



Can the Palestinian speak?

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It is sadly nothing new to argue that oppressed and colonised people have been and are subject to epistemic violence – othering, silencing, and selective visibility – in which they are muted or made to appear or speak only within certain perceptual views or registers – terrorists, protestors, murderers, humanitarian subjects – but absented from their most human qualities. Fabricated disappearance and dehumanisation of Palestinians have supported and continue to sustain their physical elimination and their erasure as a people.

But the weeks after October 7th have set a new bar in terms of the inverted and perverse ways that Palestinians and Israel can be represented, discussed, and interpreted. I am referring here to a new epistemology of time that is tight to a



moral standpoint that the world is asked to uphold. In that, the acts of contextualising and providing historical depth are framed as morally reprehensible or straight out antisemitic. The idea that the 7th of October marks the beginning of unprecedented violence universalises the experience of one side, the Israeli, while obliterating the past decades of Palestinians' predicament. More than ever, Palestinians are visible, legible, and audible only through the frames of Israeli subjectivity and sensibility. They exist either to protect Israel or to destroy Israel. Outside these two assigned agencies, they are not, and cannot speak. They are an excess of agency like Spivak's subaltern,[\[1\]](#) or a 'superfluous' people as Mahmoud Darwish[\[2\]](#) put it in the aftermath of the Sabra and Chatila massacre. What is more is the persistent denying by Israel and its Western allies, despite the abundant historical evidence, that Palestinian indigenous presence in Palestine has always been at best absented from their gaze – 'a problem' to manage and contain – at worse the object of systemic and persistent ethnic cleansing and erasure aiming at fulfilling the narcissistic image of "a land without a people for a people without a land." Yet, the erasure of Palestinians, also today in Gaza, is effected and claimed while simultaneously being denied.

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A quick check of the word "Palestine" on google scholar returns one million and three hundred thousand studies, nearly half of them written from the mid 1990s onwards. Even granting that much of this scholarship would be situated in and reproducing orientalist and colonial knowledges, one can hardly claim scarcity of scholarly production on the dynamics of subalternity and oppression in Palestine. Anthropology, literary theory, and history have detected and detailed the epistemological and ontological facets of colonial and post-colonial erasure. One might thus ask: how does the persistent denial of erasure in the case of Palestinians work? We might resort to psychoanalysis or to a particular form of narcissistic behaviour known as DAVRO – Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender[\[3\]](#) – to understand the current pervading and cunning epistemic violence



that Israel and its allies enact. *Denying* the radical obstructing and effacing of Palestinian life (while effecting it through settler-colonialism, settler and state violence, siege, apartheid, and genocidal violence in Gaza) is the first stage in Israel's and western allies' discursive manipulation. *Attacking* historicisation and contextualisation as invalid, antisemitic, propaganda, hate speech, immoral, outrageous, and even contrary to liberal values is the second stage. Lastly is the *Reversing* Victim and Offender by presenting the war on Gaza as one where Israel is a historical victim reacting to the offender, in response to demands that Israel, as the colonial and occupying power, takes responsibility for the current cycle of violence.

This partly explains why the violent attack that Hamas conducted in the south of Israel last October, in which 1200 people were killed, is consistently presented as the start date of an 'unprecedented' violence, with more than 5000 Palestinians killed in carpet bombings of Gaza until 2022 doubly erased, physically and epistemically. With this, October 7th becomes the departure point of an Israeli epistemology of time assumed as universal, but it also marks an escalation in efforts to criminalise contextualisation and banish historicisation.

Since October 7th, a plurality of voices – ranging from Israeli political figures and intellectuals, to mainstream and [left-leaning](#) journalists – has condemned efforts to inscribe Gaza into a long term history of colonialism as scurrilous justification for the killing of Israeli civilians. Attempts to analyse or understand facts through a historical and political frame, by most notably drawing attention to Gazans' lived experience over the past 16 years (as a consequence of its long term siege and occupation) or merely to argue that there is a context in which events are taking place, such as General UN director Guterres did when he stated that October 7th “did not happen in a vacuum,” are represented as [inciting terrorism](#) or morally repugnant hate speech. In the few media reports accounting for the dire and deprived conditions of Palestinians' existence in Gaza, the reasons causing the former are hardly mentioned. For instance, we hear in reports that Palestinians in Gaza are mostly refugees, that they are unemployed, and that 80%



of them are relying on aid, with trucks of humanitarian aid deemed insufficient in the last few weeks in comparison to the numbers let in before the 7th of October. Astoundingly, the 56 years old Israeli occupation and 17 years old siege of Gaza, as root causes of the destruction of the economy, unemployment, and reliance on aid are not mentioned so that the public is left to imagine that these calamities are the result of Palestinians' own doing.

