

Gaza: a decolonial perspective on the coloniality of power today

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ABSTRACT

The announcement of this special issue stated: “We are persuaded that ‘the battle for language’ is pivotal in the battle for decolonial justice,” i.e., we recognize “the power of the word to transform the world”. My contributing goals, as far as the Palestinian Question is concerned, are to insist that the “battle of language” is not only the battle for the content of what it is said. It is also urgent and necessary to engage in two decolonial endeavors: to reveal the terms (the assumptions) and the logic sustaining the danger of the hegemonic, or dominant single story (Ngozi Adichie), as well as to build decolonial narratives that would/could transform – in the public sphere – disrespect of other human beings displacing them with love. This claim may sound idealistic, but only in the context of robotization that has transformed state leaders and administrative bureaucracies into machines of hatred and destruction and the mass media into promoters and defenders of the dominant single story.

Keywords

Coloniality, decolonial thinking, relational reasoning, double standards, Zionism.

I

The call for contributions to the Special focus of *From the European South* on Gaza describes in a few words the horrors and suffering endured by Palestinians. Implicitly, it also reveals the unfathomable sensibilities and attitudes of the Zionist state’s actors. What has happened in Gaza since October 2023 discloses, once more, the most concealed facet of the coloniality of power: the disposability of life in general and of human life in particular.

At the time of responding to the call to this special issue’s editors (July 2024), the situation in the Gaza Strip has become more and more Kafkaesque. As an observer educated in the South, having studied in France and now living in the U.S., I find the inefficiencies of Western institutions (the U.N., the E.U., NATO, the U.S.) incomprehensible. They have failed to stop the silent war of convictions, wherein Palestinians are considered a disposable population, and Israel is deemed a necessary state to secure the Western idea of peace through war in the Middle East. It seems that all dissidents must either submit or be eliminated to maintain the unipolar and universal concept of peace.

As soon as The United Nations' highest court declared that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and settlements is illegal and must be ended as soon as possible, in its strongest findings to date on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Israel's unicameral legislature voted unanimously to reject the idea of a Palestinian state. They firmly oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state west of the Jordan River, arguing that it would pose an existential threat to the state of Israel and its citizens. This is just one of the many examples of the absurdity of Israeli and Western narratives.

What seems Kafkaesque on the surface becomes intelligible when we examine the idea of "the end of history" that emerged in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This marked the next chapter of Western global designs, now in the hands of the neo-conservatives. It was no secret. As Zbigniew Brzezinski explained in *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), with the Soviet Union gone, the field was cleared. First, we move into the Balkans (the dismantling of Yugoslavia and the creation of Kosovo, 1999-2000), then we advance to control Central Asia. The next step is Ukraine (2014).

What does Israel-Palestine have to do with this? The situation is undoubtedly complex, as many say. However, one aspect remains clear: Israel is a key marker in Western long-term global designs to control West Asia, to contain Iran, and – if possible – to dismantle it as they have attempted in Ukraine. Iran borders Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea, and the northern shore of the Caspian borders Russia and Kazakhstan. As I edit this article, Benjamin Netanyahu has come to the U.S. to address Congress. What other president would be allowed to do such a thing? Though half of the Democratic members of Congress boycotted Netanyahu's speech, he was still able to demand more weapons to terminate the war.

Independent media outlet *The Intercept* expressed astonishment that, while Netanyahu was directing a cruel war, the U.S. Congress applauded. And John V. Whitbeck (2024), a U.S. citizen and international lawyer living in Paris who advised the Palestinian negotiating team, wrote with dismay and incredulity: "I have just witnessed the most pathetic and humiliating hour which I, as an American, have experienced in my lifetime." He added that "after virtually every sentence uttered by the notorious war criminal Benjamin Netanyahu, no matter how inane or blatantly false, virtually all the attending political prostitutes infesting the U.S. Congress rose (53 times!) in a loud standing grovel of homage to their puppet master." He further noted that they applauded "most long and loudly when he condemned pro-justice and anti-genocide protestors on American campuses and the streets of Washington during his speech as 'useful idiots' financed by Iran."

