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# The Grandeur of Yasser Arafat

Gilles Deleuze

The Palestinian cause is first and foremost the set of injustices that these people have suffered and continue to suffer. These injustices are acts of violence, but also illogicalities, false reasonings, false guarantees that claim to compensate or vindicate them. Arafat needed only one word to describe the broken promises, the violated agreements, at the moment of the Sabra and Shatila massacres: *shame, shame*.<sup>1</sup>

It's said that this is not a genocide. And yet it's a story that consists of many Oradours, from the very beginning.<sup>2</sup> Zionist terrorism was practiced not solely against the English, but on the Arab villages which had to disappear; Irgoun was very active in this respect (Deir Yasin).<sup>3</sup> From beginning to end, it involved acting as if the Palestinian people not only must not exist, but had never existed.

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 doesn't stop the evil; on the contrary, it spreads the evil, makes it fall once again on other innocents, demands reparation that makes these 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 result.

The United States and Europe owed reparation to the Jews. And they made a people, about whom the least that could be said

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is that they had no hand in and were singularly innocent of any holocaust and hadn't even heard of it, pay this reparation. It's there that the grotesque begins, as well as the violence. Zionism, then the state of Israel will demand that the Palestinians recognize its right (*droit*). But the state of Israel will never stop denying the very fact of a Palestinian people. They will never speak of Palestinians but of the Arabs of Palestine, as if they found themselves there by chance or in error. And later, they will act as if the expelled Palestinians came from outside, they will not speak of the first war of resistance that the Palestinians led all alone. Since they haven't recognized Israel's right, they will be made into descendants of Hitler. But Israel reserves the right to deny their existence in fact. Here begins a fiction that had to stretch further and further, and to weigh on all those who defended the Palestinian cause. This fiction, this wager of Israel's, was to make all those who would contest the *de facto* conditions and actions of the Zionist state appear as anti-Semites. This operation finds its source in Israel's cold politics with respect to the Palestinians.

From the start, Israel has never concealed its goal: to empty the Palestinian territory. And even better, to act as if the Palestinian territory were empty, always destined for the Zionists. It was clearly a matter of colonization, but not in the nineteenth-century European sense: the local inhabitants would not be exploited, they would be made to leave. Those who remained would be made, not into a dependent territorial workforce, but rather into a mobile and detached workforce, as if they were immigrants placed in a ghetto. From the start, lands are bought on the condition that they be empty of occupants, or can be emptied. It's a genocide, but one in which physical extermination remains subordinated to geographical evacuation: being only Arabs in general, the surviving Palestinians must go merge with the other Arabs. Physical extermination, though it may or may not be entrusted to mercenaries, is most certainly present. But this isn't a genocide, they say, since it's not the "final goal": in reality, it's just one means among others.

The complicity of the United States with Israel does not arise solely from the Zionist lobby. Elias Sanbar has shown clearly how the United States rediscovered in Israel an aspect of its own history: the extermination of the Indians which, there as well, was only in part directly physical. It was a matter of emptying, as if there had never been Indians except in the ghettos which were made for them as immigrants from inside. In many respects, the Palestinians are the new Indians, the Indians of Israel. Marxist analysis reveals the two complementary movements of capitalism: constantly to impose limits, within which it develops and exploits its own system; and

always to push these limits farther back, to exceed them in order to begin its own foundation once again on a larger and more intense scale. Pushing back limits was the act of American capitalism, the American Dream, taken up by Israel and the dream of Greater Israel on Arab territory, on the backs of the Arabs.

How the Palestinian people learned to resist and are resisting; how a people of ancient lineage became an armed nation; how they gave themselves a body which didn't simply represent them but embodied them, outside their territory and without a state: all these events demanded a great historical character, one who, we might say from a Western point of view, could have stepped out of Shakespeare, and that was Arafat. It wasn't the first time in history that something like this has happened (the French can think of Free France, except for the fact that it had a smaller popular base at the beginning). And all the occasions on which a solution or element of solution was possible, occasions that the Israelis have deliberately, knowingly destroyed, are not happening for the first time in history either. The Israelis held onto their religious position of denying not only the Palestinian right but also the Palestinian fact. They cleansed themselves of their own terrorism by treating the Palestinians as terrorists from outside. And precisely because the Palestinians were not that, but rather were a specific people as different from other Arabs as Europeans can be among themselves, they could expect only ambiguous aid from the Arab states themselves, aid which sometimes turned back into hostility and extermination when the Palestinian model became dangerous for them. The Palestinians have run through all the infernal cycles of history: the failure of solutions each time they were possible, the worst reversals of alliance of which they bore the brunt, the most solemn promises not kept. And on all this their resistance had to nourish itself.

It may well be that one of the goals of the Sabra and Shatila massacres was to discredit Arafat. He only consented to the departure of the combatants, the force of which remained intact, on condition that the security of their families be absolutely guaranteed by the United States and even by Israel. After the massacres he had no other word than "shame." If the ensuing crisis for the PLO resulted, in more or less the long term, either in an integration into an Arab state or in a dissolution into Muslim fundamentalism, then it could be said that the Palestinian people had effectively disappeared. But this would be in such conditions that the world, the United States and even Israel would not finish regretting the lost occasions, including those that still remain possible today. To Israel's arrogant formula, "We are not a people like others," the Palestinians have not stopped responding with the cry that was invoked in the first

issue of the *Revue d'études palestiniennes*: "we are a people like others, we only want to be that . . . ."

By leading the terrorist war in Lebanon, Israel believed it could suppress the PLO and deprive it of the support of the Palestinian people, already deprived of their land. And perhaps it is succeeding, since in surrounded Tripoli there is nothing more than the physical presence of Arafat among his own, all in a sort of solitary grandeur. But the Palestinian people will not lose their identity without creating in its place a double terrorism, of the state and of religion, which will profit from their disappearance and render impossible any peaceful settlement with Israel. From the war in Lebanon Israel itself will not escape merely morally divided and economically disorganized, it will find itself faced with the mirror image of its own intolerance. A political solution, a peaceful settlement is possible only with an independent PLO which will not have disappeared into an already existing state and will not be lost among the diverse Islamic movements. The disappearance of the PLO would only be a victory for the blind forces of war, indifferent to the survival of the Palestinian people.

Translated by Timothy S. Murphy  
(originally published in *Revue d'études palestiniennes*,  
September 1983)

#### Translator's Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sabra and Shatila massacres: 1982 massacres of Palestinians at refugee camps in Lebanon, carried out by Lebanese Phalangists aided by the Israeli army.

<sup>2</sup> Oradour: French village destroyed by Nazi occupation troops in retaliation for Resistance activity shortly after the start of the D-Day invasion.

<sup>3</sup> Irgoun: right-wing Zionist organization that used terrorist tactics against British forces and others in postwar Palestine.