



The Courage of Historical Truths

written by Antonio De Lauri
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With the destruction of Gaza by Israel under way and the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories worsening day by day, a recurrent question is raised in mainstream media, TV shows and many academic circles: Is Israel's response to the Hamas attacks on October 7 proportionate or not? Some say it is. Others say only partially. Others say it isn't. But the point is that the question itself is a trap. Any serious debate about the current escalation of violence cannot start from October 2023. To overlook the historical context is a violation of the truth: it pushes to one side the state of oppression that Israel has imposed on Palestine at a growing pace in the past decades, and it washes away the responsibilities of Europe in the root causes of the conflict and occupation.



Western governments and institutions have overwhelmingly shown support for Israel in its explicit attempt at annihilating Palestinians. “This is civilization against barbarity. This is good against bad”, claimed Israel’s Ambassador to Berlin, Ron Prosor. “We are fighting against human animals”, said Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. As the mainstream narrative goes, what is taking place is a broader battle of civilizations between “the only democracy in the Middle East” (as Israel has often been labelled by politicians and journalists) and authoritarianism (Hamas and, by extension, all Palestinians). Good vs evil. The civilized vs the uncivilized.

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“You are either with us, or you are with the terrorist”, said George Bush in 2001, when the US was launching the War on Terror, which led to two catastrophic decades of human loss (hundreds of thousands of dead), devastation and destabilization. Us and them. The civilized vs the uncivilized. Yet if we really want to indulge in the depressing mantra of a battle of civilizations, we should recognize that the terms of reference are different from how they first appear to the Western intelligentsia. With current events in Palestine and Israel in mind, if we compare the speeches of [Joe Biden](#) or [von der Leyen](#), with that of the [king of Jordan](#) at the Cairo Peace Summit, the conclusion would be that the American and the German don’t make a good impression (to use an euphemism). Indeed, I’d challenge anyone in saying on what “side” reason, justice and humanity lie in that comparison.

The decline of values, ability and courage in Western political leadership, coupled with their arrogance and double standards, is a perfect symbol of our empty times, in which social media threads determine the relevance of social issues, and a significant portion of academia is complicit with power or anesthetized and irrelevant. As I write this blog post, a turmoil was generated among some research institutes in Norway for the decision of a group of researchers to publish a Statement on the Situation in Palestine, now available on [Public Anthropologist](#)



[blog](#) and taken down from the website where it was originally published.

Over the past decades, we have seen wars conducted in the name of democracy, countries bombed in the name of human rights and regimes intermittently supported or fought depending on economic interests. In the US as well as in Europe freedom of expression has been dismantled, inequalities have increased and societal cohesion has eroded.

Polarizing discourses are used to generate clicks in ways that misrepresent reality. You raise questions about the opportunity to keep sending weapons to Ukraine? Then you are pro-Putin. You maintain that it is necessary to establish a dialogue with the Taliban? Then you support violations of human rights. Journalism is compromised or controlled. Dissidence is often mocked or even cancelled. Social problems tend to be oversimplified. Nuances are often unwelcomed in political debates. And so, horrors like the devastation imposed on Palestinians go on as Europe complicitly watches. Pro-Palestinians protests are banned. Voices outside the mainstream are silenced. European governments are far from being innocent in the protraction of this humanitarian tragedy. Once again, as with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 or the bombing of Libya in 2011 (to mention only two relatively recent examples), the current events will remain in the history books as a terrifying injustice.

It may be appropriate to recall how in 1993 the historian Howard Zinn introduced the essay "[Terrorism over Tripoli](#)":

"In April of 1986, a bomb exploded in a discotheque in West Berlin, killing two people, one an American soldier. It was unquestionably an act of terrorism. Libya's tyrannical leader, Muammar Khadafi, had a record of involvement in terrorism, although in this case there seemed to be no clear evidence of who was responsible. Nevertheless, President Reagan ordered that bombers be sent over Libya's capital of Tripoli, killing perhaps a hundred people, almost all civilians. I wrote this piece, which could not find publication in the press, to argue against the principle of retaliation. I am always furious at the killing of innocent people



for some political cause, but I wanted to broaden the definition of terrorism to include governments, which are guilty of terrorism far more often, and on an infinitely larger scale, than bands of revolutionaries or nationalists.”

The essay ends with these words:

“Let us hope that, even if this generation, its politicians, its reporters, its flag-wavers and fanatics, cannot change its ways, the children of the next generation will know better, having observed our stupidity. Perhaps they will understand that the violence running wild in the world cannot be stopped by more violence, that someone must say: we refuse to retaliate, the cycle of terrorism stops here.”

Unfortunately, we cannot say that lessons have been learned. Quite the opposite, as the situation in Gaza blatantly reveals.

Along with Palestinians, truth dies.

Noam Chomsky once praised Zinn’s work (endorsement for *Howard Zinn on History*) in the following terms: “Howard’s life and work are a persistent reminder that our own subjective judgments of the likelihood of success in engaging human problems are of little interest, to ourselves or others. What matters is to take part, as best we can, in the small actions of unknown people that can stave off disaster and bring about a better world, to honor them for their achievement, to do what we can to ensure that these achievements are understood and carried forward.”

As Palestine burns, many scholars are still reluctant to speak out, established academic institutions avoid making a public stand, unverified information is used as communication tactics, investigative journalism is invisible. Along with Palestinians, truth dies. There are times when we need to create the space for the courage of historical truths to emerge. This is one of those times.