

Review - Deconstructing Zionism

Written by Romy Hasan

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RUMY HASAN, APR 14 2014

Deconstructing Zionism: A Critique of Political Metaphysics

Edited by Gianni Vattimo & Michael Marder

London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014

Whilst the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the interminable 'peace process' is never long out of the news, the political underpinning of Israel – the self-proclaimed 'Jewish state' – is rarely discussed in the mainstream media and political circles in the west. It has long been thought axiomatic, indeed plain common sense, that a homeland for global Jewry is right and proper, hence obviating the need for the interrogation of the basis for such a state. This presumption is set aside in this collection of papers (of varying relevance and quality) as an array of philosophers subject the ideological basis of Israel – Zionism – to a sustained examination and critique.

In their introduction, the editors Gianni Vattimo (an MEP and philosopher at the University of Turin) and Michael Marder (a research professor of philosophy at the University of the Basque Country) make clear the aims of this book (p. xii):

At the bottom of mutually incompatible land claims simmers the desire to erase the trace of the Other, along with the traces of this very erasure. The Israeli Occupation endeavours to reduce the Palestinian trace to a pure absence, while claiming for itself the honor of strong and undisputed historical origins, the genuine (biblical) rootedness in the Land of Israel. Indeed, in the mindset of Zionism, the two things are inseparable: the presence of Jewish origins and the absence of Palestinian traces are two sides of the same counterfeit coin... Although they both work with limit concepts, deconstruction and weak thought are not satisfied with "sitting on the fence" (or, in this case, on the wall). Far from purely academic exercises, their forays are practical and political interventions, responding to the singular demands of justice. Derrida once said that deconstruction is the possibility of justice. He had in mind deconstruction's extreme sensitivity to the context of its engagements, as much as to the subtle forms which violence can assume, for instance, in the name of universality. To deconstruct Zionism is, therefore, to demand justice for its victims – not only the Palestinians who are suffering from it, but also for the anti-Zionist Jews, "erased" from the officially consecrated account of Zionist history.

Unfortunately, the first chapter that follows the robust and stimulating introduction, by Slavoj Žižek, is confused and displays little understanding of the issues at hand. He begins with a non sequitur: a discussion of the far right Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik and his cold-blooded killing of nearly 100 people (mainly youths) in 2011 – and does not recover from this false start. There is pontification on issues such as multiculturalism, immigration, and Islamism with little understanding of these profoundly important and contentious issues in the western context. Indeed this short chapter has little to do with the subject matter at hand: the deconstruction of Zionism.

Mercifully, after Žižek's incoherent ramblings, Gianni Vattimo returns to provide a pithy and coruscating critique. He asserts:

The Nakba was the archetype for all Israeli politics since 1948; moreover, it was understandable given the proposal to preserve the Jewishness of the state and therefore to close off every possibility of return for the refugees and also to foreclose every demographic or social expansion of the Arab population. Doesn't this mean that what makes Israel

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“unacceptable” as a state is its racist-colonialist-anti-egalitarian original sin?

Indeed it does and there is now a plethora of incontrovertible evidence to show that Israel is not only racist-colonialist, but also, de facto, an apartheid state (the 80th session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, held in February-March 2012, found Israel in violation of the crime of apartheid in the treatment of its Palestinian citizens inside Israel by determining that many state policies within Israel violate the prohibition on apartheid as enshrined in Article 3 of the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination).

The longest chapter (‘Is Judaism Zionism?’) by Judith Butler helpfully utilizes the writings of Hannah Arendt on critiquing not only Zionism, but the nation state, especially from the perspective of the stateless. She makes the key point that ‘Jewish history comes to bear on Palestinian history through the impositions and exploitations of a project of settler colonialism’. In various insightful quotes of Arendt’s, this is perhaps the most prophetic:

even if the Jews were to win the war [of 1948], its end would find the... achievements of Zionism destroyed... The “victorious” Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defense to a degree that would submerge all other interests and activities.

Israelis and Zionists around the world would vehemently disagree, arguing that far from Zionism being destroyed, it is thriving as evidenced by Israel’s achievements. Moreover, the militarized nature of the state is a price worth paying for to have the prize of a Jewish state. But this begs the question: how long can this *laager*-like state last?

Walter Mignolo continues the theme of Judith Butler in ‘decolonizing the nation state’ and argues that while Israel offered a solution to the Jewish people, it also became a problem for the Palestinians – and makes the contentious argument that to solve the conflict would require more than peace agreements: it would require decolonizing the form of the modern European nation-state. Whilst Israel was/is indeed a life-threatening problem for the Palestinians, it did not provide a solution to all Jewish people as evidenced by the fact that most Jews do not live in Israel. Furthermore, about a third of Jewish Israelis have dual citizenship, and large numbers have, in recent years, availed themselves of their second passport by undergoing a reverse *aliyah* to North America or Western Europe.

