

Published (in French) as: [Les enthousiasmes anti-israéliens: la tragédie d'un processus aveugle](#). *Raisons politiques*, Nov. 2004, pp. 105-124.

## **ANTI-ISRAELI ENTHUSIASMS AND THE TRAGEDY OF BLIND PROCESS<sup>1</sup>**

The Second Intifada has once again provoked intense emotions, in Israel and Palestine, in the Arab world and the Islamic *umma*, in Europe and America. The sights are horrible: Israeli soldiers humiliating helpless Palestinians at the checkpoints between Israel and the occupied territories; Israeli tanks and gunships chasing Palestinian fighters, while in the act destroying the lives, family homes and lands of defenseless civilians; Israeli's killed randomly in buses, schools, cafés by Palestinian suicide bombers. There is no need to evoke the pictures that confront everyone on the tv-screen and the front pages.

The sheer, dumb, repetitive cruelty of these images slowly transforms heartfelt sympathies into mute loyalties, turns indignation into blind rage and replaces commiseration with utter indifference for the suffering of the other side. In such a process, people are driven apart from one another, and are each separated from their more empathic, more reflective side. They are being fanaticized. But does there remain some common ground to meet and seek mutual understanding? Does the conflict allow those it absorbs to maintain a degree of emotional and their moral integrity? If I did not think so, I would not be writing these lines.

Yet, the discussion about the Israeli Palestine conflict seems especially troublesome. It is marred by mutual suspicions. All too often, Jews sense an undercurrent of anti-

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Philo Bregstein, Johan Goudsblom, Kitty Roukens, and Bonno Thoden van Velzen for their perceptive and helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> I use 'constellation' and 'arrangement' here interchangeably with 'figuration', both very much in the sense Norbert Elias gave to the latter term in his *Was ist Soziologie*. München: Juventus, 1970, a book that much

Semitism in a discourse presented as frank and necessary criticism of Israel. Many critics of Israel, on the other hand, feel that the Nazi-annihilation of the Jews is brought up to rob them of their moral right to discuss Israel's policies in a critical vein. I will argue that it is not quite 'latent' or 'unconscious' anti-Semitism that underlies so many critical statements about Israel, but that nevertheless an unspoken message does resonate in much critical discourse. It echoes something quite different, that still may be hard to accept for Jews: it suggests a certain abandon, a kind of enthusiasm in denouncing Israel's actions. I will describe the various anti-israeli enthusiasms, analyze and explain them. But since few people of my generation are entirely detached from the ongoing conflict and as I will be trying to expose other people's implicit motives, I should maybe first introduce myself in this contested field.

I am a sociologist. My task is to understand the dynamics of human interaction. I am also a Jew, born under Nazi occupation. I belong to this generation that wanted to draw from the Jewish fate a lesson for humanity. I too have learned to deeply mistrust the self-appointed champions of the human species, present company included. And yet, allow me to try and speak not for one nationality, but from a human perspective, in a sociological vein.

At its core, sociology embodies the tragic sense of human existence. The sociological approach studies interdependent people in the social arrangements that they constitute together. Within these constellations of interdependency people also exert mutual pressures and compulsions upon one another. As a result, the dynamics of human interaction may force people into situations not of their own making or design and drive them to a course of action that they might never have chosen if they could have avoided it. The consequences of their actions are often unintended, mostly unknown beforehand and only dimly understood as they unfold. There usually is a brief moment of choice, some margin of maneuver, sometimes more, sometimes less. Usually, the people who find themselves in the

flow of events do not realize what options are left to them and when.

## 1. The maelstrom

Conflict is of course the example *par excellence* of such a mutually compulsory course of events, of 'blind process,' or if you wish, 'blind fate'. The century old struggle between Jews and Palestinians is the very paradigm of such a mutually compelling constellation. The same continuing conflict also demonstrates how a local, apparently limited figuration<sup>2</sup> may expand by drawing new parties into its vortex, that in turn compel one another, as the struggle widens and intensifies. The Israeli Palestine conflict is especially contagious, because the adjacent Arab nations are committed to the cause of the kindred Palestinians, the Muslim immigrants in Western Europe identify with their oppressed brothers and sisters in the faith, while most Jews in the Diaspora, in Europe and America, feel the bond of a shared past and a common creed with the Jewish state. The European nations that fought the Second World War and were implicated in one way or another in the fate of the Jews even today can not help but consider the Jewish people as somehow special among nations, one that they owed some redress and that somehow owes them a higher morality, the spiritual gain of victimhood. There is more: the Arab governments depend on the West for purchase of their oil, for technical aid and military support. The West and most of the rest of the world depend on the Arab countries for their vital oil supply. And finally, Christians and Muslims retrace their teachings to the Jewish Bible and the Jews reject both religions and hold on to the Torah. Israel is the holy land for Christians, Muslims and Jews alike, Jerusalem the holy city of all three monotheistic religions.

All these threads together constitute a tangle so inextricable that probably no one can be completely detached

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from all the intricacies, from all the ties that bind and blind, and separate. Some of these bonds have held for centuries, even millennia. [But no matter how convoluted, no matter how ancient the web, it still is necessary to somehow straighten it out. This inevitably entails that all parties concerned will have to give up some of their most prized advantages, or as the case may be some of their most dearly held illusions. At that point another round begins: who are to part with their possessions, who must abandon a hope cherished for so long, who must risk security for peace and who must abandon high ideals for a meager settlement? The other side, of course.

Strangely enough, the solution to this predicament is known, it has been spelled out in some detail, it has wide support from implicated outsiders, and the parties most involved probably know deep down that it is indeed the only way out:<sup>3</sup> Two states, an Israeli and a Palestinian state, defined roughly by the borders of 1949-67; Jerusalem divided between the two, under international oversight; and, if no return, then compensation for the displaced Palestinians. But it appears impossible to arrive at this point. That is due to the 'autonomous dynamics' of the constellation, helped along by greed, malice and mistrust on one side, suspicion, obstinacy and resentment on the other. On both sides, there are the war factions, the cliques that profit from the present quandary, materially and morally, as merchants and warriors, as zealots and fanatics. To an outsider, the war factions on both sides much resemble another. That should not come as a surprise: they have been watching and matching each other for a century now.

