trauma of her history. However, this fate is preempted due to the addition of the dragon to Elodie's escape. Along with Elodie, it is the dragon also who escapes from the cave, cognizant of the reality of the network of sacrifice in which she was involved. The creative militancy contained within the subalternity of the dragon transforms the category of escape. It no longer signifies an exit from an oppressive reality

that continues to exist. Rather, it becomes the mechanism that destroys the status quo, clearing the ground for the new. The fire that graphically extinguishes the lives of Aurean royalty is not just a destructive urge that wants to take revenge. On the contrary, it is an instrument of construction that razes down the grandeur of the kingdom to convert it into the bareness of structurality, a pure materiality that can be formed in a variety of modalities. A radical politics feeds on the explosiveness of this pure materiality.

Chapter 4
Étienne Balibar and the Politics of Impotence

On February 29, 2024, the Israeli army deliberately ran over a Palestinian man in Gaza City's Al-Zaytoun neighborhood after he was arrested.[1] The man was harshly interrogated by Israeli soldiers, who tied his hands with plastic zip-tie handcuffs before running him over with a military vehicle from the legs up. In order to ensure that he was thoroughly crushed, Israeli soldiers laid him on asphalt instead of an adjacent sandy area. The man had his clothes removed, since he was seen wearing only his underpants. When one looks at the body, one is confronted with the absolute unidentifiability of the man that it previously constituted: the individuality of the human being has been flattened into scattered, disfigured organs and parts.

Colonial Reality

How are we to think about the comprehensively destroyed body? In mainstream liberal thought, the evisceration of a human being can be regarded as a "moral" failing, as a loss of "lives" that has to be prevented. Palestinians here figure merely as "victims" of terror; their redemption, consequently, lies in the normative abstraction of "peace." The body of

1 "Israeli Tanks Have Deliberately Run over Dozens of Palestinian Civilians Alive," *ReliefWeb*, 4 March 2024. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/israeli-tanks-have-deliberately-run-over-dozens-palestinian-civilians-alive-enar.

the victim is sensationalized and marketed as a blot upon the fabric of humanity so that people can be convinced in favor of the cessation of hostilities. Politics is reduced to "outrage," while collective action is postponed to the day when everyone's moral conscience has awoken. When this spontaneous moral awakening does not happen, a sense of helplessness pervades. All this while, the individual can pride themselves over their distance from the violence of Hamas, which is considered as a myopic outburst without any political vision. This is clear in renowned Marxist philosopher Etienne Balibar's response to the Palestine crisis. He says that Hamas' October 7 military operation can not be justified because it was "accompanied by particularly odious crimes against the Israeli population: the murder of adults and children, torture, rape and kidnapping."[2] These "exterminist massacres... replicated the massacres perpetrated by the Jewish paramilitaries on Palestinian villages during the Naqba."[3]

Essentially, all of the supposed atrocities committed by Hamas have been debunked. Most of the 1,154 Israelis that the government claims were killed by Palestinians were actually killed by the Zionist state itself.[4] This is the result of Israel's 'Hannibal Directive,' which authorizes the killing of Israeli soldiers—and, in practice, civilians—if they fall into enemy hands. The story about the killing of babies was propagated without evidence,[5] being based on the words of Major David Ben Zion—an extremist settler who has explicitly called for violence against Palestinians.[6]

2 Etienne Balibar, "Till Death Palestine," *The Wire,* 30 October 2023. Available at: https://thewire.in/world/till-death-palestine.

3 Etienne Balibar, "Palestine, Ukraine and Other Wars of Extermination: The Local and the Global," Bisan Lecture Series, *Association des Universitaires pour le Respect du Droit International en Palestine*," December 10, 2023, 3. Available at: https://aurdip.org/en/bisan-lecture-series-etienne-balibar-palestine-ukraine-and-other-wars-of-extermination-the-local-and-the-global/.

4 Asa Winstanley, "Israel Killed Israelis, Confirms New 7 October Documentary," *The Electronic Intifada*, 11 March, 2024. Available at: https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/asa-winstanley/israel-killed-israelis-confirms-new-7-october-documentary.

5 Richard Sanders and Al Jazeera Investigative Unit, "October 7: Forensic Analysis Shows Hamas Abuses, Many False Israeli Claims," *Aljazeera,* 21 March 2024. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/21/october-7-forensic-analysis-shows-hamas-abuses-many-false-israeli-claims.

6 Dave Reed, "There Is No Proof Palestinian Fighters 'Beheaded' Babies. The

Claims about rape were established through a fraudulent *New York Times* investigation, which was published even though not a single rape victim was found.[7]

The reality of any remaining crimes committed by Hamas have been so obscured by the incessant Zionist propaganda as to be rendered impossible to judge. At the same time, and ever since the beginning of Operation al-Aqsa Flood, the reality of the extreme and genocidal acts of the Israeli forces, which outweigh even the most severe accusations thrown at Hamas by orders of magnitude, are routinely downplayed, obscured, and ignored by the Zionist forces and the Western media, despite overwhelming evidence. Babies have been beheaded—by Israeli bombs. Civilians have been deliberately targeted—in hospitals, schools, ambulances, and refugee camps. Entire families have been buried alive under rubble. The Israeli military has used civilians as human shields, forced evacuations only to bomb evacuation routes, and dropped white phosphorus on densely populated areas. Every Zionist accusation becomes a confession. The propaganda does not merely lie; it reveals what it is desperate to hide. It tells us precisely what crimes the Israeli state is committing, by displacing them onto the people it seeks to annihilate.

Balibar's willingness to accept the demonization of Palestinian resistance is rooted in the aforementioned logic of liberal peace, wherein clean, uncluttered thought is prioritized over the spiraling movement of anti-colonial resistance. Any counter-attack on Zionist settler-colonialism is said to be caught within the confines of the extant social reality. Palestinians and Israelis, then, become two sides of an overarching situation, continuously mirroring each other in terms of their deplorable violence. An exit from this situation can be conceived only in an external manner, as the intervention of a supervening agency. Thus, Balibar says that the only possible outcome consists in the intervention of the international community and its institutions, "demanding an immediate ceasefire, the release of the hostages, the prosecution of the war crimes

Only Source Is a Radical Settler," *Mondoweiss*, 11 October 2023. Available at: https://mondoweiss.net/2023/10/there-is-no-proof-palestinian-fighters-beheaded-babies-the-only-source-is-a-radical-settler/.

7 Ali Abunimah, "NY Times Found No 7 October Rape Victims, Reporter Admits," *The Electronic Intifada*, 1 March 2024. Available at: https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/ny-times-found-no-7-october-rape-victims-reporter-admits.

committed by both sides, and the implementation of the countless UN resolutions that have gone unheeded."[8] But he himself adds that this desired resolution has no chance of happening because "institutions have been neutralized by the major or medium-sized imperialist powers, and the Jewish-Arab conflict has once again become an issue in the maneuvers they engage in to determine spheres of influence and networks of alliances, in a context of cold and hot wars."[9] Geopolitical and regional power dynamics "obliterate any effective international legality. We are in a circle of impotence and calculation from which there is no escape. The catastrophe will therefore carry to term, and we will suffer the consequences."[10] *Impotence*—this becomes the fate of a liberal-pacifist strategy that wants to separate the Palestinian question from any contaminating influence of concrete geopolitical and social actors.

In order to build an alternative to Balibar's (anti)politics of impotence, consider these words by him: "I see the massacre on October 7th involving various atrocities perpetrated against civilians as a pure terrorist action (also in the literal sense: meant to spread terror), which forces to confer a terrorist character upon the organization itself."[11] Instead of disavowing this characterization, I want to interpret it literally: yes, a war of national liberation does intend to spread terror among the settlers so that the sense of security enjoyed by the colonial system can be upended. Colonial society in its entirety should be woken out of its racist insularity by being forced to pay the price of occupation, just as the colonized pay the price for national oppression. Terror should be felt on both sides. When anti-colonial practice inflicts damage upon structures of brutality through the deployment of terror, the entire alliance of imperialist states comes together to contain the movement. Therefore, when Balibar says that a "terrorist character" should be conferred upon Hamas, he forgets that this has already been done through sanctions and terror lists created by states of the Global North. But these instruments of repression have had a counterproductive effect, introducing a form of delinking among the entities that are at the receiving end of imperialist strangulation. In

8 Balibar, "Till Death Palestine."

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Balibar, "Palestine, Ukraine and Other Wars of Extermination," p. 5.

the words of Max Ajl: "As political organizations were 'maximally' coerced and quarantined, they made mutual linkages. Delinking led to a type of regional collective self-reliant security doctrine, architecture, and technological and military coordination. Imperialism built an inadvertent scaffolding for its opponents' ideological and political goals."[12] Thus, anti-colonial terror lays bare the contours of confrontation, imposing upon us the stark divide of national liberation and imperialism. Operation al-Aqsa Flood has heightened the antagonism between the colonizer and the colonized, with the entire globe feeling the reverberations of this binarized division.

As the divide between national liberation and colonialism is sharpened, amplified, and simplified, one cannot say that both the sides are involved in a cycle of violence, wherein each mimes the other in the performance of cruelty. In order to say that the colonizer and the colonized are similar in terms of their violent acts, one has to compare this violence against a common standard of peace. But the peculiarity of colonialism consists in the fact that there is no unified notion of peace. Frantz Fanon elaborates: "The zone inhabited by the colonized is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the colonizers. The two zones confront each other, but not in the service of a higher unity. Governed by a purely Aristotelian logic, they follow the principle of mutual exclusion: There is no conciliation possible, one of the terms is superfluous."[13] Since Balibar wants to establish a similarity between the violence of Hamas and Israel, he has to acknowledge that he is comparing both these forms of violence from a higher standpoint of peace. And this is exactly what he does. He writes that the aim of Hamas' October 7 attack was "to provoke a response of such violence that the war would enter a new, truly "exterminationist" phase, obliterating forever the possibilities of the two peoples living together."[14] *Possibilities*—this is a key word of liberal ideology, as it presupposes that the colonial situation always contains a reservoir of morality, a hope of reconciliation. However, colonialism is an irreconcilable struggle between two opposing forces. Even if Hamas had remained completely quiet, Israel would have maintained its genocide of Palestinians.

12 Max Ajl, "Palestine's Great Flood: Part I," *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 13, no. 1 (2024), pp. 69, 70.

13 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 38, 39.

14 Balibar, "Till Death Palestine."

Settler sovereignty can only be ensured through the perpetually enacted destruction of indigenous presence. The mere fact of Palestinian existence is a threat to Israel. Hamas' military operations do not determine the character of the Israeli response. The response of Israel is ingrained in the structure of colonialism, which mandates the extermination of the native. That is why Balibar is wrong to say that Operation al-Aqsa Flood has erased the "possibilities" of peace. There never was such a possibility. In a colonial situation, possibilities are created by cracking open the shell of frozen impossibilities.

