

Gaza: Banality of Morals

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Are there any ethical and political complexities to reflect in the murderous attack by Israel on Gaza? There are none. Morality is an enduring but banal condition or worse. It is, however, very much part and parcel of the technology of rule we live under.

“We think the price is worth it”.

– Madeleine Albright

Is there really more than one way to describe it? Here in the United States (and in Europe as well), the devastating and murderous destruction of Gaza by the Israeli Defense Forces still appears to remain muddled in ethical and political complexities, each of which is constantly enhanced by a veritable deluge of “conflicting” pieces of information, opinion, discussion, repetition and rhetorical escalation. Still, the very appearance of the event may in fact be contingent on such muddling. It may therefore demonstrate, however belatedly and futilely, the limits of morality (that is, according to the persistence of certain rhetorical and less rhetorical usages, the limits of religion). It may also indicate that the exercise of moral judgment (call this “religious doctrine” or “religion as a system of beliefs” or what not) cannot be distinguished from, indeed must be examined differentially with transformations and practices that affect body and matter, bodies that matter or do not (call this “religious practice” or “ritual”, discipline or embodiment). Put another way, religion cannot be seen as being on the side of the theological (or the moral) as opposed to the political. Not that any of it will help Gaza.

Those of us – but I should probably refrain from assuming any kind of collective here – who have expressed a tenacious concern with the banality of evil might have to resolve ourselves to yet another levelling of the discursive field. We are repeatedly confronted with the banality of morals. No one could fail to notice that everything said these days is suffused with effects of our shared moral conscience and with its application – the claim of its pertinence – on a global scale. “In Gaza, mankind’s basic morality is at stake”, I was just reading somewhere. Whatever side one is on, and it is crucial that there be sides here, the expression of moral outrage (or better yet moral outrage at the lack of outrage) is manifest all along a trajectory that includes

in its stations the enduring discourse of rights – that is also the discourse of right and wrong – and the righteous condemnation of ultimate, or alternatively necessary, evil. It is therefore imperative that one evaluate and pronounce on all sides of the human continuum. And although there is rarely a case when the other side – they are lately called “terrorists” – is not deemed much worse, I want to dwell on the shape and advantages (Sigmund Freud called them “secondary benefits”) of berating oneself instead.

‘They Shoot and They Cry’

It is unfortunately timely to offer as recent evidence of this unceasing trend the success met by the latest production of Israeli conscience (underwritten in part by the Israeli government), namely, Ari Folman’s movie, *Waltz with Bashir* (but the Hollywood machine had, of course, dispensed some prior expertise). It does no great injustice to this stunning and powerful movie to understand it as an elongated version of the well-known ethos of Israeli soldiers: “they shoot and they cry”, or, in the original Hebrew: *yorim u-bokhim*. Folman’s movie – a documentary of sorts, guided by some of the principles of magical realism – presents the successes (and, to some extent failures) of a well-known psychic and social apparatus that manages to maintain the memory of events and actions, if cleansed of the emotional, and indeed, moral significance that unfailingly accompany them (in the movie at least). Doing so, it deploys the full range of the ideological conscience apparatus of the west such as Freud summarised it in *Moses and Monotheism*. “It is true we did the same thing but we admitted it, and since then we have been purified”.

We shoot and we cry – this means that we acknowledge our wrongs (it is implied that they do not, murderous lot that they are). Some of the greatest secular murderers of history have long known that it helps to think that you are doing the right thing. And when all else fails, admit your wrongs later. You might even refer to them as “collateral damage”. This does not always mean, of course, that conscience – whether your own or some exterior version of it – will spare you (though the International Court of Justice probably

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will). It certainly does not mean that countless war criminals have failed to die in their beds. Witness Ariel Sharon, a looming if strangely fleeting figure in a film that explores the (Israeli) psychic aftermath of the Sabra and Shatila massacres. And watch George Bush follow the tracks of Henry Kissinger's golden parachute. Still, imagine, if you will, that there is today an Israeli soldier shooting in Gaza (shooting and crying, no doubt), and consider that he is not unlikely to receive, in 20 years time, a Nobel Prize for Peace (or some award of the sort), as he matures into understanding that which he already knows today (he is, after all, crying).