In some respects, the tragic view, this sociological analysis of the situation, may appear fatalistic, or even immoral, and it is indeed a-moral, at least temporarily: it suspends one morality, of apportioning specific blame, in the service of another morality, of understanding the way the figuration works. If the process unfolds blindly, unanticipated and misunderstood by those involved, it may appear to be an inexorable fate. That is not so. On the contrary, the only hope for any kind of effective,

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<sup>3</sup> Compare the Camp David plan and the informal 'Geneva accords' of the Spring of 2004.

beneficial action resides precisely in the possibility to grasp the overall dynamics of the interaction, to comprehend the constellation in its entirety, so that one day, hopefully, it may be brought under some degree of control.

Still, also in this perspective of mutually compulsory dependencies, individuals may be held accountable for their actions within the small margins of maneuver left to them. Thus, Ariel Sharon, was held responsible for his complicity, at the very least his complicit passivity, in the massacres of Shabra and Shatila and for his policy of bloody repression of the Palestinians. Similarly Yasser Arafat bears a responsibility for the corruption of the Palestinian Authority and of the PLO, for silencing all internal opposition and condoning (at the very least) terrorist acts such as the suicide bombings. In fact, even in this compelling constellation some policies did proceed very much as planned by the instigators. For example, the Israeli program of settlement in occupied territory. It may yet turn out to have entirely unexpected and unintended results, but so far it corresponds to Israeli designs.

Once again, it is almost impossible at this point to resist the temptation to begin the quarrel all over again: Who started the conflict? Which side is the guiltiest? And so on, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*. All parties are caught up in the process of revenge and retaliation, the actions of one side compel the reactions of the other, and thereby provide an excuse for them, and vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

But Palestinians and Israeli's live today, in the midst of the horror. They feel that something must be done, today rather than tomorrow. For both sides that has increasingly meant a more militant stance, abandoning all expectations of reconciliation and demanding revenge here and now, in the hope that violence will bring some kind of victory, no matter how partial, no matter at what cost. And yet, some people on both sides continue to advocate at least an armistice and at most some form of settlement. The very existence, the sheer visibility

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<sup>4</sup> 'Sharon and Arafat are both cynical leaders. Their consciousnesses were shaped in war and violence, and their actions mirror each other like a carefully choreographed ceremonial dance.' David Grossman, *Death as a way of Life; Israel ten years after Oslo*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 125.

of these peace seekers on either side creates a small space for attempts at reconciliation on the other side (while of course, the concessions and the apologies on one side give 'ammunition to the enemy', one more compulsion inherent in the constellation).

In Europe, the same sense that something must be done, that things have gone on too long and have gone too far, has prompted many and most divergent developments. On the one hand, it has instilled among Jews of the diaspora a renewed feeling of urgency. Most American Jews, and the greater part of European Jews have become more supportive of Israel and Israeli policies. The random bombings of Israeli's who just happened to be in the wrong place are enough to rekindle old anxieties and ancient solidarities. These diaspora Jews feel that Israel is viciously threatened at home and unfairly criticized abroad. The time has come to close ranks, even for those who until now had preferred to keep their distance.

In the same period, the right wing in Israel has gained support. It has at one and the same time politicized the Torah (the 'promised land' as an assigned territory) and mystified the 'holocaust' (into a claim that transcends all secular legality). This is not the Jewish consensus, on the contrary, it is rejected by a majority of Jews, in Israel and in the diaspora. It is, however, enthusiastically supported by the 'reborn' Christians in the US for reasons of their own that do not at all correspond with Jewish beliefs, opinions, or long-term interests.

On the other hand, many Jews and many non-Jews veer in the opposite direction. They have become increasingly critical of present Israeli policy. After all, Israel is a middling economic power in its own right, it is a major military power, the strongest in the Middle East. Israel can crush the Palestinians, who have no territory which they can call their own, who have only stones to throw, makeshift arms to fire and their own bodies to blow up. Israel is in a position to end the present stalemate by making major concessions, abandoning the colonists it has illegally allowed to settle on the West Bank, giving up the territories it unlawfully occupies. But this conciliatory stance, too, is adopted against the inescapable background of the history of European

Jewry, and most importantly, the still vivid past of the annihilation of European Jewry by the Nazi's and their accomplices across the subcontinent. Today, still no one of adult age can speak about Israel, or the Jews, without the words echoing, no matter how faintly, that inexorable history.]

Yet, the annihilation of the European Jews does not validate any moral claim on the Palestinians. If the Shoah indeed entails some political entitlement, it was granted by the United Nations, when, after the Second World War, it weighed that past in granting the Jews a state of their own. There ends the political claim of the Holocaust for Israel. But there does not end the hold of the past on the minds and moods of mature Europeans, Jews or non-Jews, who can not yet rid themselves of those memories.