We (the same collective we mentioned earlier) can lament, protest, and cry out in disbelief to emotionally support the Palestinians from afar. However, as long as 'world leaders' remain locked into the sacred belief in the colonial will to power – defending and imposing a

universal truth – the situation will not change. An example of this belief is not only the unconditional support of the U.S. but also the fact that Netanyahu was invited to address Congress, which Whitbeck described as democratically horrifying and shameful. The two-state, it seems, is the immediate solution. China is pressing in that direction (Global Times 2024). However, in the long term, we must demand a radical eradication of any Truth *sine glossa*. I am not advocating for relativism but rather for multipolarity in international relations and pluriversality in thought, education, and intersubjective relations.

Constanze Stelzenmüller, a German international analyst, recognizes – despite her Eurocentrism – that “Overcoming Deep north-south and center-periphery divides would require ideas and leadership, both currently in short of supply” (Stelzenmüller 2024). I agree, but the issue is that neither ideas nor leadership can emerge from the same ideological and political framework that created the problems. Decolonial arguments, of course, will not be heard by the establishment, but this is what decolonial thinkers have been advocating for at least the past twenty years.

We must pay attention to the double standards of U.S. official discourse: promoting peace in words while justifying the continuation of war. From a decolonial perspective, the U.S. double standard in international politics is neither secret nor new. It is nothing more than the rhetoric of modernity used to justify or conceal the logic of coloniality. In his recent speech explaining his decision not to run for re-election, Joe Biden claimed that during his remaining six months as president, he would work tirelessly for a ceasefire and peace in Israel. It is up to the reader to decide whether to believe this or not. The number of disbelievers is growing. However, the double standard persists, sustained by the belief that “we” are the world’s police and hold the universal Truth *sine glossa*. What can intellectuals, scholars, and activists do when the institutions that claim to uphold democratic principles either perpetuate war or cannot go beyond well-meaning judgments and declarations? ¹ I believe that the decolonial cultural struggle for meaning is increasingly necessary and increasingly difficult, given the lack of material means to intervene in the public sphere.

If the U.N.’s International Criminal Court of Justice cannot stop Israel, the U.S. refuses to, and the E.U. is unwilling to contradict Israel, and the Arab League supports Palestine only in words, Israel will continue its destruction of Gaza. Meanwhile, the Axis of Resistance (Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in Gaza) will continue to react. Beyond this, the U.S. supplies weapons to Israel and Ukraine, while the E.U. arms Ukraine, ensuring the military-industrial complex thrives, with business intertwining with institutions and political systems, leaving little room for the public to dissent.

In this intricate web of economics, state politics, and military relations, our (intellectuals, professionals, activists, and artists) battleground lies in the power of words, in cultural battles

within the public sphere. As a matter of fact, I do not see that what we can argue could impinge on imperial state decision-making, as stated in the call for contributions to this issue. Our cultural struggle in the public sphere is to provide narratives and explanations that are absent in the mainstream media, the media that most people watch or read. The cultural struggles are struggles to get in the public sphere decolonial narratives, among others, providing alternatives to the narratives of Western unipolar designs. The struggle for language, it is said, is pivotal in the fight for decolonial justice. Decolonial interventions in the struggle for control over meaning and narrative are a continual effort to liberate minds from colonization and foster new subjective and intersubjective relations. This is the direction of my argument.

A crucial aspect of decoloniality is the emphasis on relational reasoning, which contrasts with the ontological reasoning that regulates epistemology (the regulation of knowledge through schools, universities, and the mass media) and gnoseology (the general praxis of human knowledge and all living organisms). The modern bourgeois nation-state was founded on ontological reasoning, often entrenched in racist violence: the idea that the nation-state should care for nationals, not for human beings (Mignolo 2014). Gaza is an extreme case but not the only one in the history of the modern nation-state. Immigration policies in the European Union and the U.S. reflect similar distinctions between nationals and immigrants as different kinds of human beings (Swirki 2024).