This brings me back to the dismembered body of the Palestinian man. The colonial violence enacted upon this body cannot be judged against a higher notion of morality, as colonialism drives back all ethereal ideological words into the soil of struggle. In order to understand the crushed body, one has to analyze the concrete causes that have brought about this kind of death. Without these causes, we will end up in the fantasy world of liberal ethics, where everything is subordinated to the judgmental gaze of a contemplative observer. Here, it is instructive to read Nikolai Bukharin's explanation of the materiality of the body:

> Now man is a very delicately organized creature. Destroy this organization, disorganize it, take it apart, cut it up, and the "mind" at once disappears. If men were able to put together this system again, to assemble the human organism, in other words, if it were possible to take a human body apart and put it together again just as one may do with the parts of a clock, consciousness would also at once return; once the clock has been reassembled it will operate and start to tick; put together the human organism, and it will start to think.[15]

Comparing a body to a clock—this seems to offend the sensibilities of liberal morality where "humanity" is constantly touted as an inviolable construct. However, a mechanical perspective is appropriate for the politics of anti-colonialism, where one mourns not the violation of the body's humanity but its disorganization by specific actors. In politics, the disorganized body is reassembled through collective action, through the gathering of masses that preserves the desire for life through concrete practices of disobedience and construction. This organized mass targets the entity that is responsible for the disorganization of bodies, namely the Zionist state. If violence needs to be deployed in the struggle against

15 Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (Cosmonaut Press, 2021), p. 70.

colonialism, then it is fully justified. It is simply an instrument that assists in the reassembly of bodies through the disassembly of the colonial enemy.

Strategies of Civility

Balibar believes that violence is not a mere instrument. In his book *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, he states that "political violence can never be completely controlled. One cannot simply use it as a means in the service of certain ends... without oneself feeling the ambivalent effects of its use, 'deliberate' or not."[16] Violence, accordingly, can no longer be thought as "a means or an instrument employed to accomplish something else... It is, rather, the uncertain stakes of a confrontation with the element of irreducible alterity that it carries within itself."[17] This "irreducible alterity" refers to the fact that violence "exceeds the purposes guaranteeing it a permanent place in the economy of power and production."[18] It is never entirely functional, as it "exceeds the intentions and escapes the control of those exercising violence."[19] This dysfunctionality has been foregrounded through the defeat of the "ideologies of modernity" that believed in the "grand narrative of progress."[20] This grand narrative can be summarized in the thesis of the "convertibility" of violence: "the consequences of the most massive acts of destruction are ruins and mourning, but they cannot not be constructive (or reconstructive), even as they destroy."[21]

The "historical optimism or faith in the meaning of history" has been lost with the defeat of revolutionary projects.[22] These projects practiced counter-violence, which Balibar classifies as a simplistic "inver-

16 Etienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 105.

17 Ibid., p. 17.

18 Ibid., p. 134.

19 Ibid., p. 135.

20 Ibid., p. 65, 66.

21 Ibid., p. 49.

22 Ibid.

sion" of ruling class violence.[23] Socialist revolutions believed that they must duplicate bourgeois violence if they are to properly "monopolize" it.[24] This monopolization is "dangerous for the very people who wield and institute them."[25] Why? "[B]ecause they are nothing other, at the limit, than crystallized or stabilized violence and, in the final analysis, the relative stabilization, by groups and individuals in a given society, of their own violence—in the form of a distantiation and unequal distribution, a more or less permanent appropriation of the means of violence by some of them."[26] Balibar believes that the hierarchical foundation of revolutionary counter-violence—its status as an unequal distribution of force—was overlooked due to the construction of a grand narrative, namely class struggle as the "motor of history."[27] This narrative of history demarcated a new division between "revolutionary" violence and "counterrevolutionary" violence. The latter was excluded "from the meaning of history" as it was regarded as an obstacle to the revolution.[28] Insofar as revolutionary projects dogmatically justified their violence through the construction of a facile grand history, they failed to engage with legitimate disagreements and antagonisms. Any dynamic that didn't agree with state policy was classified as "counterrevolutionary." This initiated a "truly suicidal process" of increasing repression.[29] State institutions and police apparatuses in socialist societies came to replicate the hierarchical structure of the enemies against whom they were fighting.

According to Balibar, globalization has operated a "practical refutation of the grand schemes of the intelligibility of politics."[30] Both bourgeois and post-revolutionary states depended upon the primacy of the nation, which functioned as a form of "collective subjectivity" integrating individuals "in the process of historical universality (patriotism, civic

23 Ibid., p. 22.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 7.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 68.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p. 103.

30 Ibid., p. 27.

duty)."[31] Insofar as globalization has diminished the significance of the nation, it has destroyed the myth of a unified history. Today, events no longer unfold as part of an evolving chain of meaningful collective action. Conflicts no longer oppose a "negative" to a "positive." Rather, "the intrinsic complexity or order of multiplicity that characterizes conflict" introduces a new reality that can't be captured by the binaries of revolutionary counter-violence.[32] These binaries assumed that conflict would birth progress. However, progress has been replaced by the explosion of myriad forms of "extreme violence" (environmental catastrophe, ethnic wars, etc.) that do not contribute to any grand narrative. This form of violence that is not part of the "universal meaning" of history is "inconvertible" violence i.e. violence that cannot be incorporated into a teleological narrative. Inconvertible violence shows that totalizing discourses will always fail in their attempt to convert all violence into social stability. An inconvertible remainder inevitably haunts the unity of grand narratives. As Balibar remarks, "the history of society or the field of politics is that of an excess or irreducible remainder of violence (if only latent violence) over the institutional, legal, or strategic forms for reducing and eliminating it."[33]

Insofar as inconvertible violence lies outside the justificatory web of totalizing discourses, it directly attests to the entanglement of politics with antagonisms, the fact that politics is not a stable and absolute idea but a form of fragile power relation. This fragility is present in extreme violence, which is shorn of any larger narrative of progress. Consequently, extreme violence is faced with the abyss of indeterminacy, the inability of a justification to permanently ground politics. Instead of accepting the indeterminacy of politics, extreme violence aims to tear apart social bonds in order to generate security. That is why it targets "the humanity in man, the very fact of inclusion in the human race," an impossible task that needs to be repeated in order to guarantee a temporary sense of "omnipotence."[34] Extreme violence thus reveals[35] an "incompressible mini-

31 Ibid., p. 68.

32 Ibid., p. 27.

33 Ibid., p. 11.

34 Ibid., p. 52, 60.

35 Étienne Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics to Politics as Anti-Violence,"

mum,"[36] an excess that cannot be eliminated: "individuality is not a simple totality which could be circumscribed in a unique discourse, a unique way of life; there always remains an indefinite multiplicity of 'parts,' relationships, and fluctuations which exceed such an imaginary project, and wind up subverting it."[37] Balibar asks us to accept the groundlessness of politics that is revealed in a perverse fashion by the anxieties of extreme violence. Instead of eliminating the threat of conflict (which extreme violence tends to do), we should accept the fundamental conflictuality of politics itself. Not all violence can be converted into the teleology of a social order. There always remains an inconvertible remainder that disturbs the stability of discourses. The ends for which we want to deploy violence are overpowered by an excess of violence that we wrongly relegate to mere means. Balibar writes: "violence can't be simply the other of politics, unless we want to imagine a politics without powers, power relations, inequalities, conflicts, or interests, which would be tantamount to a politics without politics."[38]

The acknowledgement of violence as a conflictual dynamic that cannot be suppressed points us towards the "precariousness" of politics, the fact that it cannot be guaranteed once and for all by a grand historical narrative.[39] Instead, politics is constituted by an "infinite circularity": a political action depends on its own movement of permanent negotiation, instead of being subordinated to an invariant foundation.[40] When this circularity is ignored, we enter the realm of extreme violence where one engages in the impossible search for a metaphysical foundation. As Balibar puts it:

> [We need] to conceive of politics... as an absolute "fiction," or an institution with no foundation that is necessarily and irremediably contingent... The sole "foundation" is a negative one, terror or extreme violence (or a combination of

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Critical Times 3, no. 3 (2020): pp. 387, 388. .

36 Etienne Balibar, "Spinoza: The Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses," in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York/London: Routledge, 1994), p. 33.

37 Ibid., p. 35.

38 Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics to Politics as Anti-Violence," p. 386.

39 Balibar, *Violence and Civility,* 97.

40 Ibid., p. 17.

> the forms of extreme violence, which is, precisely, terror). The alternative, it is the aleatory, purely practical possibility of avoiding terror, of deferring it more or less completely and for a relatively protracted period.[41]

The aleatory mode of politics leads to "civility," wherein politics does not renounce the imperative of liberatory violence but attempts to combat its "nihilism" through careful controls.[42] This enables Balibar to contrast the nihilistic tendencies of revolutionary counter-violence to "anti-violence," which denotes "resistance to the reactive violence that violence itself elicits when it is generalized."[43] Thus, the anti-violence of civility allows a mass movement to "take a distance from itself" and engage in self-critique.[44] There always has to be a space where people can "reflect on the consequences and aftereffects of their own "social movements" when they confront a violent social order or a legal state of injustice."[45] In other words, civility is a second-order reflection that prevents mass movements from falling prey to unthinking "barbarity."[46] It is the practice that pits careful reflection against uninformed action. As Balibar notes, "we must take risks and know which risks we take."[47] My objection is that the notion of civility ontologizes politics by tying it to the "ultrapolitical" instance of contingency or groundlessness.[48] This is evident when Balibar says that whenever a progressive movement has succeeded in its objectives, "this has never happened in accordance with the logic of such politics alone. Rather, another politics, irreducible to any of these received political concepts, has always had to intervene in addition, or to provide politics with its underside, as it were: precisely the politics that I am hypothetically calling civility."[49]

Even if we admit that politics is groundless, this doesn't necessitate the transformation of this groundlessness into the "impolitic limits of

41 Ibid., pp. 146, 147.

42 Ibid., p. 128.

43 Ibid., p. 144.

44 Ibid., p. 104.

45 Ibid., p. 148.

46 Ibid., p. 104.

47 Ibid., p. xv.

48 Ibid., p. 147.

49 Ibid., p. 51.

politics."[50] On the contrary, the contingent nature of politics testifies to the fact that the effects of violence can't be moderated by the reflective faculty of an enlightened intellect. When Balibar asks political militants to take risks while knowing which risks they are taking, he elides the collective character of politics, wherein decisions are outside the remit of knowledge. Knowledge presupposes a relation of correspondence between the knower and the object that is to be known. In politics, the risks that are to be known are outside of one's grasp since their effects come into display only when they join the general field of social reality. Unless we take risks, we are never going to know their precise character. Balibar knows that politics is aleatory, that it cannot be provided with a permanent foundation. But he turns this very fact of contingency into a guiding principle that can be implemented by people when they undertake politics. This accords a transcendental authority to the power of abstract reflection, which swoops in from afar to judge if a specific political action is respecting the contingency of politics. In concrete cases, this leads to a vague democratic ideology that repeats anti-communist and pro-imperialist falsities.