## **2. Subdued anti-Israeli enthusiasm and anti-anti-Semitism**

Criticism of Israel does not come easy in Europe. There always is an hesitation to be overcome. But once that threshold has been passed, a sudden relief may take over. Then, the accusations follow one another with gusto and zest: an anti-Israeli enthusiasm becomes manifest. The sense of relief that so many Europeans experience when they raise their voice against Israel is not always expressed with such open, such contagious enthusiasm. Most often, it comes out in more circumspect ways.<sup>5</sup>

'Criticism of Israel is a taboo', the interviewee sighs in the tv-studio, quickly glancing over his shoulder, as if the Mossad was already standing in the door. That makes him the lone voice that courageously speaks against an omnipresent censorship imposed by... (yes, by whom? one is left to guess). Criticism of Israel has never ever been a taboo. The Jewish immigration to Palestine was always the subject of vehement

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<sup>5</sup> In what follows I use statements from tv-interviews and newspaper articles by prominent Dutch politicians and authors. For a serious evaluation of the persons who made them, they would have to be put in context, and measured against their biographies. As this is not the point here, and as these remarks are quite common, I omit names and cite them without further contextualization. A reader interested in the history of anti-semitism in the Netherlands might consult Philo Bregstein, 'Le paradoxe Néerlandais' in: Léon Poliakov (dir.) *Histoire de l'Antisémitisme 1945-1993*. Paris: Éds. du Seuil, 1994.



polemics (with Jews on both sides of the line). The foundation of Israel was the subject of bitter and open controversy (equally among Jews), Israeli policies were fought over in public for almost sixty years, in democratic Israel itself and all across the globe. The condemnation of Zionism as racism is official doctrine of the United Nations on the strength of a resolution by the Assembly<sup>6</sup>.

Yet 'Criticism of Israel might be dangerous', another panelist will maintain. So might solidarity with Israel, one could well respond. This is a fierce debate, in which no punches are pulled on either side. Yet, one would like to ask: 'What is the danger?' Is it the world conspiracy at work again? No, not quite. But, some excitable Jews will counter any criticism of Israel with the accusation of anti-Semitism.

This is indeed a miserable reproach, and the fact that most critics of Israel take profound offense at it reveals a common ground with their opponents. Someone who never in his life has expressed an anti-Semitic opinion, who under third degree interrogation would not betray an anti-Jewish thought, does not deserve to be called an anti-Semite. Those Jews who nevertheless try to paste that label on whosoever has to say something against Israel, not only engage in unfair polemics, they also trivialize a denunciation that ought to be reserved for the real Jew-haters. Never cry 'wolf!'.<sup>7</sup>

But then, what may have provoked the accusers so much that they will insult so badly those who voice quite moderate criticism? The critics' posture of civil courage, of pretending to brave a grave danger by criticizing Israel suggests that the vast majority remains silent about Israel, not out of conviction, not even for lack of it, but out of fear. It faintly insinuates that hidden but 'dangerous' powers have subtly intimidated public opinion. Guess who those powers might be.

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<sup>6</sup> 'The [United Nations] General Assembly [...] DETERMINES that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.' Resolution 3379, 10 November 1975. The statement was rescinded in 1991. In an earlier resolution, nr 3151, of 14 December 1953 the General Assembly had already condemned 'the unholy alliance between South African racism and Zionism'.

<sup>7</sup> And of course, anti-Semitism is not all of one cloth. There is the relatively 'innocent' bourgeois anti-Semitism from before Nazism, on one end of the continuum, and on the other, the 'annihilationist' anti-Semitism that supported the physical destruction of the Jews.



‘The Jewish lobby in the USA determines foreign policy, rich Jews dominate the media and shape the climate of opinion.’ This too has become a standard figure of speech, and once again the speaker adopts a daring mien: it had to be said, finally.

It is true, Jews in the US have organized Political Action Committees that operate quite effectively. So did Irish organizations throughout the strife in Northern Ireland, and so do Cubans in America to this very day. One may trust that Saudi-Arabian investors and diplomats are at least as influential, although somewhat less vociferous. That is how American politics functions. ‘Rich Jews...’ (them again): One hardly expects American power wielders to pay heed to poor Jews (although there are quite a few of those).

‘Israel presently is the greatest remaining threat to world peace’.<sup>8</sup> Again, what appears to be a factual assessment expressly ignores the fact that Israeli’s *and* Palestinians (and the Arabs in the surrounding countries) are entangled in a struggle. It is in fact an invitation, hardly concealed, for Israel to discretely remove itself from the face of the earth, so that the Arab world will make peace forever with the West. It remains silent about other countries that threaten world peace, such as North Korea or Iran, or India and Pakistan. Again, there is a faraway, faint and ominous echo: ‘The Jews are the misfortune of mankind.’ (*Die Juden sind unser Unglück*). But that is not at all what was said in fact. It is just what no adult European can fail to hear underneath. All these pronouncements at first hearing seem to contain no more than a measure of hyperbole which is not at all unusual in political discourse. But is the ‘hypobole’, let’s say the subtext, that needs to be deconstructed.

Many of these remarks strangely echo anti-Semitic themes. ‘Nevertheless, it finally must be said.’ It seems as if these voices cannot help but repeat echoes from the past, that still,

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<sup>8</sup> Eurobarometer, the EU polling office, asked respondents for fifteen countries whether or not they considered them ‘a threat to peace in the world’. The largest percentage, 59%, picked Israel. Iran, North Korea, the United States came next with 53% each.

barely audible, resound in their inner ear.<sup>9</sup> Precisely at the moment they feel that they have finally liberated themselves from the deadweight of recent history, they find themselves reproducing it, albeit in a homeopathically diluted version.

Many Jews believe that one word suffices for them to recognize the true anti-Semite behind the veil of decency. They are mistaken. What they hear and what they read is a faint reflection of the same preoccupation that haunts them, albeit much more tragically, also.<sup>10</sup>

Why is it so hard, to this very day, to speak about Israel, to talk about Jews especially, in a realistic, sober and, if necessary, a critical vein? Because the older adults of today grew up with anti-Semitism and with the campaign against it. They learned to watch their words and felt that one wrong turn might give them away. They might or might not have to confront a last residue of anti-Semitism which they would themselves despise. After all, they grew up in the era of feminism, when men learned to watch their words and guard against involuntary, subconscious remnants of sexism. They came of age in the postcolonial epoch of anti-racism and learned that deep down in every white person hides a disdain, even a revulsion of dark people. They grew to despise racism, and to reject every vestige of it, no matter how small, no matter how insignificant. It still might be a tell-tale sign.

For this super-ego is an awesome super-ego. It can read even the most hidden thoughts. It sees everything. One must watch one's words, one's feelings, one's innermost stirrings.

'Have I said something wrong?'. I hope not.

