

An analysis of Israel/Palestine

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Abstract: This lecture by Professor Alain Brossat was part of the symposium *'Perspectives on Palestine: Dialogues on History, Humanity, and Hope,'* organized to examine the political and humanitarian crisis in Palestine. The symposium focused on Israel's military assault on the Gaza Strip following Hamas's "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation on October 7, 2023. The attacks, carried out by land, air, and sea, resulted in nearly 30,000 casualties, mostly women and children, and displaced over a million people, causing a collapse of Gaza's health sector. The event featured a panel of distinguished speakers offering critical reflections; this lecture represents Professor Brossat's contribution.

(1)

The armed operation launched by Hamas on October 7 in Israeli territory is not an aggression or a provocation intended to break the peace and foment a crisis likely to engulf the entire region. It is, in the context of the endless war waged by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people since 1948, a bloody, inevitably bloody raid, intended among other things to remind world opinion (and particularly supporters of Israel) that the infinite harm suffered by the Palestinians is not soluble in the small arrangements underway between the Israeli apartheid regime, the United States and the Gulf petromonarchies, under the benevolent gaze of Western democracies.

This raid is a signal, a message written in letters of blood, addressed in particular to all the powers which actively guarantee the impunity of Israel, a conquering, racist and exterminationist ethnocracy: no, you will not so easily bury the Palestinian people and their determination to decide their own fate. No, the Greater Israel project erected on the ruins of the Palestinian world is not about to be completed. The Palestinian people are *alive*, the proof being that they are fighting and, despite the extreme inequality of the forces present, are capable, albeit ephemerally, of interrupting the succession of defeats and humiliations, of passing the thrill of terror over the spine of the enemy. October 7 is not an aggression, it is a devastating response, and all the more devastating because it was totally unexpected, to the litany of bombings on Gaza, to the violence continually inflicted on the inhabitants of the West Bank by the settlers and the army, to the desecration of the sacred places of Islam, in particular in Jerusalem by hordes of fanatics and supremacist provocateurs inspired by Jewish fundamentalism.

October 7 did not interrupt any peace or even truce established by mutual agreement between the two opposing parties, it did not intervene in contravention of any convention – the war which pits the Palestinians against the power which was and remains the actor of their spoliation has never stopped – it simply varies in intensity depending on the circumstances.

October 7 is, in this sense, a paradoxical sign of life placed under a sign of death: the Palestinian people are not a residual population, exhausted by the war of attrition led by Israel, a population deprived and demoralized in a state of survival – the proof, it fights and can inflict a terrible rout on the enemy. What disorients Western opinions is obviously that this sign of life is here indissolubly associated with terror.

How can a sign of life be associated with a scene of bloody terror, with a hyperviolent moment like that of October 7? This is what we must now try to understand.

(2)

The use of terror is one of the means by which, time and again, power and sovereignty are asserted. As such, the recurrence of this figure, in our very world, in our very present, shows that the domain of politics and that of war are never completely decoupled. Terror, long before we speak of terrorism, of terrorists, is, quite simply, the means by which an individual or collective power asserts itself and intends to assert its rights in a hyperviolent mode. This is with the aim of striking fear, on the one hand, at the fraction of humanity that this power or sovereignty intends to subject to its conditions and on the other hand, to show its strength, to assert its claims to the world in general, to other powers and sovereignties in particular.

Terror, whatever its form, is the inevitably barbaric and violent vital sign by which this force shows itself. In our societies, it is the states, whatever the political regimes under which they are placed, which implement violent actions whose principle is terror – this by relying on all armed, scientific and technological means at their disposal. It is the states and they alone which have the means to practice terror on an industrial scale – as the United States and its allies did during the invasion of Iraq which led to the fall of Saddam Hussein, as the Israeli army regularly does when it bombs Gaza or crisscrosses the West Bank.

In our societies, since the end of the First World War, aerial bombardments have become the most common form by which States terrorize populations or attack other sovereignties and thus attempt, by crushing them under the bombs, therefore on a variably exterminationist mode, to reduce them to their conditions. But there are all kinds of other modalities of terror whose elementary principle, as a political means, as a “goal with an end in mind”, is to produce, by saturation effect, that is to say by the use of extreme means of violence, by their massiveness or their spectacular nature, the paralysis, the fall into a state of total apathy or desolation the human groups or the forces on which it swoops down on.

