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From memory to policy

Most of the time, the discourse around the Gaza war has less to do with real Palestinians and Israelis and more with how we see the past

A bloodbath is taking place in the Middle East, and yet, the world is embroiled in absurd debates. One is tempted to say, paraphrasing Marx: here the tragedy, there the farce. The German-speaking world – and Germany in particular – takes a decidedly pro-Israeli stance, while in other societies, an equally dubious anti-Israeli position prevails.

At the beginning of October, Hamas and other Islamist groups not only launched an attack from the Gaza strip but also carried out a cruel massacre. Over 1 200 people were killed, most of them civilians, young party people, including many peace activists: the majority of the inhabitants of the affected *kibbutzim* belonged to the Israeli left. Horrific war crimes were committed, which cannot be justified as 'collateral damage' of legitimate resistance. Nor can we ignore the fanatical ideology of radical Islamism, which eliminates empathy and justifies acts of bloodshed.

However, due to the bloody history of at least 75 years of conflict and the recent history of occupation policies and the irresponsible escalation strategies of Benjamin Netanyahu's radical right-wing governments, the attack met much approval within the Palestinian population. Fatah and the Palestinian Authority have been weakened for years, and their support is dwindling.

Rights and obligations

The Israeli government responded with massive military action and retaliatory strikes. This, on the one hand, was to be expected – no nation in the world could not have reacted to such an attack – but, on the other hand, the war immediately escalated in a horrific manner, which was, unfortunately, also to be expected. Around 27 000 people have now lost their lives in Gaza. Entire families have been wiped out by the bombardments.

Under international law, Israel has the right to respond to such an attack, but every country also has the duty to act 'proportionately'. What is proportionate – in relation to threats or to defined, legitimate war aims – is a complicated legal debate. But it is largely undisputed that the shrugging acceptance of tens of thousands of civilian casualties cannot be justified, even in the fight against a 'terrorist' organisation. And excessive force that literally razes Gaza to the ground, which destroys the livelihoods of the civilian population, the supply of food and the medical-care system, is itself a war crime.

Put quite simply: to a bestial war crime by Hamas, Israel has itself responded with war crimes. And the matter is made worse by the fact that leading members of Israel's government have engaged in appalling rhetoric, from Manichean religious-war language to vile fantasies of mass expulsions and 'ethnic cleansing'.

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Just as the history of the conflict has for decades provided both sides with arguments for viewing the other as the perpetrator and their own side only as the victim, the same has been true in these recent months. Palestinian figures see Hamas' actions as a justified reaction to oppression, while their Israeli counterparts see excessive (and criminal) military action as a legitimate response to terror.

Yet, that is precisely the problem. Those who paint a Manichean, black-and-white picture fall far short of the terrible complexities of this conflict. There are horrible pogroms in the West Bank by right-wing extremist settlers and members of the army, and violent expulsions of Palestinians and an expropriation of their land. And there are terrible acts of violence involving unspeakable cruelty by Palestinian militias.

But the world is increasingly sorting itself into vocal supporter groups of fans and followers. In many societies, this is obviously about their own history and identity. To be more precise: a complex reality is being accommodated to the apparent requirements of their domestic politics of remembrance — and if it doesn't fit, it is being made to.

Manipulation strategies

Germany and Austria have adopted a decidedly pro-Israeli position. First, this can be explained by their own history, the fatal past of genocidal anti-Semitism which escalated under the Nazi regime into the Shoah against European Jews.

This is why Germany has been an ally of Israel for decades: the former chancellor, Angela Merkel, declared it an important element of the German *Staatsräson* (reason of state). This is why there is, properly, a strong sensitivity in Germany towards anti-Semitism and the threat to Jews and why the identity of Israel as a safe 'home' for all Jews is supported. The extreme right in both Germany and Austria supports Israel today, on the one hand because Israel's opponents are Muslims (whom it hates even more than contemporary Jews) and on the other because this is the best way to immunise itself against the accusation of being 'Nazi'.

In addition, however, the Israeli right – above all the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and his party, in alliance with right-wing Jewish lobby groups abroad – has sought in recent decades to denounce almost any criticism of Israeli policy as 'anti-Semitic' and thus morally eliminate it. In German-speaking countries and some other societies with a very well-founded sense of guilt, this manipulation strategy has worked: nobody wants to expose themselves to the suspicion of being seen as a person with morally reprehensible opinions — in other words, as an anti-Semite.