And then, things come out awkwardly, too devious, too tortuous, too shrill. It is, so to say, an overreaction of a

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<sup>9</sup> A telling example: One very visible pro-Palestinian activist in the Netherlands who has continuously decried Israeli misdeeds in the Occupied Territories without ever revealing any sympathy for the Israeli victims of Palestinian attacks, at one point was informed that she had received 6000 signatures of support. She spontaneously reacted: 'Why not six million!'. A huge outcry ensued: Now she finally had betrayed herself for what she was ('six million', of course, is the figure habitually used to denote the number of Jewish victims of the Nazi's). But had she? Yes and no. What she had involuntarily revealed was that for her, as for every mature adult in the Netherlands, the Holocaust was still present, in the back of her mind, on the back of her tongue.

<sup>10</sup> The Yiddishe expression '*rishes*' refers to a disdain for Jews on the part of non-Jews, that these Jews can sense even if the *gojim* are not at all aware of it themselves. Of course, against such a whisper there is no defence at all.

conscious anti-anti-Semite to an unacknowledged residue of anti-Semitism, a vaguely awkward feeling of shame or a remote remnant of guilt, a slight anger at the Jews who are still so troublesome, all of it outshouted in a seemingly factual criticism of Israel that somehow turns sour. This is something very different from anti-Semitism. It is almost its opposite. This entire generation in Europe is still captive to a genocidal past. There is no liberation from that past, except in mourning and reflection.

It is time, high time, for fair, balanced and considerate criticism of Israel and Palestine. But for some, that is not enough. They feel that Israel by doing what it did to the Palestinians has forfeited its place among nations. And yet, no adult, educated European can think of the Shoa and at the same time deny Israel the right to exist. Therefore, in order to refuse Israel a place in the world, somehow the hold of the Shoa must be undone. The bluntest way to break it is to flatly deny that it ever happened.

### **3. Anti-israeli enthusiasm and the invalidation of the Shoa**

The Shoa must be denied. This denial is no longer, if it ever was, the monopoly of the lunatic right. Most of the negationists, who reject the factual truth of the annihilation camps now come from the Left, and often (as in the case of Roger Garaudy), Israel's existence is the very reason for their denial: Israel has seized the land that belonged to poor and defenseless peasants, it has worked itself up into a position of economic and military power, all the while claiming that the Shoa entitled it to do so. Therefore, if the Shoa never happened, Israel has no right whatsoever. If the Shoa can be denied, Israel can be denied its claims to legitimacy. The negationists contend that the Shoa never happened and accordingly Israel must be undone. This factual denial of the historical truth of the Shoa is

reserved to a criminally insane fringe of European politics and a rather broad swathe of Arab opinion.<sup>11</sup>

But the Shoa need not be denied as a historical fact, it may be invalidated as a moral truth. That has become the customary stance of the European right initially, and increasingly of the *bien pensants* on the European left. The French National Socialist, Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the Front National, who at some point attracted twenty percent of the national vote, took an intermediary position: the Shoa was a fact, but a fact of no consequence, '*un detail de l'histoire*'. It need not even be denied, it could just be ignored.

Very often these days, authors respectable in every other sense, admit and stress the facticity of the Holocaust, but deny its continuing moral relevance. An early, influential voice to speak in this vein was Gilles Deleuze's:

'The conquerors were those who had themselves suffered the greatest genocide in history. Of this genocide the Zionists have made an *absolute evil*. But transforming the greatest genocide in history into an absolute evil is a religious and mystical vision, not a historical vision. It does not stop the evil; on the contrary, it spreads the evil, it makes it fall once again on other innocents, demands reparation that makes others suffer part of what the Jews suffered (expulsion, restriction to ghettos, disappearance as a people). With "colder" means than genocide, one ends up with the same results.'<sup>12</sup>

The poison is in the tail: are the results indeed the same? Have Palestinians been exterminated by the millions, coldly or hotly? No, not at all. Thousands have been killed, many of them unarmed, defenseless civilians. All of them have been oppressed, and in a despicable manner. But Deleuze, using

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. the report by Melanie Phillips, 'The new anti-Semitism' in *The Spectator*, 22 March 2003; also Harold Evans, 'The anti-Semitic lies that threaten all of us' *The Times of London*, 28 June 2002 (French transl.: 'Les mensonges antisémites qui nous menacent tous' on [irl@club-internet.fr](mailto:irl@club-internet.fr)).

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'The Grandeur of Yasser Arafat', *Discourse*, Fall 1988, pp. 30-33. The author's italics. This is a translation of 'La grandeur d'Arafat', which originally appeared in 'Etudes Palestiniennes' Septembre 1983.

exaggeration as a rhetorical device, accomplishes two insidious maneuvers in one stroke: first, by ascribing one highly sectarian vision to 'the Zionists' in general (the term was still used by the Communists to denote Jews at the time Deleuze wrote this). And it is the fault of the Jews that the Shoa has lost its moral meaning. Secondly, Deleuze succeeds in equating the Zionists (and that means Israel) with the Nazi's, since they perpetrate a 'cold' genocide. Whatever that may mean, it 'ends up with the same result'.

Deleuze has divested the Shoa of its remaining moral relevance. Next, its victims, the Jews have been denounced as Nazi's themselves, Israel now is the new *Third Reich*, and the Israeli repression amounts to the extermination of the Palestinians. This is disproportionate, to say the least.