Ontological reasoning focuses on singular events, no matter how complex, and fragments relationships – a task better suited to relational thinking. Since ontological thinking is the credo of Western sciences and Christian theology (Judeo-Christian religion in Israel), decolonial relational thinking has become the guiding principle of decolonial projects that disobey and delink from Western modernity, moving beyond its philosophical universality and political and economic unipolarity. Decolonial relational thinking builds the pluriversal over the universal and supports (but cannot intervene) in the making of multipolar international relations. Western ontological reasoning would see this as pro-Russian, as its focus is fixed on Russia.²

What is happening in Gaza now is not new. It has a 500-year long history, which, of course, is shattered by the ontological reasoning of Western modernity. In the early days of the conquest and colonization of the Americas and, more evidently, in the commodification of human's body established by the slave trade, human beings were converted into bodies to buy and sell and to exploit their labor. Human beings became disposable, like any other commodity. In this case, ontological reasoning was economically implemented. The naturalization of disposable life was evident in a recent Jerry Kushner interview where he explained – in a matter-of-fact statement – the economic potential that Gaza's waterfront offers

to real estate once the civilians are removed and Israel cleans up the strip. But he is not the only one imagining Gaza's future in these terms (Hauenstein 2024).

Later in Western history, the disposability of human beings was implemented for political reasons. The German Nazi regime enacted a politics of ethnic cleansing (genocide), exterminating millions of people, most of whom were Jews. Hitler's antisemitism was not ontological but relational: it stemmed from his German nationalism. It is known that two Austrian politicians were influential in Hitler's antisemitism. The first was Georg Ritter von Schönerer (1842-1921), a German nationalist who felt that Jews could never be fully-fledged German citizens. The second was the Viennese mayor Karl Lueger (1844-1910), from whom "Hitler learned how antisemitism and social reforms could be successful" (Smilde, n.d.). What Hitler had in his hand to implement these ideas were the nation-state and the idea of racial purity of all the nationals. For that reason, he killed not only Jews, but also Roma, Poles, African Germans, and people with disabilities: they all became disposable human beings (The US Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.).

The first example mentioned above (the slave trade) and the second (the nation-state) illustrate the deadly consequences of ontological reasoning, whether economic, political, or both. One of the contributions that decolonial relational reasoning offers (albeit relational reasoning is not decolonial private property) is that of revealing the assumptions, logic, and consequences of a kind of ontological reasoning that manages to establish the universal and transcendental truth of a single story. In this case, that truth is rooted in Western political economy and political theory.

II

Not long ago, an op-ed published in *The Federalist* evaluated the political turmoil in the U.S. and noted that "For a long time now, smart people have read Western media as one does *Pravda* – to discern reality by reading their propaganda backward" (Pullman 2024). The days when the objectivity of Western media (backed by the social sciences) was taken for granted have been a long time gone. In 2012, I spent a semester at the City University of Hong Kong and became accustomed to watching CGTN (the English-language news channel of the state-run China Global Television Network) and reading *Global Times* (a daily newspaper under the auspices of the Chinese state).

I was advised that both media outlets were media-controlled by the state. I responded that that was precisely why I was consulting them, in the same way that I consulted the *New York Times* (a liberal newspaper allegedly founded by subscriptions and ads) and *Fox News* (a conservative TV channel connected to 86 countries). If we add social media and the possibility of saying whatever crosses your mind at a given moment without taking

responsibility to the traditional means of managing subjectivities and intersubjective relations, we end up with a suction machine from which most of the population can hardly escape. Independent media, fortunately, continue to counter the mass media misinformation and social media “chats.”