I would say, to get to the point, that as a means of obtaining these effects – fear, overwhelm, feeling of desolation, tetany – terror is one of the figures of the affirmation of power which is old for the world – it is at the heart of all the great invasions that Europe has known, the Greeks and the Romans, when they massacred the populations of the cities they conquered and reduced them to ashes were completely familiar with these means.

Machiavelli, in chapter 8 of *The Prince* (1532), entitled “Of those who have become princes by villainesses”, urges his readers to consider the relationship that is established between power, sovereignty and terror not from a moral angle, necessarily horrified, but under that of the *autonomy of politics*, as a domain where particular rationalities are implemented, unlinked from moral values (Good and Evil as moral categories) and from codes of good conduct based on a certain idea of

Justice. He shows how a hyperviolent action, a murder, a crime, a “villainousness” can allow a prince to triumph over his competitors and establish himself in power not only by using violent means, but by displaying cruelty intended to show his determination and his lack of scruples – terror as a pure means of asserting strength, power.

This figure of terror spans the ages and eras. It precedes, and by a long time, the advent of the modern State. As I have said, conquering tribes and peoples make repeated and completely natural use of it. The Mongols, for example, stay, roughly, in the cultural area where we are located.

The heart of terror, as the use of force with a view to securing a dominant position or a temporary advantage, is *excess*: it is necessary to deploy a riot of violence, hyperbolic forms of violence whose effect is to strike with stupor and fear the human group targeted by this action. Air strikes, terror from the air, produce, par excellence, this effect, but only states have the means to implement them. It is, in our societies, the terror exercised by the rich, those who have the military, economic, technological and political means. From this point of view, the situation in Israel/Palestine is quite exemplary: the massive, lasting, repeated, ever more destructive and exterminating forms of terror, it's the Palestinian population, particularly those in Gaza, who suffer them. Hegemony is not exercised today without recourse to terror, and this is of industrial, major, majority form.

What we witnessed on October 7 was, in a typically colonial, neo-colonial context (Israel being the “last of the colonies”, as Jacques Derrida said) an operation in the form of counter-terror. In a general configuration of radically asymmetrical war, as are all colonial and decolonization wars, the dominated (the colonized as oppressed and “vanquished of History”) is often inclined to demonstrate their endurance and determination to continue the fight. Against all odds while organizing, to the extent of its forces, counter-terror operations intended to send this message to the enemy and to world public opinion: *no, we are not dead*, nor defeated nor discouraged! Yes, we too have, even if occasionally, the capacity to strike terror into the enemy, to defeat him on the ground, to ensure that fear changes sides.

The miniature blitzkrieg conducted on October 7 by the military branch of Hamas (and which we can be sure will be permanently studied, in detail, in all military schools around the world) typically falls into this category of actions, that is, the category of counter-terror undertaken, in a colonial context, by a weak against a strong, a colonized against the colonist or the colonizer, an action intended to set the record straight, as we say in French: not only are we still there, but we also have the means to terrorize you. The counter-terror action carried out by Hamas thus exposes the real heart of the confrontation (dispute) between the state of Israel and the Palestinians – an endless war, without rules, not a conflict based on misunderstandings but *a struggle to the death* – this in the very sense that what is at stake here is indeed a question of all or nothing: the possibility for the Palestinians to live as a people among the other peoples of the region and the world, a possibility which is stubbornly and radically denied to them by Israeli power. A one-off counter-terror action, however small its long-term effects may be, remains, even in the most desperate situations, the recourse of the oppressed, of the dominated: this was the very meaning of the insurrection of the Warsaw ghetto, April-May 1943.

(3)

Hegemony (today that of the white West adorned with the trappings of total democracy) does not only hold with stories, intrigues, but it is also, very much, a matter of *storytelling*, the construction of tailor-made “narratives”, a question of elements of language, the creation of chains of equivalences, etc. In the configuration that interests us here, words derived from “terror” – “terrorism”, “terrorist” occupy a special place in these discursive strategies. It is basically a question of constructing a narrative, that of the “war against terrorism”, according to which most of the disorders in the world are attributable to these forces of evil that are the “terrorists” and to this endemic scourge that would be terrorism, both global and local.