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Susan Neiman, a Jewish-German-American intellectual who is director of the Berlin Einstein Centre, recently wrote a major essay in the *New York Review of Books* in which she spoke of a 'philosemitic McCarthyism' that had taken on the characteristics of 'hysteria'. Things had gone so far that 'non-Jewish Germans publicly accuse Jewish writers, artists and activists of anti-Semitism'. As in the early postwar campaign of denunciation of 'anti-Americanism' led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, dissenting views are silenced.

In extreme cases, this has had bizarre consequences. Conferences have been banned, at which large numbers of people with the most diverse views should have been exchanging them. In Kassel, an Indian art critic and curator lost his position because he had signed a (rather stupid) Israel boycott petition years ago, despite having unequivocally condemned 'the terror unleashed by Hamas on 7 October' as a 'terrible massacre'. A Berlin theatre removed from its programme a humorous play (*The Situation*) about the conflict of narratives by the Austro-Israeli playwright Yael Ronen — now that the situation 'puts us on Israel's side'.

'Israel' has become a 'trigger point' in the culture wars, as with 'wokeness'

or similar themes elsewhere. 'Part of a proper culture war is … to want to misunderstand the other side at all costs', the critic Hanno Rautenberg wrote recently in the Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit*, about the German debates on Israel: 'One wrong word or even just one unsaid word and you're threatened with discursive excommunication.'

No doubt there are forms of criticism of specific Israeli policies that carry more than just anti-Semitic overtones, but in most cases, this is far from reality. As a result, German public opinion is oddly many times more 'pro-Israeli' than Israeli public opinion itself.

Good and evil, oppressor and oppressed

If there is one-sidedness in the discourse in the German-speaking world, this certainly exists in other parts of the world as well, and not only in Muslim or Arab countries such as Turkey, Iran, Jordan or Indonesia. In the United States, Britain and other societies, significant sections of the public and the academic left cultivate their own one-sidedness. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is described in categories of imperialism and colonialism, into which it hardly fits.

The 'post-colonial' left has adopted theories, some of which are quite inspiring and have opened up productive new intellectual horizons, but it has radicalised them into Manichean delusions. The world is divided into oppressor and oppressed — and, in this simple-minded worldview, the person identified as the 'oppressed' is always right. Since oppressors can never even comprehend the experiences of the oppressed, the oppressed must always be *proved* right.

From there, it is only a small step to the final clicking into place: the Palestinians are black / 'people of colour', the Jews are white, and in Israel, they are beacons of 'US imperialism'. Even if one cannot find everything Hamas does to be right, as an authentic expression of the resistance of the oppressed against the system of oppression it is 'right' in a higher way. Israel, on the other hand, is a 'settler-colonialist' project.

While Germany unconditionally supports Israel, as an imperative of its own guilt and exterminationist anti-Semitism, American, British and other

Since, in this perspective, the idea of free debate is a 'bourgeois ideology' only invented to support the ruling power, dissenting views should be delegitimised or, if necessary, shouted down, because what is deemed 'sayable' and what 'non-sayable' is merely an effect of power. Just as in Germany, any criticism of Israel is labelled 'anti-Semitic' and thus compromised as morally culpable, so any defence of Israel's right

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to exist is dismissed as an expression of 'racism'.

Amid all this dogmatism, one gets the impression the whole world has gone mad. While Germany unconditionally supports Israel, as an imperative of its own guilt and exterminationist anti-Semitism, American, British and other discourses are also characterised by the imperatives of their own history: racism, the genocide of indigenous populations, the enslavement of black people, imperial exploitation, colonial oppression and exploitation. Fragments of the real are used arbitrarily and pressed into the scheme of one's own politics of memory, for which 'identity politics' is then actually the opposite description.

Most of the time, all this has less to do with real Palestinians and real Israelis than who and what one wants to be — how one wants to see the world and oneself in it. One poses as a heroic fighter against anti-Semitism, or against racism and colonialism, while the external appurtenances of reality become at most the set for this show of the self, as props in a play— to whose script reality must be made to conform.

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