Interrogation

I do not mean hereby to diminish the value of moral conscience, or to criticise its turns and temporalities, or even its achievements – cinematic and otherwise. I do not mean either to underscore the irony of an Israeli movie being showered with well-deserved awards, that documents today the psychic violence that followed – and no doubt enabled – yesterday's unleashing of murderous violence. I do mean to interrogate the banality of morals. For conscience today does not make cowards of us all. It makes us successful moviemakers, writers, or politicians, academics, even.

Rawalpindi and Mumbai (and for that matter, the cellars of Vienna) might come to mind as recent examples of occasional soul-searching articles in a variety of platforms. Should Gaza be as well? There is no question that knowledge must be disseminated and reflection extended, but I am not convinced of the wisdom of a discourse that comes fully loaded with moral baggage distributed, as if equally, on either sides. I am, however, convinced of its efficacy. I have already said that, in the us and in Europe, the public and media appearance of the murderous devastation of Gaza by Israel demonstrates the limits of morality and of religion. But what I want to say now that it might serve as an opportunity to reflect on the reverse side, as it were, of the banality of morals, namely, the current technology of western rule.

Were it recognised as a religion, it would be on the side of practice and power

such as it is embodied and disembodying: call it religion as the military-industrial (and moral) complex. Under this title, at any rate, I include the main players of the "war on terror," those who took the initiative and who appear to benefit from it (the business class and its collaborators among them, that is): the us, Europe, and Israel, and those of us who do not abstain from producing and directing a measure of moral outrage, at those we cannot – god forbid – identify with. And even at ourselves. Let me state right away that, with regard to what I am referring to here as "western rule," I am hardly in a position to adjudicate on the wagging of that multi-headed dog and its tail, which rather reminds me of the proverbial elephant palpated by the blind men among which I therefore count myself. I am of course speaking about Israel (and the so-called Israel lobby) and American as well as European foreign policy, but I do not know who is on first. Regardless of ascendance or precedence, however, it seems to me undeniable that Israel can be taken as a reliable indicator of the latest advances in the technology of rule under which we live and which we humbly exercise or legitimise – call it, for added effect, secular (or religious – as if it mattered).

Morals and Technology

The two – the banality of morals and the technology of rule – are essentially related, of course, and they have been for a long time. Think of them as old companions, like the carrot and the stick, or belief and observance in the secular age. It is, for instance, essential that moral imperatives be publicly set and discussed if one is going to surrender to the constant disciplining of the (global) body that goes under the name of "the war on terror". Bombing is, after all, another version of the rod, even if (especially if) it hardly affects all of us by any shared measure.

Talal Asad, who described morality, which is to say the western conscience that occupies me here, as giving the latter a certain "style" in the way it inflicts violence on the rest of the world, has perfectly described the shape and effect of distinctions made between intentional killing (evil, wrong) and collateral damage (good, or at least, necessary).

More prosaically, from surveillance cameras to the embrace of myface.com and other personal GPS devices in the form of a gizmo to the minute location of your shoes at the airport, the moral value of "security" is impressed upon us as effectively as, Louis Althusser reminds us, Blaise Pascal's kneeling technique. Better believe it. We kneel (and take off our shoes) and believe (that security is being achieved). Really? Probably not. And still we kneel. And we better. Israel's conscience is better too, by the way, and it has long had a direct hand in the equipment and training of countless populations, and their police forces, for security purposes (remember South Africa?). Following an emergency request of the Greek police, Israel even sent a fresh supply of gas canisters to tame unruly crowds (another expert country, Germany, contributed too, in case you were worrying). That is one reason why Israel should be taken as an enduring indicator of the technology of rule under which we live, and increasingly so.

Consider the proliferation of walls along western borders (that is, along southern ones, or those of Fortress Europe, and of course, in Palestine), or observe the participation of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in the canvassing of college campuses, and the reigning notion of "balance" (in journalistic coverage or in Columbia University's classrooms), but consider as well that which has made it possible for the Finnish police to engage the first instance of school shooting in the country with armoured vehicles, such as happened a few months ago. Forgive the naïveté of the question but, really, who authorised the purchase of armoured vehicles for the Finnish police? More importantly, what moral consensus made their use completely acceptable, indeed, unnoticeable, even banal in the face of one unprecedented gunman? I am not suggesting that populations have that much wiggle room to rock that boat (it is alright, they rock the vote change you can believe in), or that resistance (to taking off your shoes, at least) is futile or necessarily significant. I just think that we might take notice of the fact that what Israel does in the full light of day makes manifest a significant aspect of technology of rule such as is being shaped in front of our eyes.