The Ideology of Bourgeois Democracy

The ontologization of politics is visible in Balibar's comments on the Russia-Ukraine war. He says that the rationale behind the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was two-fold. First, Russia wanted to "rebuild the Empire that had been formed over centuries under the tsarist regime and sanctified by the messianic mission of 'Holy Russia,' then secularized and expanded by Stalin under the name of communism, now resurrected with the help of a virulent nationalist ideology that counterposes an idealized traditional 'Greater Russia' or 'Eurasia' to the 'degenerate' democratic West."[51] He never explains why Stalin's rule represented a form of imperialism. He merely mentions the Holodomor—the 1932-33 famine that killed Ukrainian peasants. Balibar regards the Holodomor as part of the "greatest genocides of the 20th century," putting it on par with the

50 Étienne Balibar, "Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Anthropology," *Differences* 20, no. 2–3 (2009), p. 21.

51 Balibar, "Palestine, Ukraine and Other Wars of Extermination," p. 9.

Holocaust.[52] This interpretation takes part in an anti-communist model that attributes the Ukrainian famine to the evil intentions of Stalin.[53] According to Mark B. Tauger, "the famine was not limited to Ukraine, but affected virtually the entire Soviet Union, and resulted first of all from a series of natural disasters in 1931–32 that diminished harvests drastically."[54] It is illogical to say that Stalin killed Ukrainian peasants, because "the Soviet regime depended for its survival on the peasantry and relied on the peasants to overcome the famine, which they did by producing a much larger harvest in 1933, despite the tragic famine conditions in which they worked."[55]

This shows that "collectivization allowed the mobilization and distribution of resources, like tractors, seed aid, and food relief, to enable farmers to produce a large harvest during a serious famine, which was unprecedented in Russian history and almost so in Soviet history."[56] It is also important to remember that it was farm collectivization that strengthened the Soviet state against the Nazi army "by ensuring the priority of Red Army soldiers and war workers over peasants in the wartime allocation of food."[57] Without the defeat of Germany by the Soviets, Hitler would have achieved domination over continental Europe, possibly

52 Ibid.

53 For more information on the anti-communist narrative surrounding the 1932-33 famine, see *For a Few Canards More: Counter Inquiry on Stalin and the Soviet Union*, Aymeric Monville (2024, Iskra Books). See also Hiroaki Kuromiya, who provides much-needed international geopolitical context in noting that "one might argue that in such a tense international environment [marked by Japan's invasion of Manchuria and threat to the Soviet Far East, Polish-Japanese intelligence cooperation, uprisings in Xinjiang and Mongolia, and fears of a two-front war involving Poland and Japan] Stalin would not have intentionally caused a large-scale famine which would politically de-stabilise the country." Hiroaki Kuromiya, "The Soviet Famine of 1932-1933 Reconsidered," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 4 (2008), p. 671.

54 Mark B. Tauger, "Stalin, Soviet Agriculture, and Collectivisation," in Frank Trentmann and Flemming Just (eds.), *Food and Conflict in Europe in the Age of the Two World Wars* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2006), p. 112.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Mark Harrison, "Afterword," in Mark Harrison (ed.), *Guns and Rubles: The Defense Industry in the Stalinist State* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 258.

leading to Britain's withdrawal from the conflict and hindering American support to Europe. Thus, when we look beyond the decontextualized invocation of the famine, we can observe how the Soviet Union pre-empted the spread of fascism and then brought about large-scale, revolutionizing changes in Ukrainian society. It turned a largely agricultural and illiterate country into a highly industrialized nation in the developed world.[58] For instance, the first computer in the USSR was developed in Kyiv. With Soviet collapse, Ukraine's industry suffered greatly due to open theft and deterioration. Ukraine could not find any market for its industrial goods after the destruction of Soviet trade links.

The absence of concrete analyses is also present in the equivalence that Balibar makes between the Holodomor and the Holocaust. Jaquelin Coulson notes that the Holodomor has functioned as a nationalist narrative in the building of Ukraine, mobilizing hatred not only against Russians (who are constructed as a foreign, invasive Other) but also against Jews.[59] In wartime Soviet Ukraine, Nazi occupiers used public accounts of the famine to stoke anti-Semitic sentiments, blaming the Jews for committing genocide against Ukraine. Since its establishment in 1929, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) framed "Judeo-Bolshevism" as a powerful threat to Ukrainian nationalism, thus carrying out violent acts against Ukrainian Jews. This anti-Semitic worldview led to the belief that Jews had somehow caused, benefited from, or escaped the famine. Levko Lukyanenko, author of the Declaration of Independence of Ukraine, thought that the Jews were in control of the Soviet government when the supposed genocide took place.

Yet this projection of Jewish culpability during the famine is not simply a matter of historical confusion. It has been part of a longer, ideologically motivated structure of erasure that has sought to overwrite Ukraine's deep involvement in the Holocaust. As Taylor Genovese

58 "Ukraine on the Brink: From the Soviet Union to Euromaidan to the Crisis Today: International Strategy Center Interview with: Volodymyr Ishchenko," *Midwestern Marx Institute*, 22 February 2022. Available at: http://www.midwesternmarx.com/1/post/2022/02/ukraine-on-the-brink-from-the-soviet-union-to-euromaidan-to-the-crisis-today-isc-interview-with-volodymyr-ishchenko.html.

59 Jaquelin Coulson, "The Holodomor in Collective Memory: Constructing Ukraine as a Post-Genocide Nation," *The General Assembly Review* 2, no. 1 (2021), pp. 1–15.

observes, the explicit use of "genocide" in narratives around the Holodomor often works to obscure the fact that Ukrainian forces, particularly the Nazi-established Ukrainian Auxiliary Police, were central actors in the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust. These indigenous police forces were not marginal collaborators but were directly involved in registering Jews, conducting raids, guarding ghettos, and executing civilians, including Jewish children. Veterans of the OUN took the lead in organizing pogroms as early as June 1941, and by the end of that year, tens of thousands of Jews had been murdered with Ukrainian complicity. Despite this, the Ukrainian state has not openly reckoned with these histories. Sites such as Babyn Yar have instead been repurposed to promote a nationalist narrative of Ukrainian victimhood. As Genovese notes, the signage at the Babyn Yar memorial centers the suffering of "Ukrainians, Jews, Romani" under the "Hitlerite regime," placing Ukrainians first and implicitly equating their suffering with that of ethnic minorities who were systematically exterminated. This rhetorical displacement resembles what Genovese calls a "darkly apophatic move"—a maneuver that obscures historical collaboration by decentering Jewish victimhood in favor of a homogenized and depoliticized human tragedy.[60]

By not undertaking a historically grounded dissection of the Ukrainian famine (and by abstractly equating it with the Holocaust) Balibar partakes in the politics of "competitive atrocity" wherein suffering is inflated as a unique, immoral event instead of being referred to its socio-structural contexts.[61] Worse still, such equivalences risk providing discursive cover for far-right nationalist projects that seek to exonerate Ukraine's fascist past while simultaneously positioning it as a perennial victim of totalitarian violence.

Balibar says that the imperial ambitions of Russia are being reinvented through the dichotomy of a traditionalist "Greater Russia" or "Eurasia" and a "degenerate" democratic West. This is a purely culturalist analysis that overlooks the actuality of geo-economic politics. A Eurasian project is not about traditionalist and imperialist ideology but about the reduction of European countries' dependence on the US-led unipolar world

60 Taylor R. Genovese, *Dark Cosmism: Or, the Apophatic Specter of Russo-Soviet Techno-Utopianism*, PhD Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2023, p. 129–132

61 Coulson, "The Holodomor in Collective Memory," p. 9.

order through trade with Russia and China.[62] Due to the war in Ukraine, Europe has reduced its use of Russian gas, thereby increasing its dependence on costlier US liquefied natural gas (LNG).[63] The US has exploited this energy crisis by selling its LNG to Europe at high prices. This allows the US to exercise greater influence on European foreign policy. What Balibar characterizes as the traditionalism of present-day Russia is not the core component of the country's reigning politics. Rather, Russian pragmatically operates according to multiple ideologies that can challenge the legitimacy of the US-led world order and thus, help combat imperialist attacks against Russia.[64] Western observers have accused Russia of being traditionalist because they overemphasize the conservative and authoritarian elements that compose Putinism. What they overlook is the fact that these ideologies are said to be against the excessive liberalism and globalism of the West.

Thus, what matters for Putin is a sovereigntist position against the West, one that uses patriotism against an interventionist Western liberal order. The 2023 report "Russia's Policy Towards the World Majority," published by the most influential foreign policy institutes of Russia, argues that US unipolarity is being challenged by a new coalition that is not "anti-West" but "non-West": it is not ideologically hostile to the West but finds itself opposed to the objective interests of the Global North.[65] This opposition manifests itself in support for a multipolar world order where nation-states are free from imperialist influence and thus more permeable to popular influence. As the report states:

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62 Vijay Prashad, "The United States Wants to Prevent a Historical Fact—Eurasian Integration: The Twenty-Seventh Newsletter (2022)," *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*," 7 July 2022. Available at: https://thetricontinental.org/newsletterissue/eurasian-integration/.

63 "The Churning of the Global Order," *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*," 23 January 2024. Available at: https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-72-the-churning-of-the-global-order/.

64 Yanis Iqbal, "Why Russia Is Not Fascist," *Midwestern Marx Institute,* 9 May 2022. Available at: https://www.midwesternmarx.com/articles/why-russia-is-not-fascist-by-yanis-iqbal.

65 Sergey Karaganov, Alexander Kramarenko, and Dmitry V. Trenin, "Russia's Policy towards the World Majority" (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and Russia in Global Affairs, 2023), p. 5.

> The extremist mutation of the liberal idea currently underway in the West should be classified as a specific product of Western civilization not subject to internationalization. There is a need for our own response—agreeable with the cultural and philosophical traditions of different civilizations—to the most acute challenges to human development ranging from environmental issues to ethical problems related to modern technologies. Blindly following the Western agenda is not just useless but is also harmful.[66]

The distinction between "anti-West" and "non-Western" is important because it highlights that Russia's illiberal and traditionalist biases are not reflective of imperial ambitions. Instead, they are a subordinate component of a sovereigntist position that supports multipolarization. Insofar as multipolarization will democratize the world order, it needs to be critically welcomed even as we oppose the traditionalist streaks of Russian politics.