Was Deleuze an anti-Semite? I have no reason to think so. Then what inspires his argument? (And what prompts the American editors of *Discourse* to reprint his tirade five years later, under the same title which by then had already become laughable...). Deleuze obviously was outraged. Not without reason. He wrote not too long after the mass killings in the Palestinian refugee camps of Shabra and Shatila (he never mentions that the actual massacre was perpetrated by Christian militias, not by Israeli soldiers, who – unforgivably – stood by and allowed it to happen, under the responsibility of their chief, Ariel Sharon, who was relieved of his command by an Israeli court for that very fact). Enraged, Deleuze decided to vent his anger and show his solidarity by writing for the newly established journal of Palestinian studies. But still, something withheld him, some hesitation was still to be overcome. The weight of all those dead, those murdered Jews. And, indeed, he could free himself from that last obstacle. The Zionists, that is the Jews themselves, had lifted that burden from him. The Jews had invalidated the Holocaust, they themselves had become genocidal exterminators. Gilles Deleuze had finally freed himself of an obsession, and his sympathetic readers were liberated with him. Deleuze could be passionate and relieved at

the same time: he had found an enthusiasm, an anti-Israeli enthusiasm.

Think of the relief that can dispose of so much guilt. But in order to sustain such distortion, such hyperbole, one must maintain the excitement, the feverishly righteous indignation, the anti-Israeli enthusiasm.

According to the enthusiasts, it is the fault of the Jews that the suffering of the victims and the survivors has been robbed of its moral meaning. This can be taken further one perverse turn of the screw. The Portuguese author and Nobel laureate, José Saramago, evokes the victims of Auschwitz and Sobibor, who would blame their descendants if only they would have lived to see their misdeeds:

‘I wonder whether those Jews who died in the concentration camps, those who were persecuted in the course of history, those who died in the pogroms, those who remained forgotten in the ghettos, I wonder if this immense multitude of unfortunates would not feel ashamed at the sight of the infamous acts that their descendants are committing.’<sup>13</sup>

Saramago, whose good Jews are dead Jews, may not have intended this reading of his text, he may not even have imagined it. Yet, there seems to be an abyss between his post-

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<sup>13</sup> The Spanish author and Nobel prize winner José Saramago in *El País* of 21 April, 2002, [saramago.iespana.es/saramago/elpais6.htm.] transl. AdS. The Spanish quotation reads: ‘Me pregunto si aquellos judíos que murieron en los campos de concentración nazis, aquellos que fueron perseguidos a lo largo de la historia, aquellos que murieron en los pogromos, aquellos que quedaron olvidados en los guetos, me pregunto si esa inmensa multitud de desgraciados no sentiría vergüenza al ver los actos infames que están cometiendo sus descendientes.’ saramago.iespana.es/saramago/elpais6.htm. The argument is not only perverse, it is also factually unlikely. The remaining survivors of the Nazi annihilation are to be found on all sides of the issue. There lurks another misconception underneath: suffering, especially prolonged and intense suffering, tends to morally elevate the victims. The Jews by their aggressive, i.e. immoral, behaviour have shown themselves unworthy of their own suffering. It has truly been in vain. They should not even evoke it: ‘[...] the Jews incessantly scratch their own wound so that it won’t stop bleeding, so as to make it incurable, and they show it to the world as if it were a flag [...] Israel wants all of us to feel guilty, directly or indirectly, of the horrors of the Holocaust [...] and to become a docile echo of its will [...]’ And so on. The Spanish text follows: ‘[...] los judíos arañan sin cesar su propia herida para que no deje de sangrar, para hacerla incurable, y la muestran al mundo como si tratase de una bandera [...] Israel quiere que todos nosotros nos sintamos culpables, directa o indirectamente, de los horrores del Holocausto [...] y nos transformemos en un eco dócil de su voluntad.’

Christian, ex-Communist sensibility and that of the Jews who happen to be survivors, or descendants of his good Jews.

Is the theme of the Shoa sacrosanct? No, of course not, but if he really was wondering that much, he could have posed the more pertinent question: 'Why do you, whose parents have suffered so much, now inflict suffering on others?' And the answer might be: 'We inflict it precisely so that we never shall have to suffer the way our parents did.' And, just for the record, the descendants' 'infamous acts' are still very, very far removed from the total annihilation of the Jews by the Nazi's.

Saramago, very ingenuously, turns the Shoa against its own victims. His are passionate statements, inspired by indignation and a sense of justice. They are also immoderate, skewed, contorted and distorting. Jews might well respond by calling them anti-Semitic. But are they? Are they inspired by a hatred of Jews, not for what single Jews have done, say or believe, but for all Jews indiscriminately, not for what they say, nor for what they do, but for what they are? In other words, do they betray a hatred of the essence of Jewishness. I am not aware that Saramago ever owed up to such sentiments. I'd be surprised. It is so vulgar, so... illiterate, so terribly 'has been'.

Some Jews will insist, Saramago may not know it, he may be unaware of it, but he still is an anti-Semite, unconsciously that is. This is a mean stratagem. There is no defense possible against the accusation, or rather the insinuation, the innuendo, of unconscious anti-Semitism, or unconscious anything for that matter. Nevertheless, it might still be true. But I think the matter of anti-Semitism does not really enter here. Just from reading the article, and this particular passage, what transpires is a passionate, an enthusiastic attack upon Israel and all the Jews that belong to it or defend it. It is, clearly, an advanced case of anti-Israeli enthusiasm.<sup>14</sup>

According to the enthusiasts, if there is any moral meaning left in the holocaust, it should be turned against Israel itself.

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<sup>14</sup> In his *Portrait d'un antisémite (Réflexions sur la question juive)*, Paris, 1946 Jean-Paul Sartre qualifies anti-Semitism not as an opinion, but as a 'passion': 'D'ailleurs c'est bien autre chose qu'une opinion, c'est une passion.' p. 10). That is what it has in common with anti-Israeli enthusiasm.