No Rod Spared, No Child Spoiled

Today's technology of rule is essentially related to the banality of morals. It might even be enabled, it is at least sustained, by the granting of a moral debate, issues of moral equivalence, justification and what not, when it comes to security and the carpet bombing of the most densely populated area of the world by a liberal democracy. Closer than the Warsaw Ghetto, perhaps, we might think of the Balkans as another

enabling event. But be that as it may, it seems to me that the question is no longer a moral one. It is no longer whether or not one can justify or indeed, regret or condemn such actions, before, during or after the fact. Twenty years later even. Morality is an enduring but banal condition or worse. It is, however, very much part and parcel of the technology of rule we live under, buttressing the political climate and reinforcing the security apparatus that is

our religion (others, I am told, might have a different set of apparatuses). Athens and Jerusalem (and yes, Paris, London, and Washington DC). In the passage I mentioned above, Freud, and I, in his wake, called it religion (but it should make us rethinking what we mean by that term). In the US and in Europe, for better and for worse, the banality of morals ensures (better, what justifies and condemns) that in Gaza, no rod is spared, no child spoiled.

Resettlement and Rehabilitation in Urban Centres

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The World Bank's policy on involuntary resettlement carries a heavy rural bias as does the Indian draft rehabilitation and resettlement policy. The Maharashtra government's policy on the relocation and rehabilitation of those displaced by the Mumbai Urban Transport Project (partly financed by the World Bank) is therefore significant since it has evolved over the past few years in response to the protests about its initial inadequacies. The lessons learnt from its implementation are relevant not only for large infrastructure projects in densely populated urban areas in India but also in other parts of the world.

This article is based on field research conducted among the project-affected persons at several project/resettlement sites in the author's capacity as a short-term consultant with the Inspection Panel of the World Bank (2005) and later as an independent researcher. The views expressed are her own.

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Makhmal ki chaddar pe ye tat ka paiband kyon?" (why is there a rag patchwork on a velvet sheet?) asked Abdul Karim, who has been displaced by the Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP). He was referring (at a stakeholders' meeting) to the poor quality of tenements constructed at the Motilal Nehru Nagar, a resettlement site at the Bandra Kurla Complex, the city's most expensive business district. Karim's expression sums up very succinctly the dissatisfaction in some sections of the project displaced about the resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) component of the World Bank-financed MUTP. The case study of MUTP highlights the tenuous relationship among economic growth, infrastructure development, displacement and issues of social equity in the current context of globalisation that Mumbai exemplifies.

The MUTP comprises three segments: (i) the upgradation of the railway transport system, improvement and widening of two highways, (ii) the Santacruz-Chembur Link Road (SCLR) and the Jogeshwari-Vikhroli Link Road (JVLRL) to augment east-west connectivity in the city, and (iii) the R&R component that involves the resettlement of about 20,000 project-affected households (PAHS) or an estimated 1,20,000 persons displaced by the project.¹ Several infrastructure development projects have redefined the

existing land use patterns in the city like the Mumbai Urban Infrastructure Project (MUIP), the Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS) or Metro Rail Project, the Airport Modernisation Project and the MUTP. The displacement due to the MUTP is the largest urban displacement caused by a project undertaken with the help of the World Bank in India. Though the projects vary in their nature and scope, they all involve the massive displacement of those in the "right of way" (ROW). The commercial and residential structures displaced by all the above-mentioned projects are being relocated at about 33 R&R sites scattered across the city. In the years ahead, planned development and the consequent displacement will necessitate R&R on an enormous scale, as Mumbai is projected to become the second-most populous city in the world, with 25 million inhabitants by 2020! The United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) report says that of the four crore slum population in India, 25% lives in Mumbai. The "...poor people will make up a large part of future urban growth and preparing for an urban future requires, at a minimum, respecting the rights of the poor", it adds.²

This article limits itself to the MUTP and attempts to critically assess the Maharashtra government's R&R policy. The tenements for rehousing the displaced have been procured partly through the unique private-public partnership (PPP) model under which a stock of housing has been provided by real estate developers at resettlement sites in lieu of lucrative incentives such as the Floor Space Index (FSI) and tradable Transfer Development Right (TDR) granted to the builders. The rest of the tenements have been purchased directly from the Maharashtra Housing