Second, Balibar writes that the Russian invasion was a "preventive political war" aimed at crushing "the liberal-democratic orientation of the Ukrainian state" so that it did not inspire reformist changes in Russia itself.[67] He says that the Maidan-Revolution of 2013-14 was a "democratic invention" despite all its weaknesses, like sectarianism, oligarchical manipulation, political corruption, and involvement of militias.[68] For Balibar, the ultimately "democratic" character of the Maidan-Revolution lies in the fact that "it initiated... a collective move towards the official values of the Western European democratic systems (however 'oligarchic' they can be themselves, but leaving room for political *pluralism*) and it could represent a *model* for the citizens of the Russian federation."[69] So, the "democratic" character of the Maidan revolution lies in its espousal of bourgeois-liberal democracy. It is hardly a foregone conclusion that the political pluralism of liberal democracy is superior to other regimes. Pluralist democracy can very well function as the most efficient means of authoritarianism. This is what happened in the Maidan revolution. The 2014 Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych tried to play Russia

66 Ibid., p. 18.

67 Balibar, "Palestine, Ukraine and Other Wars of Extermination," pp. 9, 10.

68 Etienne Balibar, "In the War: Nationalism, Imperialism, Cosmopolitics," Commons, 29 June, 2022. Available at: https://commons.com.ua/en/etienne-balibar-on-russo-ukrainian-war/.

69 Ibid.

and the European Union (EU) off one another to get the best economic deal for Ukraine. Thus, he became the target of Western-backed business interests and Russophobic neo-Nazi groups. The slogans of dignity and alignment with the EU deployed during the Maidan protests were not embedded in a structural critique of inequality, labor precarity, or the global capitalist order. Rather, they gestured toward a civilizational reorientation that uncritically adopted EU and NATO as proxies for modernization and progress. This desire for Western affiliation ignored the internal crises of the EU itself: at the very moment when protesters in Kyiv were waving EU flags, demonstrators in Athens and Madrid, reeling from austerity imposed by that same EU, were burning them. Far from signaling solidarity with global struggles against capital, the Maidan movement embodied a nationalist aspiration clothed in the language of Westernization.[70] Far-right nationalist groups such as Svoboda and Right Sector, though electorally marginal, held disproportionate influence on the ground. These forces were often the most militant in street clashes and later found glorification in post-Maidan Ukraine—as national heroes and commanders of paramilitary battalions. Their mainstreaming narrowed the space for leftist critique, entrenched a form of hyper-patriotic militarism, and helped institutionalize reactionary ideology in state structures.[71]

Given the civilizational nationalism that the Maidan movement espoused, it wasn't surprising that its geographic spread was highly uneven.[72] Despite its mythologization as a Kyiv-based national revolt, only 13% of Maidan-related protests occurred in the capital. The majority were concentrated in the western and central regions of Ukraine—areas with stronger pro-European leanings. In contrast, the Russian-speaking east and south viewed the uprising with suspicion or outright hostility. These regional asymmetries reflected not just cultural divergences but material interests: while western Ukraine, reliant on labor exports, sought closer EU ties, the east was deeply integrated into industrial trade networks with Russia. Fears in the east, of violence, and linguistic and cultural exclusion, were not Russian fabrications but re-

70 Volodomyr Ishchenko, "Maidan Mythologies," *New Left Review* 93 (2015).

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

sponses to a real process of nationalist homogenization and Western modernization.

With US backing, the NATO/Neo-Nazi axis staged a coup and forced Yanukovych to flee to Moscow. On February 6, 2014, an anonymous entity leaked a call between US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt.[73] They could be heard saying that Arseniy Yatsenyuk is America's choice to replace Yanukovych, which he did. The new government adopted pro-EU and pro-NATO policies. It imposed restrictions on the teaching of the Russian language in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, provoking resistance among the inhabitants. With the support of the majority of the population, expressed in a referendum, Putin joined Crimea to Russia.[74] In the same year as Russia's annexation of Crimea, separatist leaders supported by Moscow seized Donetsk and Luhansk—populated primarily by Russian ethnic minorities striving for independence—and declared the "People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk." These events angered ultra-nationalist Ukrainian forces; they declared war on the people that were opposing Yatsenyuk's Euro-American posture.

So, far from being an instance of "democratic invention," the Maidan revolution was a maneuver through which Northern imperialist forces staged a coup, promoted neo-Nazi forces in the state apparatus, and launched a war against Russian ethnic minorities in the country. This liquidated the sovereignty of Ukraine and plunged it "into a simulated semicolonial situation without being directly occupied and divided but nevertheless reprogrammed to launch a war against itself and to point offensive weapons at neighboring Russia."[75] Instead of initiating a democratic resurgence, liberal democracy functioned as a framework for a NATO/Neo-Nazi axis that wanted to wage war against Russia without any concerns for the human cost. However, Balibar ignores all this by

73 "Ukraine Crisis: Transcript of Leaked Nuland-Pyatt Call," *BBC News*, 7 February 2014. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957.

74 Rick Sterling, "Why Zelensky Will NOT Take Back Crimea, *Al Mayadeen English*, 3 April 2023. Available at: https://english.almayadeen.net/articles/opinion/why-zelensky-will-not-take-back-crimea.

75 Paris Yeros, "A Polycentric World Will Only Be Possible by the Intervention of the "Sixth Great Power,"" *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 13, no. 1 (2024), p. 11.

merely asserting that "there is a complete dissymmetry for a democratic country between the perspectives of being taken and swallowed again by a backward-looking autocratic empire, and the perspective of being incorporated into a federation which creates or perpetuates inequalities, but has set up rules for negotiating participation."[76] In the end, we get an Orientalist assertion that replaces a concrete examination of the Russian social formation with an unverified faith in the goodness of bourgeois, Western democracy.

Given that Balibar's politics of civility forgoes the confrontation of social forces in favor of the reflective power of bourgeois democracy, it is no surprise that his discussion of the global significance of the Palestinian movement is oriented towards the abstract goal of "justice." He says that both Ukraine and Palestine are united their pursuit of "justice": "not only the justice that refers to a position in war, on one side or the other of the divide between aggressor and victim, or oppressor and resistant, but the justice that can acquire a universal resonance, the justice that confers a universalistic dimension upon the claim of rights that some actors embody in the war."[77] Both Ukraine and Palestine "appear as incarnations of universal principles of self-determination and resistance to oppression, [this being the] reason why, in different parts of the world, there are today activists who make valuable efforts to simultaneously support and articulate the two causes."[78] This universalist perspective of justice is different from the logic of "campism" which sees the current conflagrations either "in terms of a conflict between 'democracies' and 'totalitarian states,' or a conflict between the 'Western imperialism' (under US hegemony, organized by NATO) and the 'emerging peoples' with a tricontinental basis."[79] Balibar wants to repudiate both these campist perspectives by emphasizing "the specific history of each war, each people, each territory in its own local terms" and by describing "the modalities in which a war has developed out of conditions and choices that were made by their own actors: Russians, Ukrainians, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, with all their internal divisions and their complete his-

76 Balibar, "In the War."

77 Balibar, "Palestine, Ukraine and Other Wars of Extermination," p. 15.

78 Ibid., p. 15.

79 Ibid., p. 16, 18.

tory."[80] At first glance, this appears to be a call for historical specificity. Yet what Balibar offers is not concrete history, but a form of historicist nominalism that denies the actuality of imperialist totality by treating each conflict as sui generis, unlinked from any shared historical logic. In the name of the local, he evacuates the global. What is displaced in this move is the material structure of imperialist camps as real determinations that shape the possibility and form of local struggles. The "local" is not ontologically prior to imperialism, but is precisely that which is articulated through it. This is the paradox of nominalist historicism: while it presents itself as the rejection of abstraction in favor of the particular, it can only sustain itself by positing an abstract essence of "the local"—a pure, self-determining locality uncontaminated by global relations of force. Thus, in its disavowal of imperialist structuration, nominalism inevitably leads back to the very abstraction it seeks to avoid. It must appeal to transcendent ideals—"justice," "liberty," "self-determination"—as the organizing ground of meaning, because it has emptied the local of its material embeddedness in global antagonisms. The critique of "campism," then, ends up reinscribing liberal universalism under the guise of radical historicity. Balibar wants to replace the actual reality of geopolitical camps with the philosophically concocted fantasy of struggles that transcend these camps and strive for "justice" and "liberty." The American Empire controls, through NATO and other modalities, 74.3% of all military spending worldwide. This amounts to more than US$ 2 trillion.[81] Thus, "the single most important aspect of state power—that is, military power—the absolute central danger to the working classes of *all* countries, especially to the darker nations of the world, lies in the US-Led Imperialist Camp."[82] The struggles for "justice" and "liberty" that Balibar imagines obscure the contradiction between the imperialism of the American Empire and the people of Global South. He says that this division, "while remaining real (and crucial), is also compounded by other "global" phenomena," namely "global warming and the environmental catastrophe,"

80 Ibid., p. 16.

81 "Hyper-Imperialism: A Dangerous Decadent New Stage," *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, 23 January 2024. Available at: https://thetricontinental.org/studies-on-contemporary-dilemmas-4-hyper-imperialism/.

82 Ibid.

which subvert "all borders in the world."[83] But ecological degradation itself is differentially distributed according to the socio-economic gradations of the world-imperialist system. Countries of the Global South are disproportionately affected by climate change due to the fact that global warming hits the hotter, low latitude, tropical, and subtropical regions of the earth especially hard.[84] These countries are also generally poor due to imperialist factors such as underdevelopment, mal-development, poverty, corruption, and inequality which amplify each extreme weather event into social tragedies as communities suffer displacement, hunger, and heightened precarity.

Balibar sees contemporary conflicts not as a division between "camps" but as a "globalized," "hybrid" war.[85] This hybrid war supposedly subverts the boundary of those camps by unleashing a quest for "justice" and "liberty" that is not reducible to geopolitical and military conflicts. We can see here how the politics of civility ends up with an abstract, contemplative mindset that wants to attain justice not through the struggle of camps but through another ethereal struggle that floats above all concrete divisions. In the end, this ethereal level of justice becomes synonymous with the defense of bourgeois democracy, since it contains the appearance of pluralism. Civility becomes a pro-imperialist prejudice that constantly rails against the hordes of "uncivil" masses who are not trained in the kind of reflection that bourgeois democracy teaches. In the real world, by contrast, conflicts are resolved not through careful contemplation but through "uncivil" antagonisms.

Today, the most important division is between imperialism and humanity. The Palestinian cause cannot be separated from the struggle against US domination, a fact that is well understood by the Axis of Resistance (Iran, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq). Popular democracy can be realized only through strengthened national sovereignty that is capable of waging defensive wars against USA's policy of sanctions, invasions, encroachment, and destabilization. As Ajl writes: "Wars of national sov-

83 Balibar, "In the War."

84 N.S. Diffenbaugh and M. Burke, "Global Warming Has Increased Global Economic Inequality," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. (20), pp. 9808-9813.

85 Balibar, "In the War."

ereignty against imperialism are pro-working class... the contemporary axis plays a limited but real liberatory role in staving off state collapse in the countries near and around Palestine and shielding populations' social reproduction and popular well-being against the reaper of accumulation-through-development."[86] The same logic of anti-imperialism applies to Russia. The country witnessed more than 25 million deaths due to the invasion of European fascists when it was governed by communists. Today, Russia is again a target of imperialist forces. The US-NATO camp wants "to permanently destroy Russia's nuclear military capacity and install a puppet regime in Moscow in order to dismember Russia in the long term and replace it with many smaller, permanently weakened vassal states of the West."[87] Thus, we have a campist struggle that no one can escape. Any new horizon has to be born from within these camps, amidst the uncontrollable, contingent materiality of struggles.