‘When Hitler destroyed the Jewish people, there was no television, people did not know what was going on, people found out after 1945, and now we are seeing this annihilation daily... They are doing what Hitler did to the Jewish people in the Second World War, they are deliberately annihilating (sic) a people, the Palestinian people... ‘

This is not the voice of a great literary orator, such as Deleuze or Saramago, it is a quote from the internet correspondence about a boycott of Israeli academics. Once again, what is striking is the tone of sincere indignation and at the same time the feverish exaggeration. In fact, the Israeli government is not doing to the Palestinian nation what Hitler did to the Jewish people and the author must be aware of it. There is no question of deliberately annihilating the Palestinians. Then why say so in an exchange in which every correspondent surely knows it is untrue? There is a cue: ‘When Hitler destroyed the Jewish people, there was no television, people did not know...’ Did they not? The deportations were there for all to see, no bystander doubted that the destination was dismal, although few indeed realized that they spelled literal extermination. Could there be a remnant of guilt about the passivity of those people without television who did not know. There might be: ‘Do we really want to face our children twenty years from now asking and demanding from us how such a thing could happen? No I don’t want that...’ Did the correspondent once have to confront his parents with such questions? In that case, the present exaggeration would bring twofold relief: this time he will not be a passive witness of evil as the contemporaries of his parents were. And if his parents ever failed the Jews, and if he felt the blame for sixty years, now the accusation may be returned. It is the Israeli government that is as bad as the *Third Reich*.<sup>15</sup> After all, the Jews who have for more than half a century

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<sup>15</sup> It should be mentioned that the author does not talk about Jews, or Israeli’s but about the Sharon government, which ‘does not represent the Israeli people.’

reproached the gentiles in Europe for abandoning them (if not actually murdering them), now turn out to harbor in their ranks criminals as bad as the Nazi's. The Jews are no better than the rest. We have been misled in feeling so guilty about them. After all those obligatory history lessons, all those holocaust-documentaries, the annually returning memorial services, the succeeding reparation payments, the Jews turn out to be just the same kind of bastards as we are, only worse. One can again breathe freely, finally.

One must have grown up in Germany or the Netherlands (I am not so sure about France or Britain) and have gone through the well-meaning and unsparingly moralizing holocaust education in the schools and the media to understand how heavily it weighed upon young minds. It is this moral burden that can now be thrown off and hurled at the Jews: 'We are not guilty. They – the alleged victims of the past are the true perpetrators of today.' Relief is at hand. If the Jews ever deserved it, they now have forfeited their moral claim.

Things presently are bad enough in the occupied territories without coming anywhere near the Holocaust. The vast hyperbole serves emotional needs. It also enrages most Jews who get to read it: the Shoa is theirs, no one else can touch it and use it for his own purposes. Turning it against the Jews themselves is the utmost blasphemy. They see it as the certain proof of undiluted, slanderous anti-Semitism. But it is not, it is a newly found political enthusiasm, an anti-Israeli enthusiasm. And from the looks of it, it must feel very good.

It is not hard, it is uncannily easy to find this kind of citations. There is something mechanical about them: Bush = Sharon = Hitler. Jews are Nazi's. Israel equals the *Third Reich*. That is already bad enough, it is very bad. It gets much worse when these mechanic, Manichean reflexes pass for reflection.

#### **[4. A reality of mutually reinforcing anxieties**

It is true, in some factions of the Likud party and in the splinter parties to its right a poisonous brew of Zionism and Orthodoxy

has been concocted, containing all the ingredients of inborn superiority, divine mission, the conquest of living space, the elimination of alien elements, etcetera.<sup>16</sup> Sharon may not share these delusions, but he certainly is not above exploiting them whenever it suits his purpose. His past does not offer much reassurance on this score.

On the other side, Arab governments and the media in most Arab countries are vituperously anti-Israel. Demagogues threaten the destruction of the 'Zionist entity' and the extermination of the Jews. Among the Palestinian resistance groups, too, fanatics promise to annihilate Israel and 'drive the Jews into the sea.' The point, here, is not to compare and weigh the evils on both sides, but to demonstrate how fanaticism on one side serves to justify and provoke extremism on the other. The Arab threats of annihilation help to persuade the Israeli electorate that 'no peace will ever be possible', and that a Palestinian state is certain to be used as a base for an attack against Israel. Against such a murderous enemy only extreme oppression will do, just as the ideologues on the right have been preaching all along. But the ravings of the extreme Orthodox-Zionists in turn add to the conviction of many Palestinians that one day they may be ousted from the territories, if not exterminated outright on the spot. Therefore, only the complete destruction of Israel will ensure their safety. And so on... Those are the mutually reinforcing effects of negative expectations. The point is not that the two sides are equally bad, but that they make each other worse.

The extremist views are not shared by the majority of Israeli Jews, nor of those in the diaspora. They are not part of the official policy of the present government. In fact, Israeli Arabs are full-fledge citizens in almost every legal respect (they do not serve in the army). In an economic and social sense they are

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<sup>16</sup> 'By 2002 it was possible to hear language within the right wing of the Likud Party and some of the small religious parties that comes close to a functional equivalent to fascism. The chosen people begins to sound like a Master Race that claims a unique "mission in the world", demands its "vital space," demonises an enemy that obstructs the realization of the people's destiny, and accepts the necessity of force to obtain these ends.' ( Robert Paxton, *The anatomy of fascism* . London: Allan Lane, 2004, p. 204

disadvantaged, much like, say, Moroccans in France or the Netherlands. Israel is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual country. It defines itself, indeed, as a Jewish state, just as the two dozen other states in the region define themselves as 'Arabic' or 'Islamic' republics or kingdoms, as the case may be. However, Israel has continued to occupy the territories conquered in the six-day war of 1967. Since then it has proclaimed a 'land for peace' policy, suggesting that it would relinquish its conquests in exchange for peace treaties. In the meantime, it has condoned, encouraged and facilitated the creation of dozens of settlements that now house hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews. This is illegal, it is a blatant provocation and it flies in the face of every attempt to create a viable Palestinian state in the area. What is worse, the occupation of the territories and the suppression of the resistance it has engendered among the Palestinians who live there, has gradually perverted Israel's administration and army, from democratic institutions under the rule of law into an impenetrable machinery of oppression. The occupation of the West bank has deeply harmed Israel.<sup>17</sup>

Israel's Arab neighbors – with or without formal peace treaties – have remained as hostile as ever. The PLO rejected the Camp David accords, Arafat proclaimed another Intifada, suicide commando's unleashed a succession of lethal attacks on Israeli civilians. All these external circumstances go far to explain Israeli occupation policies. But not far enough.