In other domains, we see a similar endeavour in preventing Palestine from being inscribed in its colonial context. Take for instance the many critical theorists who have tried to foreclose Franz Fanon's analysis of colonial violence to Palestinians. Naming the context of colonial violence and Palestinians' intergenerational and ongoing traumas is interpreted as morally corrupt, tantamount to not caring for Israeli trauma and a justification for the loss of Israeli lives. The variation of the argument that does refer to historical context either pushes Fanon's arguments to the margins or argues that the existence of a Palestinian authority invalidates Fanon's applicability to Palestine, denying therefore the effects of the violence that Palestinians as colonised subjects have endured and continue to endure because of Israeli occupation, apartheid, and siege.

But perhaps one of the most disconcerting forms of gaslighting is the demand that Palestinians should - and could - suspend their condition of subordination, their psychic and physical injury, to centre the perpetrators' feelings and grief as their own. In fact, the issue of grief has come to global attention almost exclusively as an ethical and moral question in reaction to the loss of Israeli lives. Palestinians who accept to go on TV are constantly asked whether they condemn the October 7th attack, before they can even dare talk about their own long history of loss and dispossession, and literally while their families are being annihilated by devastating shelling and bombing and still lying under the rubbles. One such case is that of PLO ambassador to the UK Hussam Zomlot, who lost members of his own family in the current attack, but was asked by Kirsty Wark to "condemn Hamas" on screen. To put it another way: would it even be conceivable to imagine a journalist asking Israeli hostages in captivity if they condemn the Israeli



bombardments and the war on Gaza as a precondition to speak and be heard?

“Condemning” becomes the condition of Palestinian intelligibility and audibility as humans, a proof that they share the universal idea that all human life is sacred, at the very moment when the sacrality of human life is violently precluded to them and when they are experiencing with brutal clarity that their existence as a people matters to no one who has the power to stop the carnage. This imperative mistakes in bad faith the principle that lives should have equal worth with a reality that for Palestinians is plainly experienced as the opposite of this postulate. Israel, on the other hand, is given “the extenuating circumstances” for looking after Israelis’ own trauma by conducting one of the most indiscriminate and ferocious attacks on civilians in decades, superior in its intensity and death rate to the devastation we saw in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, according to the [New York Times](#). Nearly 20.000 killed – mostly children, women, and elderly – razed, shelled, bulldozed while in their homes or shelters, in an onslaught that does not spare doctors, patients, journalists, academics, and even Israeli hostages, and that aims at making Gaza an unlivable habitat for the survivors.

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Let us go back to the frequently invoked question of “morality.” In commentaries and op-eds over the last few weeks we are told that any mention of context for the attacks of October 7th is imperiling the very ability to be compassionate or be moral. Ranging from the Israeli government that argues that a killing machine in Gaza is justified on moral grounds – and that contextualisation and historicisation are a distraction or deviation from this moral imperative – to those who suggest Israel should moderate its violence against Palestinians – such as New York times columnist [Nicholas Kristof](#) who wrote that “ Hamas dehumanized Israelis, and we must not dehumanize innocent people in Gaza” – all assign a pre-political or a-political higher moral ground to Israel. Moreover, October 7th is said to – and is felt as – having awakened the long historical suffering of the Jews and the trauma



of the Holocaust. But what is the invocation of the Holocaust – and the historical experience of European antisemitism – if not a clear effort at historical and moral contextualisation? In fact, the only history and context deemed evocable and valid is the Israeli one, against the history and context of Palestinians' lives. In this operation, Israeli subjectivity and sensibility is located above history and is assigned a monopoly of morality with October 7th becoming an a-historical and a meta-historical fact at one and the same time. In this canvas Palestinians are afforded permission to exist subject to inhabiting one of the two agencies assigned to them: guardian of Israeli life or colonised subject. This is what Israeli president Herzog means when he declares that there are [no innocents in Gaza](#): "It's an entire nation out there that is responsible. This rhetoric about civilians not aware, not involved, it's absolutely not true. They could've risen up, they could have fought against that evil regime". The nearly twenty thousand Palestinian deaths are thus not Israel's responsibility. Palestinians are liable for their own disappearance for not "fighting Hamas" to protect Israelis. The Israeli victims, including hundreds of soldiers, are, on the other hand, all inherently civilians, and afforded innocent qualities. This is the context in which Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu, of Itamar Ben Gvir's far-right party in power, can [suggest](#) nuking Gaza or wiping out all residents: "They can go to Ireland or deserts, the monsters in Gaza should find a solution by themselves". Let us not here be mistaken by conceding this might just be a fantasy, a desire of elimination: the [Guardian](#) and the +972/Local call magazines have provided chilling evidence that Palestinian civilians in Gaza are not "collateral" damage but what is at work is [a mass assassination factory](#), thanks to a sophisticated AI system generating hundreds of unverified targets aiming at eliminating as many civilians as possible.