Revolutionary Movement

The present-day Palestinian movement is giving us indications of what an alternative revolutionary politics can look like by erecting a sharp divide between the democratic ideology of bourgeois intellectuals and the militancy of the masses. On the one hand, intellectuals like Balibar are worried that Hamas is reproducing the violent mentality of Zionism. This is based on the assumption that the October 7 attack was an irrational outburst of primitive sentiments without any political rationale. That is why politics can only be entrusted to the reflective scrutiny of democratic discussions. In Balibar's theory, such reflective scrutiny is provided by civility, which is a form of politics that can touch the ultra-political contingency of politics itself. This ultra-political contingency is present as the inconvertible violence that forms the limit-point of every political action. If we hubristically suppose that all violence can be converted into reason, we will end up with the fantasy of omnipotence in which all resistance is eliminated in a cycle of nihilistic violence. That is why

86 "Palestine's Great Flood: Part I," p. 77.

87 Kyeretwie Opoku, Manuel Bertoldi, Deby Veneziale, and Vijay Prashad, "Eight Contradictions in the Imperialist 'Rules-Based Order,'" *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, 13 March 2023. Available at: https://thetricontinental.org/eight-contradiction-of-the-imperialist-rules-based-order/.

Balibar's politics of civility wants us to respect the contingency of politics without attempting to hide it beneath fantasies of omnipotence. Thus, even though politics is tragic—groundless and without guarantees—this "tragedy of politics can become a politics of tragedy on the basis of the 'ethical' decision that the risk of the perversion of the revolt is not a sufficient reason not to revolt."[88] In the paradigm of civility, people will revolt with the full knowledge that they are intrinsically impotent and can't wholly eliminate antagonism. Thus, we get a "politics of tragedy" sustained by ethical reflection upon the groundlessness of politics.

On the other hand, we have the mass action of Palestinian anti-colonialism wherein the dilemmas of politics are answered not through the philosophical invocation of ultra-political contingency but through the confrontation of forces on the terrain of social reality. Balibar simplifies divisions by dissolving them into a transcendental level of civility wherein the political actor can treat antagonisms in a peaceful manner. Instead of trying to eliminate the enemy, the enlightened political actor focuses on how antagonism can never be entirely eliminated, or how politics can never attain full stability. This knowledge curbs violence against the enemy and cultivates a more civil attitude. One cannot fail to emphasize how Palestinians are constantly asked to demonstrate their civility; their language has to remain perpetually aware of the kind of effects that it may have on others. This leads to a hyper-moderation of Palestinian behavior, where anything that is disliked by Israeli oppressors is deemed "anti-Semitic." Mohammad el-Kurd writes:

> We were instructed to ignore the Star of David on the Israeli flag, and to distinguish Jews from Zionists with surgical precision. It didn't matter that their boots were on our necks, and that their bullets and batons bruised us. Our statelessness and homelessness were trivial. What mattered was how we spoke about our keepers, not the conditions they kept us under—blockaded, surrounded by colonies and military outposts—or the fact that they kept us at all.[89]

In this situation, "simple ignorance" becomes a "luxury" for Palestin-

88 Balibar, "Violence and Civility," p. 29.

89 Mohammad el-Kurd, "Jewish Settlers Stole My House. It's Not My Fault They're Jewish," *Mondoweiss*, 26 September 2023. Available at: https://mondoweiss.net/2023/09/jewish-settlers-stole-my-house-its-not-my-fault-theyre-jewish/.

ians.[90] If we keep focusing on how the oppressed should regulate themselves so that they don't fall into barbarity, we will forget that no matter how they behave, they will never be perfect enough for a dialogue with the oppressors. Balibar thinks that by being the "perfect victims" the oppressed will convince the oppressors to negotiate their antagonisms with them in a thoughtful manner. But this is never going to happen. Antagonisms are irreconcilable as long as they are not fought out to their end. El-Kurd rightly asks us to "renew our commitment to the truth, to *spitting* the truth."[91] Spitting is a physical expression of disgust, or aggression. It is an open declaration of hostility instead of a solely cognitive exchange of knowledge. Cognition and reflection fail to initiate the flow of ideas since the sea of thinking remains trapped in spaces of colonialism, the bodily realities of colonized and colonizing subjectivity. The flow of ideas will happen once their spatial encasements are burst open. Antagonisms have to jump-started through the act of spitting the truth, through violence against the colonialist. Balibar, in contrast, subscribes to a cognitive schema because he regards antagonisms as concrete representatives of an ultra-political antagonism, which he designates as the "precariousness" of politics that we have to constantly recognize. Such an ultra-political antagonism does not exist; in social formations, we only have concretely situated groups with concrete interests. These interests cannot be removed through careful reflection and discussion. On the contrary, they are material structures whose rigidity needs to be broken down through a concrete struggle of forces. This is what anti-colonial violence does by eroding the sense of entitlement enjoyed by colonizers and exposing them to the popular power of the colonized.

In the midst of struggle, only a detached philosopher can ask the oppressed to use violence in a way that preserves the openness of antagonisms. This openness or precariousness of politics is not an idea that can be theoretically pondered upon or a reservoir of morality that can be used to practice civility. Rather, it is an emergent reality formed through the destruction of the oppressors. That is why inconvertible violence as such does not exist. The inconvertibility of violence is determined con-

90 Ibid.

91 Mohammad el-Kurd, "Are We Indeed All Palestinians?," *Mondoweiss* 13 March 2024. Available at: https://mondoweiss.net/2024/03/are-we-indeed-all-palestinians/.

juncturally when political procedures of conversion encounter certain impasses/obstacles. Instead of staring at the impasse and turning it into a philosophical principle of precariousness, we need to use the impasse to reconfigure our own political perspective and carry on the struggle. The groundlessness of politics is not a tragedy that we need to codify into an ethical principle but a material fact out of which we need to weave the dynamic of political action. Politics is indeterminate and without guarantees, but this does not mean that indeterminacy has to become a moral horizon. Instead, indeterminacy functions as the motor that renders politics inexhaustible and confronts it with obstacles that demand specific responses. Far from conforming to the reflective carefulness of civility, politics is like the uncivil act of flooding unleashed by Operation al-Aqsa Flood, wherein hierarchies are flooded with the deluge of popular energy, a deluge that listens to nothing but its own undulating waves.

Chapter 5

Philosophy as an "Act of Life": Gaza and Anti-Colonial Praxis

In his 1918 article, "Fear of Collapse of the Old and Fight for the New," Vladimir Lenin talked about intellectuals who were ready to recognize socialism if humanity "could jump straight into it in one spectacular leap, without any of the friction, the struggles, the exploiters' gnashing of teeth, or their diverse attempts to preserve the old order, or smuggle it back through the window, without the revolutionary proletariat responding to each attempt in a violent manner."[1] Situated at a distance from actual political struggle, these intellectuals want to avoid the "extremes" of political struggle, preferring the path of "conciliation."[2] The current colonial genocide in Gaza has generated a similar phenomenon: Western philosophers have condemned the October 7 attack launched by Hamas, advocating for the adoption of a more peaceful approach. The term "Western" is used not to refer to ethnic identity but to indicate the political, cultural, and ideological network of influence managed by the US-led imperialist order. Nested within this network, philosophy has separated itself from the domain of politics, passing judgements upon its dynamics. This book performs a reverse operation: it considers politics as a productive form of thinking that sets the boundaries of conceptualization for philosophy. The standpoint of mass struggle is used to underline the severe inadequacies that afflict the intellectual framework of Western

1 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 26* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 402.

2 Ibid., pp. 401-402.

philosophers.

The Pitfalls of Political Ontology

According to Jodi Dean, the criticism of Hamas should be carried out according to the political exigencies that structure the conjuncture.[3] Against the background of the imperialist demonization of Hamas as a group of "terrorists," even a nuanced critique of its actions contributes to the dehumanization of the Palestinian struggle. As Dean puts it:

> What matters is knowing when disagreement and criticism—especially in public—is likely to be useful, when it might move the struggle forward, and when it's little more than posturing or condescension—an expression of our attachment to the singularity of our own feelings and position. Acting on the basis of such knowledge is the essence of solidarity. Even when every effort is taken to disagree with nuance and good faith, criticism and condemnation can do serious damage to a movement, undermining the fragile alliances that hold it together under enormous threat and pressure.[4]

Ayça Çubukçu thinks that the conjunctural insistence on the political effects of critique risks silencing the multitude of paths that lie beneath the binaries of mainstream discourse. Our "political predicament" consists in the fact that the "either/or tends to structure much thinking on the subject of international solidarity with Palestine. Are there only two positions available to us in the global solidarity movement with Palestine—to 'support' or 'condemn' Hamas?"[5] In opposition to this binary, Çubukçu asserts that the recognition of Hamas' political significance can very well be accompanied by a questioning that probes into the workings of its leadershßip vis-a-vis the broader Palestinian liberation movement. "Must such questions necessarily 'ech'" imperialist demonizations of Hamas and imply its 'condemnation' as a political formation?"[6] Here, we come to the crux of the debate: can the discursive terms of struggle be detached from the immediacy of existing politics? Can the historical

3 Ayça Çubukçu and Jodi Dean, "Leadership and Liberation: An Exchange," *Boston Review*, 14 June 2024. Available at: https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/leadership-and-liberation-an-exchange/.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

weight of a definite political struggle between imperialists and Hamas be perforated to create a multiplicity of strategies? Çubukçu says that this perforation is completely possible: "It is possible to support a resistance movement while critiquing elements of its leadership and actions, even during long periods of backlash and repression."[7] In fact, acts of critique "enable the political transformation and strengthening of our movements through mutual engagement with our political differences."[8] But from where does one undertake the critique of Hamas? Where is the alternative location to which we can migrate in order to escape the stringency of the "zero-sum" possibilities that we face? Çubukçu doesn't elaborate this because she simply presumes that there exists a capacity for innovation that can generate creative multiplicities. But this assumption is belied by the reality that obtains in Palestine. In the colonized social formation, multiplicity exists not as an expression of a creative capacity but in the form of a historically produced structure of "radical fragmentation."[9] According to Abdaljawad Omar, this structure "has led many Palestinians to begin questioning the very notion of our unity as a people, pondering whether the discrepancy in the capacity of Palestinians to resist is a sign of the weight of geographic divisions and various colonial governmentalities after 75 years."[10] Hamas has eroded defeatist sentiments of disunity by destroying the myth of Israeli invincibility, showing how Palestinians are capable of attacking the Zionist security regime. Many of Hamas's critics offer nothing that "could match its work to accumulate power in the Gaza Strip and its opening of a strategic Pandora's box that has overflowed and deformed the colonial regime, providing a historical moment that includes among its many possibilities the potential for Palestinian liberation."[11]

Hamas' practical efforts to dissolve the reality of radical fragmentation demonstrate that there is no pre-existing creative force that can

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Abdaljawad Omar, "The Question of Hamas and the Left," *Mondoweiss*, 31 May 2024. Available at: https://mondoweiss.net/2024/05/the-question-of-hamas-and-the-left/.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

be harnessed to practice a politics of multiplicity. Instead of grounding politics in the ontological force of multiplicity, one has to realize that politics is a groundless procedure that creates truths through its own constructive dynamic. In other words, there is no reservoir of multiplicity that can supply resources for the execution of political initiatives. In the present situation, the critique of Hamas cannot unleash a dynamic of mutual exchange because there exists no other political force that can parallel Hamas' militant ability to practice resistance against the Zionist regime. It is this militant capacity that has earned Hamas universal condemnation from imperialist hegemons. A critique of Hamas assumes the existence of an alternative agent of politics that can generate revolutionary effects greater in intensity than the one generated by Hamas. Insofar as there is no such practical revolutionary agent to which the critique of Hamas can address itself, such criticisms feed into the entity that is churning out anti-Hamas propaganda, namely the imperial war-machine. Critique is revolutionary only when it is embodied in the practical ability to strengthen revolutionary power in the midst of an existential struggle. Disembodied criticism fails to find any political referent that can tilt the balance of power in favor of liberation. As a result, it joins the general circulation of imperialist propaganda against Hamas.