Palestinians and Israeli's are afraid of each other. Israeli's see themselves surrounded by hundreds of millions of implacable Arabs, manipulated by their despotic regimes. They live in fear of suicide attacks and armed assaults by Palestinian militias. They might be willing to vote for a more conciliatory regime if they believed that it could improve their security. At present, time and again, they too are manipulated into voting for ever more aggressive leaders.

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<sup>17</sup> For the record: As the Six Day War broke out in June 1967, I registered in the U.S. as a volunteer for Israel. Luckily the war was over before I ever got there. I since have supported the surrender of the occupied lands, and I have done so ever since.

The Palestinians are in no position to vote. They are oppressed and humiliated by the Israeli occupation forces, and risk being killed, if not intentionally, then as 'collateral damage' during actions against armed militants. They are also scandalously exploited by the corrupt Palestinian authority and harassed or maltreated by bands of armed thugs posing as resistance fighters.<sup>18</sup> In fact, they get it from all sides. In their rage the Palestinians applaud the suicide attacks and armed assaults; in their despair they realize that such violence serves only to perpetuate or worsen the present predicament. Each time when the one or the other side is about to make a conciliatory gesture, the war party on the other side will commit some outrageous act of aggression bound to enrage the opposing side. When, recently, I visited Israel, the Likud rank and file was about to vote on the proposal to withdraw from Gaza. On the eve of the referendum, Palestinian gunmen killed a pregnant Israeli settler with three of her children. The next afternoon the Likud membership voted against the proposal by a 10% margin. Most likely, that wanton murder did much to sway the vote against withdrawal. In fact, it may have helped to free Sharon from a quandary, allowing him to appear conciliatory without having to make preparations for the very controversial retreat. Whenever, on the other hand, the Palestinians are about to agree on a cessation of violent attacks, as sure as night follows day, Israel will launch a provocative action against a pocket of resistance in the territories. In the ensuing wave of indignation, the militias are spared the quandary of a cease-fire that might make them appear superfluous. The war factions on both sides operate as if they were coordinated by some hidden hand. But they do not even need coordination. Tacit collusion is enough. They act upon each other's silent cues. No matter how unequal the balance of forces, no matter how different the interests and ideals that are at stake, there is a hidden reciprocity between the two war factions, which allows either side to hold on to its

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<sup>18</sup> See also the most enlightening report by Ben Cramer, *How Israel lost: the four questions*. New York etc.: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

position. They are part of an encompassing, mutually compelling constellation. Both sides are caught in an inexorable dialectics of escalation.]

## **5. Anti-israeli enthusiasm as anti-imperialism**

For fifty years the European and American Left has supported every liberation movement that fought a western, colonial occupier. Time and again the freedom fighters won their struggle, each time the Left came out vicariously victorious (and always willing to condone the oppression and the violence of the post-colonial regimes). Finally South Africa's Apartheid regime crumbled and the ANC took power. Now, there was only one stronghold of colonial oppression left in the world: Israel.

For younger generations the Holocaust no longer serves as the epitome of evil. Their formative experience was the battle against Apartheid. And the South African precedent completely shapes their perception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Are not the occupied territories like the homelands in South Africa, Bantustans? Had not the United Nations Assembly declared that 'Zionism is racism', just like the white supremacy doctrine that underlies Apartheid. So, is n't there one more righteous struggle left to be fought, against racism, colonialism, imperialism, in one word, against Israel?

There are many disturbing similarities between Israel with its occupied territories and Apartheid South Africa with its Bantustans. The undeniable oppression of the Palestinians compares with that of the Blacks and Coloured in South Africa's recent past. But mainstream Zionism is not a racist ideology (but rather a somewhat old-fashioned nationalist creed with religious overtones) not unlike the nationalist enthusiasm one finds in today's Poland or Hungary. It has, however, been perverted in some extremist circles into a racist and a fascist doctrine. Unlike the Apartheid system, the Israeli economy is not based upon the exploitation of Palestinian labor, but on the contrary, on its exclusion. In contrast with Apartheid, a million

Israeli Arabs live with full political and civil rights in Israel. The African National Congress did not resort to systematic terrorism against civilians, as opposed to Hamas and the Al Aksha brigades. Unlike South Africa, Israel has no official ideology of racist discrimination and oppression, repressive practices are still justified in pragmatic terms as unavoidable necessities in maintaining control of the occupied territories in the face of continual terrorist attacks. But a perverted version of Orthodox Zionism may yet be mobilized to legitimate continuing separation and oppression of the Palestinian population. In the same vein, Palestinian resistance so far has mainly been nationalist and liberationist, but in the confrontation with Orthodox Zionist zealotry Palestinians have veered more and more towards a fundamentalist mixture of Islamism and nationalism, directed at the complete elimination of Israel.

In other words, Israeli's are still very much divided about these issues and so are Palestinians. As the conflict escalates extreme factions gain support, fan the flames of struggle, and drive the opposing side into increasingly extreme positions. Here, again, the interactions within the constellation follow their own destructive dynamics.

As matters stand, Israel is not South Africa, or more precisely, and more ominously, it is *not yet* South Africa. And it also is, at present, very far removed from a dramatic reconciliation in the manner of Mandela and De Klerk.

For the new left of altermondialists and 'tiermondistes', there is no nuance, no doubt. Israel is the last colony to be overthrown, the Jews of Israel the last colonizers to be defeated. Israel's very existence is the main cause of division in the world. It is the first protégé of the USA and its most reliable errand boy. It is the spearhead of imperialism in the Arab world. Jews in the diaspora constitute a worldwide network of support and protection for Israel, using their influence and money to bend national policies in favor of their homeland.