In other words, by highlighting these *scarecrow words*, what is at issue is saturating discursive spaces with a use of words that are themselves terrorizing. It is a matter of making indiscernible the massive reality of the moment, in the Israeli-Palestinian context as in others: that terror, as a means placed at the service of states, and particularly of the democracies of the global North, has not never worn so well. By placing the monster, the specter of the terrorist hydra (notably Islamist), at the forefront, it is a matter of hiding the figure of major, industrial and technological terrorism, by producing an entire *show organized around these avatars*, the maddened faces and bodies of the hordes which swept through southern Israel on October 7.

The discursive operation consists of substituting *faces* (necessarily monstrous) and names *supposed* to embody terror in its most infamous and quintessential form, the faces and names of the great terrorist enemies of humanity through whom all evil happens, to the *apparatuses of terror* available to states and of which they make such constant use, particularly the democracies of the Global North. It is about making terrorism or the industrial and technological terror practiced by states undetectable for the benefit of an image, a staging, *a sort of global western*: the one where we see the forces of Good (democracies) embodying the character of the righter of wrongs, of the vigilante, confronting the outlaws of international terrorism. It's a crude tale but one that, for the most part, maintains its grip on the opinions of the Global North. In the Global South, it's a different story.

(4)

What makes this discursive swindle possible and has the effect that despite all the massive evidence presented before our eyes – at this moment in Israel/Palestine, in particular –, what makes the narrative of the struggle of democracies against international terrorism is not totally discredited in the eyes of the opinions of this part of the world, is very distinct (if we take the trouble to think about it a little): modern democracies, always, have attributed to themselves the brand image of regimes oriented towards peace, having established, internally, the gentleness of mores, working tirelessly to eliminate violence as a means of resolving conflicts, etc. They have always excelled in the construction of this image, of this great apologetic narrative, and the extension of which is, always, that violence is *the part of the other*, the systemic adversary (Russia, China, Iran...), and therefore extreme violence, terrorism, par excellence, the act of the bad other, Islamist, subversive, etc.

On the ground, and from the experience of recent decades, we can see that things are a little different: invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, French military campaign in the Sahel, major maneuvers intended to raise tensions in China Sea, proxy war tirelessly fueled by Western powers in Ukraine, etc. When tested by facts, the chain of equivalence democracy, world at peace, freedom for all, not to mention progress and prosperity, in general, falls apart. If you want to have a true idea of how the white, Western democracies promote the world in peace, combat violence and watch over the

well-being of peoples, see how the state of Israel is currently leading the “pacification” of Gaza, reducing the enclave to a pile of ruins and ashes under which they bury its inhabitants. Now, Israel, for the West, is the exemplary democracy, and, for this very reason, the spoiled, darling child of all the democratic powers in the world – an example, a situation that the Taiwanese governing elites never stop to envy – to become the Israel of East Asia – this is their dearest wish... waiting, no doubt, for Hainan or Fujian to become their “new frontier, their “East Bank””...

Ubi solitudinem faciunt pacem appellant is the famous statement that the Latin historian Tacitus puts in the mouth of a Caledonian (Scottish) warrior stigmatizing the ravages of the Roman conquest of Great Britain: *where they sow devastation, they call it peace*. This formula applies very precisely to the type of “peace” that Israel is producing in Gaza, in Palestine, in the Middle East in general, with the blessing of its Western protectors. And “terrorism” is the name they like to give to that which resists, by the means available, to this “pacification” which is, we hope, on a historical scale, the last criminal episode of Western colonization. A colonization which, today, is no longer conducted under the sign of imperial grandeur *but of the promotion of global democracy* – and it is precisely this which makes things a little “more complicated”...

Event Information

Event Title: Perspectives on Palestine: Dialogues on History, Humanity, and Hope

Speaker: Alain Brossat, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Paris 8 University

Other speakers: Hazem Almassry, Syed Farid Alatas, Ruba Salih, Michael Furmanovsky

Coordinated by: Kahlan A. Alradhi & Hanh T. L. Nguyen

Organizer:

International Center for Cultural Studies, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, Transit Asia Research Network

International Master's Program in Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, University System of Taiwan

MOE-SPROUT 2.0, Conflict, Justice, Decolonization: Asia in Transition in the 21st Century, Sub-project 3: Migration, Unequal Citizens, Critical Legal Studies & Sub-project 6: Social Intervention and Artistic Production

Date: January 15, 2024

Time: 17:00 - 19:40 (Taiwan Standard Time, GMT+8)

Venue: F106 HA Building B, NYCU, 1001 University Road, Hsinchu, Taiwan 300