Liberal Politics

The ontological grounding of politics in a pre-existing force is a common strategy among Western philosophers. While Çubukçu opts for multiplicity, others, as we have seen, deploy the language of "possibility"—the possibility of peace. None of the philosophers enquire into the source of these possibilities. It is simply assumed that peace between Israel and Palestine can be ensured through nonviolent means without the necessity of anti-colonial struggle. This ontological turn in Western philosophy mirrors the liberal politics that has been implemented through the Oslo peace process. After the isolation of Iraq and the downfall of the Soviet Union, a pallor of defeat hung upon anti-systemic forces. In this conjuncture, the necessity of political struggle was suppressed by the attractiveness of arbitration. Full-scale decolonization was replaced by the management of legally granted statehood. The depoliticization of the Palestinian movement was strategically beneficial for Zionist power.

Haidar Eid writes:

> By winning the 1948, 1956 and 1967 wars, and by getting international, Arab and Palestinian recognition, Israel—as an apartheid settler-colonial state—has hoped to move onto a new stage; a stage that requires the formation of a "new consciousness" among colonized Palestinians. Herein lies the danger of Oslo—the creation of a new paradigm through which the consciousness of the supposed enemy—the "Other"—is washed out and replaced with a one-dimensional mentality, through the construction of a fiction—two states for two peoples—the goal of which is unattainable.[12]

Post-Oslo de-politicization worked through the forgetting of the power imbalances that constitute the reality of Zionist setter-colonial rule. Israel and Palestine became two moral entities engaged in a process of mutual recognition. Limor Yehuda waxes eloquent about how Oslo sheared off Palestinian national liberation from the geo-economics of Arab-Israeli conflict, converting it into a "unique Israeli-Palestinian conflict."[13] Whereas earlier the Palestinian struggle functioned as a "zero-sum game, evoking feelings of existential threat and profound insecurity," Oslo shaped it into a question of dialogue that could be solved through representative institutions of local governance.[14] Thus, the peace process can be seen to have inaugurated a new discourse of morality, wherein both Israel and Palestine became partners who needed to trust each other and articulate their concerns. Serge Schmemann articulates this belief very clearly:

> The wisdom of Oslo is a credit to the negotiators, who came to recognize the validity of each other's guiding narratives: of Israel's return to a promised land after an unspeakable tragedy and of the Palestinians' dispossession and humiliating occupation. These narratives could not necessarily be reconciled, but the negotiators were able to escape the zero-sum feuding over who was in the right and acknowledge the other's yearnings, history and grievances.[15]

12 Haidar Eid, "The Oslo Accords: A Critique," *Aljazeera*, 13 September 2013. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/9/13/the-oslo-accords-a-critique.

13 Limor Yehuda in Emily Bazelon (Moderator), "Why the Oslo Accords between Israelis and Palestinians Failed," *The New York Times Magazine,* 20 November 2023. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/11/20/magazine/israel-gaza-oslo-accords.html

14 Ibid.

15 Serge Schmemann, "Why Oslo Still Has Relevance," *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 October 2023. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/30/

The moral discourse of the peace process flattens the historical unevenness of settler-colonialism—the binary of the colonizer and the colonized—into the abstract universe of "guiding narratives." Each nation has its own guiding narrative, which interacts with the other narratives present on the global platform. This is essentially the transposition of the ontology of liberalism onto the scene of international politics: just as the liberal individual expresses their own views in front of a public sphere that has learned the values of tolerance, so nations also express their own guiding narratives in front of other tolerant nations. The ensuing balanced discussion eliminates any misunderstandings. In opposition to this liberal ethics of discussion, Edward Said notes that the conflict between Palestine and Zionism is not just a "misunderstanding... but a real opposition between opposed forces, furthermore a conflict embedded in a specific region, having a concrete history, and bringing into play a conjunction of many different regional, international, and cultural factors."[16]

Outside the a-political universe of liberal morality, one can find historical explanations for how nation-states are constituted. Israel's establishment in 1948 was intimately interlaced with the logic of imperialism. During its period of existence, Israel has served as a bulwark against Soviet influence (though the USSR did initially support the creation of Israel using chauvinist theories like "Yishuvism"[17]), as an extremely effective counterweight to the rising anti-imperialist tide headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser, as a conduit for channeling arms to unpopular regimes, as a regional backer of oil-rich Gulf monarchies, as a home for US weaponry or as a major partner and market for the US military-industrial complex. All these historical structures of imperialist accumulation are erased when nation-states are reduced to moral entities with unique emotional grievances and yearnings.

When the colonial Israeli entity is transformed into an ethical unit, the political urgency of Palestinian liberation disappears. Even as Zionists keep murdering Palestinian children, the liberal can say that Israel

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opinion/oslo-accords-history.html

16 Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 213.

17 Ahmad H. Sa'di, "Communism and Zionism in Palestine-Israel: A Troubled Legacy," *Holy Land Studies* 9, no.2 (2010), p. 172.

still possesses the moral goodwill to negotiate with Palestinians. As long as this moral goodwill exists, any act of anti-colonial warfare on the part of Palestinians will be perceived as an unwarranted aggression that violates the possibility of peaceful dialogue. No political pressure needs to be placed on Israel. The nation only needs to be convinced that the realization of its guiding narrative lies in the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Schmemann notes:

> [T]he root of the problem identified by the Palestinians and Israelis in what is still the closest they have come to an accommodation remains the same: The Palestinians will gain freedom only when Israelis find acceptance and security, and Israelis will achieve that bitahon, the broad Hebrew term for security that so pervades Israel's consciousness, only when the Palestinians have sovereignty over their lives.[18]

An infinite ethical flexibility is conferred upon the colonial conjuncture. The historical antagonism between Israel and Palestine evaporates into a discursive world of free-flowing discussion. Peace can be won through the force of convincing arguments. Against this, one needs to insist that Zionist settler-colonialism will not go away on its own, through a self-overcoming dynamic of ethical reflection. On the contrary, it is characterized by a structural *inertia,* caused by the self-maintaining tendencies of an imperialist global political economy. It is in the interests of the US-led geopolitical order to preserve the savagery of Zionist colonization.

Axis of Resistance

In her article on left internationalism, Çubukçu acknowledges the materiality of Israeli colonialism when she notes "how Israel's chief financial, military, and political sponsor, the United States, remains the most destructive state on Earth and the only one to have ever used nuclear weapons (which it houses in military bases across Germany, Turkey, Japan, and elsewhere)."[19] But the force that is combating the American Empire, namely the Axis of Resistance (Iran, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq), is not even discussed as a potential constituent of internationalist solidarity. On the contrary, Çubukçu elabo-

18 Ibid.

19 Ayça Çubukçu, "On Left Internationalism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no.3 (2024), p. 581.

rates an anarchist program of anti-state politics wherein a nebulous "desire for freedom" performs a function similar to that of liberal pacifist ethics:

> In response to... state-sanctioned internationalisms and their militarist, humanitarian, and legal calculations, we need a left internationalism that does not reflexively wave the flag of any existing nation-state, as the primary form of demonstrating solidarity. If the transcontinental wave of protests for a free Palestine demonstrate the anti-colonial impulse of left internationalism today, its expansive desire for freedom can, in deed and dream, trespass walled sovereignties of the nation-state. We can think beyond the nation-state form in situating "our" side in war and peace alike. The partial and partisan "we" of left internationalism, in any case, can claim sides within humanity and nation to better understand, sustain, and create forms of ecological, social, and political struggle that must exceed them both.[20]

The elimination of the state-form is necessary for the success of revolutionary politics. A state emerges in the course of class struggle so that the exploitative minority can keep the exploited majority in check through repression and reforms. The state can never establish order by reconciling the classes, as its very function is to ensure that the oppressive interests of the exploiters remain dominant. Given the inability of the state to effect reconciliation, it progressively alienates itself from the masses, constantly acting against their wishes. Consequently, the objective of the Left consists in dissolving the state into society, so that the task of governance is carried out by the oppressed themselves. But how do we merge the state into the mass activity of society? Çubukçu believes that the dissolution of the state has to be carried out in the here and now through the invention of democratic forms that exceed the boundaries of the nation-state. In the context of the genocidal war in Gaza, this implies a critique of the Axis of Resistance, which has been using state capacity for defensive industrialization against the US-Zionist bloc. Michael Hardt and Sandro Mezzadra, whom Çubukçu cites, assert that any support for Iran and its allies commits the error of "campism: an ideological approach that reduces the political terrain to two opposed camps and often ends up asserting that the enemy of our enemy must be our friend."[21] Instead of "supporting Iran or its allies, even rhetorically," Hardt and Mezzadra declare that "an internationalist project should instead link Palestine solidarity struggles

20 Ibid., p. 581.

21 Michael Hardt and Sandro Mezzadra, "A Global War Regime," *Sidecar*, 9 May 2024. Available at: https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/a-global-war-regime.

to those such as the 'woman, life, freedom' movements which challenged the Islamic Republic."[22] This is a strategy that embeds nation-states in a "wider context" of social revolution, instead of confining oneself to its logic. Hardt and Mezzadra elaborate: "A resistance movement fit for the 2020s would include a range of forces, including local and city-wide organizations, national structures and regional actors. Kurdish liberation struggles, for example, extend across national borders and straddle social boundaries in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq."[23]

Just as liberalism presupposes an inherent ethical capacity for peace, anarchist left internationalism presupposes a global space of freedom where the state can be immediately abolished through the practice of direct democracy. Instead of fighting on the terrain of nation-states, one situates them in a broader space where life can be reproduced in a non-statist form. Hardt and Mezzadra label this as a strategy of "desertion" in which people simply exit from the state into an international space of freedom.[24] Çubukçu also presupposes this space of freedom when she notes how "the forced hand of an either/or position between "supporting" and "condemning" Hamas... shrinks the space for debate and political transformation in the global movement for a free Palestine."[25] But what if there is no pre-existing space of free, democratic multiplicity into which we can escape? This assumption is simply a postulate of liberal epistemology, which grounds politics in an ontological force. The Kurdish movement is cited as an example of a dynamic that exceeds the logic of the nation-state and points to anti-statist structures of self-governance. This depiction fails to accurately portray reality. In Syria, for instance, the democratic power of the Kurdish movement is undermined by its entanglement in the imperial structures of American dependency. Rojava is not an enclave of anti-statist popular sovereignty. On the contrary, its existence has been tied to the illegal presence of US military bases, soldiers, advisors and special forces in Syria.[26] So, the Kurds' legitimate right to

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Çubukçu and Dean, "Leadership and Liberation."