The Star of David equals the Swastika. Rabbis shout *Sieg Heil*. The fat capitalist with the crooked nose and the dollar signs in his eyes has reappeared: in Arab cartoons and on



alternative websites.<sup>19</sup> These rudimentary equations are perfectly congruous with the conspiratorial paranoia of classical anti-Semitism. The raw material is easily available, in libraries and archives, to be recycled as anti-Zionist polemics.<sup>20</sup> Everything falls neatly into place. But in its simplification and exaggeration, the resulting picture strangely resembles the old myth of the Zionist world conspiracy.

Are the new activists anti-Semites? They don't think so. Anti-Semitism is a thing of the past, a preoccupation of their parents' generation. They are exempt of the guilt and the shame of recent history, for being young, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and, above all, anti-fascist. How could they be anti-Semites? They have nothing against Jews, frankly they do not care much about Jews one way or another, they just hate capitalist, imperialist and fascist Jews.

And how could the young Maghrébins who join their demonstrations in small bands, wearing masks and waving Palestinian flags ever be anti-Semites? They are after all Semites themselves, they belong to the oppressed of the world, they have no part whatsoever in the guilty European past. If anything, they are the new victims of today's Europe. If they assault someone who appears Jewish to them, it is in a wave of anti-Israeli enthusiasm, a spontaneous urge to finally confront a visible, palpable opponent who temporarily embodies the abstract, remote system of global Zionist oppression.

In the end, there is in this complicated, unfathomable world one object that lends itself to undiluted, righteous indignation: Israel with all its accomplices. Once again, there is an occasion for enthusiasm, anti-Israeli enthusiasm. And once more, it brings great relief, it is liberating in itself.

In order to keep up the enthusiasm, much must be ignored, passed over in silence and oblivion. There is not a

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<sup>19</sup> For a quite uncanny collection of anti-Israeli cartoons in the Arab and Western press, cf. Joël and Dan Kotek, *Au Nom de l'antisionisme; L'image des Juifs et d'Israël dans la caricature depuis la seconde Intifada*. Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Klug 'The myth of the new anti-Semitism' *The Nation*, February 2, 2004, reviews books signalling a resurgence of anti-Semitism by Abraham Foxman, Alan Dershowits, Phyllis Chesler and a volume edited by Paul Iganski and Barry Kosman. Klug, however, presents arguments to qualify these recent currents not as anti-Semitic but rather as anti-Zionist in most cases by far. For a thoughtful consideration of these matters, Edgar Morin, 'Antisémitisme, antijudaïsme, anti-israélisme' *Le Monde*, 19 Februari 2004.

single democratic, progressive government in the Arab world. Muslim governments from Libya to Irak, from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia have oppressed their citizens by the millions and massacred them by the thousands, for being political opponents, or just for belonging to a different tribe or creed.

Almost nothing is produced in the Arab world, only oil is pumped up and exported; the revenues disappear in foreign bank accounts, held by a small coterie of princes and courtiers. All those countries are vehemently anti-Israeli, but, sadly, that has not made them actively pro-Palestinian.

In the Leftist imagination, no crime, no cruelty counts unless it is committed by a white Westerner.<sup>21</sup> Iran, Zimbabwe, Nyanmar, somehow these governments can not awaken the enthusiasm of the Left (the Right could not care less in the first place). Not even the atrocities that militias supported by the Sudanese government are committing against civilians in the province of Darfur can awaken that spark of zealous, righteous indignation. The 30-year occupation of Lebanon by Syria has not provoked any protest, except there where it is immediately and cruelly oppressed: in Lebanon itself.

What can explain this indifference, this complete callousness in the face of countless atrocities and omnipresent corruption? The new Left is in more ways than it wishes to acknowledge the heir of the old, twentieth century Left. For Communists and Socialists the history of colonial liberation was the triumphant march of human emancipation, in which they walked side by side with the freedom fighters from victory to victory. What happened after the defeat of the colonial occupiers was not really their responsibility, it was due to enduring poverty and ignorance, it was the result of intrigue and interference by the imperialist powers, or it was simply ignored and passed over in silence. It might have dampened the

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<sup>21</sup> 'The moral paralysis of the left, when it comes to non-western tyrants, may also have a more sinister explanation. The Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit calls it moral racism. When Indians kill Muslims, or Africans kill Africans, or Arabs kill Arabs, western pundits pretend not to notice, or find historical explanations, or blame the scars of colonialism. But if white men, whether they are Americans, Europeans, South Africans or Israelis harm people of colour, hell is raised. [...] there is a disproportion, which suggests that non-western people cannot be held to the same moral standards as us [...] But this would be a rather racist view of world affairs.' Ian Buruma, 'Wielding the moral club' *Financial Times*, September 11, 2003.

exhilarating enthusiasm of living on the right side of history. Today, such misgivings might spoil the anti-Israeli enthusiasm by admitting that there are other evildoers in the present world. Even worse, it might force the anti-Israeli enthusiasts to admit that Israel is surrounded by profoundly reactionary and corrupt dictatorships that foment hatred against the Jewish state so as to divert their population from criticism of their own regimes. It might force the new enthusiasts to recognize that Israel is indeed in danger: It rides a tiger. If Israel were to step down, it might be devoured.

The task at hand is not one of partisan enthusiasm, it is much more modest and restrained. The task is to help the battling parties, unequal as they are, to deescalate, to dampen their rage and their fear, to reign in the fanatics on their own side, to defanaticize themselves, and create opportunities for the moderates on the other side. Israeli's and Palestinians may have gone too far to be able to bring this about without outside support. The United States has thrown away its honest broker's role. The Arab states have never even feigned impartiality. The European Union has not yet begun to mediate between the warring sides. And yet, in its past, Europe must find the motives and the means to help bring peace to today's Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> A passionate plea for outside intervention towards a peace process : Amos Oz, *Aidez-nous à divorcer! Israël Palestine: deux États maintenant*. Paris : Gallimard, 2003. Cf. also David Grossman, 'International Intervention, Please' in *op. cit.*, pp. 127-130.