Whether Palestinians are worthy of merely living or dying depends thus on their active acceptance or refusal to remain colonised. Any attempts to exit this predicament – whether through violent attacks like on October 7th or by staging peaceful civil tactics such as disobedience, boycott and divesting from Israel, recurrence to international law, peaceful marches, hunger strikes, popular or



cultural resistance – are all the same, and in a gaslighting mode disallowed as evidence of Palestinians’ inherent violent nature which proves they need taming or elimination.

One might be compelled to believe that dehumanisation and the logic of elimination of Palestinians are a reaction to the pain, sorrow, and shock generated by the traumatic and emotional aftermath of October 7th. But history does not agree with this, as the assigning of Palestinians to a non-human or even non-life sphere is deeply rooted in Israeli public discourse. The standpoint of a people seeking freedom from occupation and siege has consistently been reversed and catalogued as one of “terror and threat” to Israeli state and society when it is a threat to their colonial expansive or confinement plans, whether the latter are conceived as divinely mandated or backed by a secular settler-colonial imaginary. In so far as “terrorists” are birthed by snakes and wild beasts as Israeli lawmaker Ayelet Shaker [states](#), they must be exterminated. Her words bear citation as they anticipate Gaza’s current devastation with lucid clarity: “Behind every terrorist stand dozens of men and women, without whom he could not engage in terrorism. They are all enemy combatants, and their blood shall be on all their heads”. Urging the killing of all Palestinians women, men, and children and the destruction of their homes, she continued: “They should go, as should the physical homes in which they raised the snakes. Otherwise, more little snakes will be raised there. They have to die and their houses should be demolished so that they cannot bear any more terrorists.” This is not an isolated voice. Back in 2016 Prime Minister Netanyahu argued that fences and walls should be built all around Israel to defend it from “[wild beasts](#)” and against this background retired Israeli general and former head of Intelligence Giora Eiland, in an opinion article in Yedioth Aharonoth on November 19, argues that all Palestinians in Gaza die of fast spreading disease and all infrastructure be destroyed, while still positing Israel’s higher moral ground: “We say that Sinwar (Hamas leader in Gaza, ndr) is so evil that he does not care if all the residents of Gaza die. Such a presentation is not accurate, since who are the “poor” women of Gaza? They are all the mothers, sisters, or wives of Hamas murderers,” adding, “And no, this is not



about cruelty for cruelty's sake, since we don't support the suffering of the other side as an end but as a means."

But let us not be mistaken, such ascription of Palestinians to a place outside of history, and of humanity, goes way back and has been intrinsic to the establishment of Israel. From the outset of the settler colonial project in 1948, Palestinians as the indigenous people of the land have been dehumanised to enable the project of erasing them, in a manner akin to other settler colonial projects which aimed at turning the settlers into the new indigenous. The elimination of Palestinians has rested on more than just physical displacement, destruction, and a deep and wide ecological alteration of the landscape of Palestine to suit the newly fashioned Israeli identity. Key Israeli figures drew a direct equivalence between Palestinian life on the one hand and non-life on the other. For instance, Joseph Weitz, a Polish Jew who settled in Palestine in 1908 and sat in the first and second Transfer Committees (1937-1948) which were created to deal with "the Arab problem" (as the indigenous Palestinians were defined) speaks in his diaries of Palestinians as a primitive unity of human and non-human life.^[4] Palestinians and their habitat were, in his words, "bustling with man and beast," until their destruction and razing to the ground in 1948 made them "fossilized life," to use Weitz' own words. Once fossilised, the landscape could thus be visualised as an empty and barren landscape (the infamous desert), enlivened and redeemed by the arrival of the Jewish settlers.

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Locating events within the context and long durée of the incommensurable injustices inflicted upon the Palestinians since 1948 - which have acquired a new unimaginable magnitude with the current war on Gaza - is not just ethically imperative but also politically pressing. The tricks of DARVO (Denying Attacking



and Reversing Victim and Offender) have been unveiled. We are now desperately in need of re-orienting the world's moral compass by exposing the intertwined processes of humanisation and dehumanisation of Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. There is no other way to begin exiting not only the very conditions that usher violence, mass killings, and genocide, but also towards effecting the as yet entirely fictional principle that human lives have equal value.

[1] Spivak, G. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). In Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, pp. 271-313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Basingstoke: Macmillan.

[2] Mahmoud Darwish, "The Madness of Being a Palestinian," *Journal Of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 1 (1985): 138-41.

[3] Heartfelt thanks to Professor Rema Hamami for alerting me to the notion of DAVRO and for her extended and invaluable comments on this essay.

[4] Cited in Benvenisti M (2000) *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp.155-156.