26 Suzanne Adely, Max Ajl, Ajamu Baraka et al., "Response to 'A Call to Defend Rojava,'" *Monthly Review Online*, 7 May 2018. Available at: https://mronline.

defend themselves against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and against Turkish aggression has been expressed through the geopolitical channels of the American empire. US military support for Rojava is purely motivated by self-interest. American military presence in northeastern Syria allows the US to loot the country's oil and gas reserves, prevents Iran from establishing land connections to the Mediterranean through Iraq and Syria, and contains the influence of Russia and China.[27]

The entanglement of the Rojava experiment with US imperialism demonstrates that there is no global space of freedom where the state can be abolished through the practice of democracy. Rather, one has to *construct* that space by defeating the forces of imperialism. If emancipatory politics simply ignores the state and tries to escape into an anti-statist enclave, it will soon be forced to face the reality of imperial state power. In the context of the war in Gaza, this means that Zionist settler-colonialism cannot be dismantled if the national liberation movement chooses to bypass the system of state sovereignty. State power does not stop existing if we pretend that this is the case. Rather, the collective state power of the US-Zionist bloc has to be concretely destroyed if people are to attain freedom. The exercise of freedom on a global level requires that people have the capacity to manage their lives without any form of coercion. Relationships of hierarchy should give way to self-governed associations in which *everyone* can participate. However, in order to enable this universal participation, one has to first deal with the forces that are opposed to it. Freedom for Palestine means combating the enemies who desire the continuation of colonial domination. These enemies constitute a US-led system of imperialism. As long as this imperialist system exists, there can be no free association of peoples that can reconcile conflicts. It is this very irreconcilability of antagonism that accounts for the existence of the state. The state arises only when class antagonism cannot be reconciled. At the level of the world-system, the class struggle expresses itself through the divide between the Global North and the Global South. The core capitalist countries of the North assert extra-territorial sovereignty over Southern states, thus weakening their power of independent deci-

org/2018/05/07/response-to-a-call-to-defend-rojava/

27 Mohamed Nader Al-Omari, "The Other Occupation: US Forces in Syria," *Orinoco Tribune*, 18 August 2024. Available at: https://orinocotribune.com/the-other-occupation-us-forces-in-syria/

sion-making. Given a people's irreconcilable antagonism with the imperialist class, they have to use violence against such counter-revolutionary forces. Social interaction cannot be carried out through the democratic mechanism of free association because there are still imperialist powers that are irreconcilably opposed to freedom. This irreconcilability gives rise to the state, to the use of organized violence by one class against another.[28] The persistence of an imperialist international system necessitates the formation of an apparatus of violence that can suppress the resistance of the dominant group. Vis-à-vis Palestine, the Axis of Resistance serves precisely such a function: its use of state capacity for defensive wars undermines the geopolitical stability that is required for the perpetuation of imperialism and Zionism in the Arab region. The anti-imperialist state reflects the attempted counter-domination of one part of global society (people of Global South) over the rest of society (imperialist rulers of the Global North).

Against Moral Responsibility

Insofar as Western philosophy grounds politics in an ontological element, it converts practice into a mere means for the realization of a theoretically posited capacity or possibility. Anti-colonial struggle is jettisoned as a superfluous dynamic that can be replaced by attention to a more fundamental ontological reality. In the last instance, this fundamental ontological reality is reducible to the liberal insistence on the use of pre-given ethical capacities against the revolutionary emphasis on the necessity of an intensifying struggle. Seyla Benhabib, for instance, writes about the "cruel cycle of violence, almost biblical and apocalyptic in its ferocity," that is underway in Gaza, underlining that a "ceasefire" must end the extremisms practiced by Hamas and right-wing Israeli parties.[29]

28 In *Twenty Theses on Politics,* Enrique Dussel deals with the political function of the state by foregrounding "strategic feasibility" as a "constitutive determination of political power." In his words: "The macro-institution of feasibility is Political Society or the State (in the restricted sense), whose universal ends comprise the entire political community, and which has seen a long process of institutionalization during the past five millennia."

29 Seyla Benhabib, "An Open Letter to My Friends Who Signed "Philosophy for Palestine,"" *The Hannah Arendt Center*, 4 November 2023. Available at: https://medium.com/amor-mundi/an-open-letter-to-my-friends-who-signed-philosophy-

What does it mean to say that the genocidal war in Gaza is a "cycle of violence"? It implies that the brutality of Zionism is part of a broader pattern of self-perpetuating violence, wherein the violence of the colonizers begets the violence of the colonized. The dehumanization of Palestinians by Israelis invites a reciprocal dehumanization on the part of Palestinians, creating a "cycle" in which the oppressor and the oppressed come to mirror each other.

When discussing Operation al-Aqsa Flood, Adam Shatz says that it can be explained on account of the "rage fueled by the intensification of Israeli repression."[30] This "mimicry" keeps reinforcing itself: the "sadism of Hamas's attack" makes it easier for Israel to portray its enemies as Nazis, "rekindling collective memories, passed down from one generation to the next, of pogroms and the Holocaust"[31]. In the end, Shatz makes Palestinians responsible for the inhumane violence they are facing from Zionist colonizers. He essentially asks the colonized: "why do you keep mimicking the colonizers? Can't you act as a responsible moral agent and strive for freedom in a more peaceful manner?" The assumption is that morally upright behavior on the part of the colonized will lessen the sense of insecurity prevalent among the colonizers and thus convince them of the necessity of peace. The model of moral responsibility that underpins Shatz's retelling of Operation al-Aqsa Flood participates in the ontological turn that dominates Western philosophy. Judith Butler talks about a "capacity to judge" that can help us gain valuable "knowledge" and thus "furnish a truer understanding of the situation" in Palestine.[32] Since this "capacity to judge" can always be exercised, "nothing... [can] exonerate Hamas from responsibility for the hideous killings they have perpetrated."[33] Butler calls this a "different political morality... a patient and courageous way of learning and naming."[34] It is very counter-intuitive

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30 Adam Shatz, "Vengeful Pathologies," *London Review of Books* 45, no.21 (2023).

31 Ibid.

32 Judith Butler, "Compass of Mourning," *London Review of Books* 45, no.20 (2023).

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

to characterize the colonial relation of hierarchy as a pedagogical process involving the acquisition of knowledge. Palestinians and Israelis are converted into moral agents who can engage in critical dialogue if they choose to pay attention to the ethical capacities that they possess. When evaluated from the viewpoint of this ethical capacity, both the colonizer and the colonized can be indicted for having failed to carry out a mutual dialogue. But what allows us to posit such a pre-given ethical capacity? If we assume the presence of such a capacity, then politics is hardly allowed any autonomy of its own. Its script is pre-set by the need to realize the moral agency which each one of us carries. Against the ontologization of politics, one must begin in the midst of politics, where no ethical capacity is ensured. In this politics without guarantees, the colonized no longer function as a placeholder for a fundamental ethical-psychological capacity. Refaat Alareer, a Palestinian poet and academic killed by Israeli forces on December 6, 2023, asserts Palestine as "a fascinating entity that Israel still refuses to allow to exist in reality."[35] In place of a fully present ethical possibility of emancipation, we have a "fascinating" dynamic that wants to be realized. Even though it is not part of "reality," Palestine circulates as an "insistence on life and a determination to live."[36] The permanent reality of colonial death surely makes it impossible to live freely. But the impossibility of a free life doesn't mean that there is no "desire for survival"[37] The oppressiveness of Zionism stokes the desire for survival. This desire is maintained and reinforced through practices of solidarity, such as storytelling. As Refaat says: "The desire to describe and explore the experiences of life—including, in this case, that of death—so that others might lead a better life is the very act of *sumud* or steadfastness that has long characterized Palestinian life."[38] The desire that Refaat talks about is not a drive towards freedom that is just waiting to be realized. On the contrary, it is a desire that grows from the granularities of life and death.

35 Refaat Alareer, "Editor's Introduction," in *Gaza Writes Back*, Edited by Refaat Alareer (Virginia: Just World Books, 2013), p. 22.

36 Ibid., p. 23.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

In a poem, Refaat writes:

We dream and pray,
Clinging to life even harder
Every time a dear one's life
Is forcibly rooted up.
We live.
We live.
We do.[39]

The desire to cling to life is reinforced through encounters with death. Life is not an untarnished capacity but a repeatedly performed act of living ("We live/We live"), a repetition that demands collective renewal after every tragedy. The necessity of renewal means that the desire for life is connected to "memory," to the task of inscribing experiences in the materiality of transmissible stories. The model of moral responsibility that dominates philosophical discussions of Gaza follows an opposite path: memory in this case is treated as a stable expression of the ever-present ethical capacities that nations possess. Pankaj Mishra, for example, talks about the Holocaust as a "universal reference" for the post-1945 world order, which was apparently defined by a set of common "ideals": "respect for freedom, tolerance for the otherness of beliefs and ways of life; solidarity with human suffering; and a sense of moral responsibility for the weak and persecuted."[40] The reconstruction after 1945 was not so much about modern values as it was about the political struggles of socialist and national liberation regimes against US expansionism. There was no ready-made global edifice but only a turbulent antagonism between imperialist capitalism and anti-systematic forces. Any universal morality had to emerge from this antagonism. Mishra, on the contrary, presupposes the existence of such a morality and wants to recover it without the need for concrete struggle. He advances an abstract ethics that would revive a lost moral idyll. Thus, he locates Israeli brutality not in the settler-colonial character of Zionism but in the "nihilistic survival-of-the-strongest ideology" propagated by all Israeli governments

39 Refaat Alareer, "And We Live On," *Mondoweiss*, 27 May 2012. Available at: https://mondoweiss.net/2012/05/and-we-live-on/.