Artemy Magun focuses on the similarities between Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt on the ‘Jewish Question’, and their overarching critique of religion per se. Interesting as this is, it does not get to grips with the subject matter at hand.

Marc Ellis, in a fascinating chapter ‘Notes on the prophetic instability of Zionism’, argues that ‘in the framework of deconstructing Zionism, solidarity here means a critical embrace of Jewish history and contemporary Jews with the hope that the end of the violence of the Jewish state will bring Jews back to an ethical path’. He elaborates upon this in the concluding section with a laudable wish:

By hollowing out the Jewish claim to Palestinian land, eventually Jews in Israel and around the world will acknowledge the wrong done to the Palestinian people. Then, Jews will embark with Palestinians in creating Israel/Palestine where both live together in equality, justice, and peace.

Christopher Wise discusses Jacques Derrida’s concept of spirit/specter and its indebtedness to the Hebraic notion of *ruah* and forcefully concludes that peace and security can be achieved on the basis of international law, notwithstanding its flaws, rather than on regressive theologies of ‘blood election’.

Ranjana Khanna’s chapter ‘Rex, or the negation of wandering’ is little more than observations of various authors and has little of substance to say about Zionism. In contrast, Santiago Zabala in ‘The hermeneutical stance’, defends the ideas of Heidegger – despite his affinities with the Nazi regime – to argue that

political Zionism does not only represent the “massive dispossessions of Palestinians in 1948, the appropriation of land in 1967, and the recurrent confiscations of Palestinian lands that continues now with the building of the wall and the expansion of settlements” but also the discharge of Being. If Being must remain discharged from the standpoint

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of Zionist nationalists who can then proceed with their programs of occupations and segregation, then philosophy has the obligation to retrieve its remainders.

In the penultimate chapter, Michael Marder returns to the theme of 'trace' elaborated upon in the introduction but rather than utilizing deconstruction, uses the device of synecdoche to make the case that the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homes is the consequence of 'the exclusionary synecdoche that effaces and destroys much more than it reveals and constructs. This is not to say that Zionism was "blind to the presence of Arabs in Palestine"; rather, it was (transcendentally) blind to the *justification of* and the *right to* their presence'.

The final chapter by Luce Irigaray does not deal with Zionism so, along with the papers by Žižek, Magun, and Khanna, sits oddly in this collection. She does pose the question as to whether the feminine practice of hospitality represents a value to be considered and extended outside the family and asks: '[w]ould current conflicts, in particular the Arab-Israeli conflict, be possible if feminine hospitality would spread into and shape civil life? And does not a world culture require such an evolution?' These are plainly difficult questions to satisfactorily answer but even if the answer is yes, there is no agreement as to how a feminine hospitality can be realized.

Though of uneven quality, this collection of papers is, nevertheless, a welcome addition to the critique of Zionism. There is, however, a serious lacuna: an absence of the voice of a Palestinian or Arab given that, apart from Jews, the greatest impact of Zionism has been on Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular – the example of Nur Masalha who has written extensively on Zionism and the Palestine Nakba readily comes to mind. Setting aside this reservation, there is likely to be consensus among Arabs (especially among Palestinians) that perhaps the best deconstruction of Zionism – at least of the dominant political variety – was by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, during a conversation with the Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann, a few years after the creation of Israel:

Why should the Arabs make peace? If I was an Arab leader I would never make terms with Israel. That is natural: we have taken their country. Sure, God promised it to us, but what does that matter to them? Our God is not theirs. We come from Israel, it's true, but two thousand years ago, and what is that to them? There has been anti-Semitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They only see one thing: we have come here and stolen their country. Why should they accept that? They may perhaps forget in one or two generations' time, but for the moment there is no chance. So it's simple: we have to stay strong and maintain a powerful army. Our whole policy is there. Otherwise the Arabs will wipe us out. (Nahum Goldmann, *The Jewish Paradox*, 1978, p. 99)

But one ought to be cognisant of the fact that for Palestinians the priority is not only the deconstruction of Zionism but of its dismantling – so that, to paraphrase Marc Ellis, all who presently reside in Israel/Palestine, together with refugees who have the right to return, live together in equality, justice, and peace. One hopes that such a sobering and hopeful thought will be readily accepted by the contributors of this volume.

About the author:

Romy Hasan is a senior lecturer at the University of Sussex and author of *Dangerous Liaisons: The Clash between Islamism and Zionism* (2013) and *Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths* (2010).