40 Pankaj Mishra, "The Shoah After Gaza," *London Review of Books* 46, no.6 (2024).

since Menachem Begin.[41] The assumption is that there is an inner nucleus of Zionism that can be retrieved from the excrescence of extremism. Israel is accordingly consecrated as an ethical agent with whom peaceful dialogue is possible and necessary. Since militant anti-colonial struggle is not necessary, Operation al-Aqsa flood can be demonized as a series of "massacres and hostage-taking."[42] Mishra also worries that the Global South's indifference towards the inflated value of the Shoah risks turning the "color line into a new Maginot Line."[43] That's why in the end he wants to preserve "the Shoah as the measure of all crimes, [and] antisemitism as the most lethal form of bigotry."[44] Enzo Traverso similarly eulogizes the status of the Holocaust "as a paradigm for constructing the memory of other forms of mass violence."[45] He worries about the damage that Israeli violence is causing to the memorial sanctity of the Holocaust:

> If this memory were identified with the Star of David worn by an army carrying out genocide in Gaza, the consequences would be devastating. All our points of reference would be blurred, both epistemologically and politically. We would then enter a world where everything is equivalent, and words no longer have any value. A whole series of reference points that make up our moral and political conscience—the distinction between right and wrong, defense and offence, oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim—would be in danger of serious damage. Our conception of democracy, which is not just a system of laws and institutional arrangements but also a culture, a memory and a set of experiences, would be weakened.[46]

The feeling of disorientation that Traverso talks about is linked to a specific intellectual mindset: politics should be subordinate to the unicity of a moral foundation, to the clarity of a firmly established memory. This memory serves as a universal moral code guaranteeing the "the distinction between right and wrong, defense and offence, oppressor

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Enzo Traverso, interview by Joseph Confavreux and Mathieu Dejean, "The war in Gaza 'blurs the memory of the Holocaust,'" *Verso*, 28 November 2023. Available at: https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/enzo-traverso-the-war-in-gaza-blurs-the-memory-of-the-holocaust.

46 Ibid.

and oppressed, perpetrator and victim." Since these moral distinctions are etched into the collective consciousness of the world, fierce struggle between antagonisms can be substituted by universal compliance with pre-established norms. When politics is being compared to the abstract goal of dialogical ethics, it is inevitable that Traverso will see Operation al-Aqsa Flood as a "terrorist act."[47] Instead of emotionally enthusing over its execution, he asks us to undertake a "necessary effort at contextualization and rational understanding."[48] Traverso laments that "[w]e are not in a position today to analyze the situation with the necessary critical distance… [since] history is always written after the event."[49] Despite this, he asserts that "certain things are quite clear": both Hamas and Israel are guilty of committing massacres.[50] The memory of the Holocaust thus functions as a transcendental viewpoint, a "universal reference," from which the participants of a political struggle can be condemned. The memory of the Holocaust crystallizes a moral code that all political participants should adhere to in times of disorientation.

Refaat, however, does not presume the existence of such a moral code. He highlights a condition wherein the possibility of dialogical ethics is shattered by the physical weight of the colonial war machine. Universal adherence to a moral code established by the Holocaust is possible if words have the chance to change the enemy's conscience. It is this possibility of appealing to morality that is thrown in doubt by colonial violence. In 2022, Refaat asked: "can a story or a poem change the mind or the heart of the occupiers? Can a book make a difference? Will this calamity, this occupation, this apartheid, pass? … Does a single Palestinian life matter? Does it?"[51] In 2023, facing the possibility of death at the hands of Israeli colonialism, his question changed into a definitive assertion: "Israel could kill all 2.3 million of us and the world would not bat

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Refaat Alareer, "In The Face of Lifelong Terror, Gaza Speaks Truth To Power," *In These Times,* 12 August 2022. Available at: https://inthesetimes.com/article/palestinian-struggle-armed-conflict-gaza-israel-idf.

an eye."[52] The absence of a moral conscience on the part of the colonizers means that the colonized cannot be expected to behave as perfect victims, peacefully asking their oppressors to give up their privileges. This is simply a liberal fantasy of infinite ethical capacity. In his genocide diaries, Refaat negates this fantasy, noting the sheer levels of despair that can seep into colonized subjectivity. He writes about a stage of colonial war characterized by "silence and numbness":

> This is when Israel particularly intensifies the bombing of civilian homes. Stories are interrupted. Prayers are cut short. Meals are left uneaten. Showers are abandoned. Therefore, amid the chaos and danger Israel brings, many in Gaza, especially children, withdraw into silence. They find solace in solitude as means of coping with the overwhelming emotion and uncertainty that surrounds them. Silence prevails. Then numbness follows. As people attempt to protect themselves from the constant onslaught of distressing news, they grow indifferent. Because we could die anyway, no matter where we go. Emotional numbness sets in, as individuals attempt to detach from their emotions to survive.[53]

In a conjuncture wherein no ontological capacity is ensured for the maintenance of dialogical ethics, memories have to become political tools of collective self-making, instead of functioning as expressions of a pre-given moral code. A memory-based moral code is effective only if the agents to which it is addressed possess an intrinsic capacity to take heed of it. But when the presumption of such an intrinsic capacity is discarded, memories become a means for constructing political power among different social groups. Refaat configures memories as situated acts that "promote remembering and condemn forgetting"—"an act of resistance to an occupation that works hard to obliterate and destroy links between Palestine and Palestinians."[54] Against the colonial drive towards the annihilation of the native, Refaat wants to engrave "atrocities" and "rare moments of hope" into the fabric of memories.[55] As a partisan in the national liberation struggle, he wants to weave powerful memories so that the

52 Refaat Alareer, "The unpublished genocide diaries of Refaat Alareer," *The Electronic Intifada,* 23 August 2024. Available at: https://electronicintifada.net/content/unpublished-genocide-diaries-refaat-alareer/48436.

53 Ibid.

54 Alareer, "Editor's Introduction," p. 24.

55 Ibid.

colonized can gain the ability to confront and ultimately defeat the colonizers: "we Palestinians will keep breathing down your necks until you realize that occupation needs to end, or else we will spoil your most intimate moments by yelling at the top of our lungs, 'Enough! Enough!'"[56] Once memories are embedded in the strategic necessities of political struggle, they are completely de-linked from any ontologized or ethicized foundation. The Holocaust cannot serve as a moral evaluator of politics. Assuming the existence of such a moral evaluator converts political agents into moral entities with a pre-given capacity for conforming to a fixed universal code. However, politics knows no such capacities. Israel cannot be treated as a moral entity whose narratives need to be respectfully engaged with. Rather, it needs to be understood as a colonial machine that provides material and emotional security to its settler population. If the sense of security enjoyed by colonizers is not disrupted, then there is no possibility of reconciliation.

The Future of Philosophy

Since the colonial situation presents us with an irreconcilable antagonism between the colonizer and the colonized, philosophy cannot arrogate to itself the right to conduct a moral dialogue. A moral dialogue works only if the entities possess a pre-given capacity to exchange knowledge about each other. However, the colonizer is not concerned with an exchange of knowledge. It is a brutal machine that wants to eliminate the colonized. The colonized, similarly, are not perfect victims with an infinite ethical power for dialogue. They exist under the oppressiveness of colonial death wherein the desire for freedom has to be repeatedly cultivated through the construction of counter-hegemonic collective power. Lenin remarked that the capacity for proletarian self-emancipation "does not come ready-made."[57] Rather, it is forged in the "extremes of the exploiters' resistance," which teaches the proletariat "to ferret out its enemies from their last nook and corner... [and] to pull up the roots of their domination."[58] Instead of beginning from the assumption of an unlimited ethical

56 Ibid.

57 Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 26*, pp. 402-403.

58 Ibid., p. 403.

capacity, one has to begin amidst the materiality of "extremes," namely the violence of the oppressor that necessitates the formation of anti-colonial violence from the oppressed. When an interviewer asked Ghassan Kanafani "Why not just talk [to the Israeli leaders]?" he powerfully replied: "That is kind of a conversation between the sword and the neck you mean!"[59] A conversation between the colonizer and the colonized is never a moral exercise in discovering a common ethical capacity. It is always a deeply political act of warfare that will result in the annihilation of natives if carried out with naivety. Conversation can happen, knowledge can be produced and transmitted, only if the colonized can damage the insular infrastructure of material and emotional security enjoyed by the colonizers.

In his last interview, Refaat said: "I am an academic. Probably the toughest thing I have at home is an Expo Marker. But if the Israelis invade us, if they barge at us, open door to door to massacre us, I am going to use that marker, throw it at the Israeli soldiers, even if that is the last thing that I will be able to do."[60] The Expo Marker, a symbol of knowledge, is thrown into the combative exteriority of a militant struggle. Philosophy is no longer tasked with the disclosure of the moral reservoirs of humanity. There is no such hidden moral capacity. Everything takes place on the surface, on the terrain of politics. Instead of searching for a noble power for freedom in everyone, one is faced with the urgency of combating the savagery of colonialism. "We are helpless and we have nothing to lose," stresses Refaat.[61] In this moment of desperation, Refaat chose to direct philosophy outwards, towards the imperative of revolutionary struggle. For him, philosophy functioned as an "act of life,"[62] wielded by a "proud stone thrower" like him.[63] Western philosophy continues to suppress this imperative, floating in the sovereignty of a contemplative consciousness. The duty falls upon us to destroy this anti-political philosophical tradition through militant participation in revolutionary struggle.

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59 Palestine Diary, "Why Palestinians Fight? Ghassan Kanafani," 16 October 2023. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg5fGMQYr8k.

60 The Electronic Intifada (@intifada), "Excerpts from Livestream," X, 8 December 2023. Available at: https://x.com/intifada/status/1732994197752307842.

61 Ibid.

62 Alareer, "Editor's Introduction," p. 14.

63 Alareer, "In The Face of Lifelong Terror, Gaza Speaks Truth To Power."

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PHILOSOPHY / PALESTINE

The Sword and the Neck: Reading the al-Aqsa Flood is a militant work of philosophy that insists Gaza must be approached not as a humanitarian "exception," but as a primary terrain of proletarian and anti-colonial struggle. Writing in the immediate wake of the al-Aqsa Flood and the genocidal campaign unleashed against Gaza, Yanis Iqbal reconstructs the ideological architecture that licenses extermination: Zionism, liberal modernity, and a global consensus that treats Palestinian resistance as a metaphysical scandal rather than a political fact.

Across five tightly argued chapters, Iqbal stages a confrontation between Marxism and postcolonial theory around the problem of the colonial mode of production, developing sharp critiques of Slavoj Žižek and Étienne Balibar for the ways their "abstract negativity" and political quietism ultimately disarm solidarity with Palestinian struggle.

Drawing on Mahdi Amel, Fanon, Lukács, and Marx's own insistence that philosophy must become a practice of liberation, Iqbal argues that philosophy today either aligns itself with the physics of the oppressed—or becomes complicit with extermination. The Sword and the Neck thus reads al-Aqsa Flood as a concrete act of decolonization, a rupture in the spatial order of siege that transforms Gaza from a zone of managed death into a site of revolutionary initiative. The book is both an intervention in contemporary debates on Palestine and a poignant contribution to the renewal of Marxist theory under conditions of genocidal imperialism.

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