I am telling this story because I want to stress the intersection of three related trajectories: the unattainability and uncapturable complexity of any event, whether it be the Hamas incursion in Israel territory (the taking of hostages, the estimated of 1,140 deaths) and the psychological impact on the Israeli population. Since then, it is estimated that 38,500 Palestinians have been killed and 89,000 injured, and the material and psychological suffering of the population has only worsened. Although one death is too many, whether a Palestinian or Israeli, the disproportion of the suffering is constantly being shattered by the narratives anchored on the assumption that Israel has the right to defend itself. Theoretically, it is true that whoever is attacked has the right to defend itself, herself or himself. So, the same holds true for Palestinians over the seventy-five years of Israeli occupation.

What narratives can capture is always and only a small portion of what happened. Narration can never ever ‘represent’ the narrated. Similarly, quantum mechanics can never ever represent the ‘laws’ of the universe. What quantum mechanics does is to single out in mathematical formulas a smaller bit of the cosmos. The same principle applies to any narration of human events. Any narration and any quantum theory tell us more about the social sciences, the humanities, and theoretical physics than they tell about social events, human subjectivity, intersubjective relations, or the cosmos.

III

We all live among stories. Stories are always framed in a universe of regulated options (scientific, disciplinary, religious, ideological). Stories of human existence and human events could be used to demonize and misinform as well as to reveal the misinformation and the interests behind demonization, thus liberating captured minds, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) has pointed out.

There are two aspects of Ngozi Adichie’s story about the danger of a single story that are not only still relevant today, but are more relevant than they were in 2009, when the story about the danger of a single story was told. Despite the over 37 million people that have listened to it, the danger of a single story continues to be ignored. This is the first of three aspects: officers of the states, corporations, and mainstream media, in complicity with both, go in a different direction: they promote the virtues of their own single stories while condemning the dangers of the opposing ones.

The dangers of a single story, and this is the second aspect, are the outcome of ontological reasonings disavowing the potentials of relational reasoning. Simply put, any narrative and argument explaining why the long-lasting conflict Palestine/Israel arrived to this point and why the U.S. and the E.U. are unconditionally supporting Israel's genocide, are being shattered, its author penalized and, as we know, menaced by phone or other means. The danger of a single story is here at work. If you start by saying that Israel has the right to defend itself, you go in one direction. If, instead, your reasoning is relational and starts by recalling the foundation of the state of Israel and the consequences it has had for the Palestinian population who have the right to reclaim their rights, you go in a different direction.

If you assume that Hamas is a terrorist organization and that the October 7th attack was an act of terrorism, you go in one direction. If you assume, on the contrary, that Palestinians have been for seventy-five years submitted and besieged by the state of Israel, and Hamas is a freedom fighter organization trying to liberate the Palestinian people, you go in different direction. If you start from the second assumption, you may disagree with the ways the Hamas attack was conducted, but you would not deny Hamas and the Palestinian's rights to defend their rights.

When a single ontological story conveying the Truth *sine glossa* loses its hegemony due to strong competing single relational stories, the single ontological story mutates into domination and war. That, it seems to me, is what all of us on the planet are witnessing and explains, at least in part but a significant part, what is happening in Israel, in Ukraine, and may happen in Taiwan. When hegemony is gone, soft power becomes hard power. The story of a single ontology begins to be defended and imposed. The repression of free speech and manifestations in solidarity with Palestine and condemnation of Israel are shattered and repressed. Democracy becomes a justification of repression to defend democracy. As we know, after Joseph Nye, hard power means the uses of material means to make others follow the will of the dominant single story. The dangerous single story, in this case, is the Zionist story.

Besides the university confrontations with students' protests in the U.S. university campuses, the most notorious was the reaction of the administration of prestigious Ivy League universities, such as Harvard University in Boston and Columbia in New York City, extended to the faculty. In January 2024, Harvard President Claudine Gay resigned. PBS reported that she was accused of allowing the rise of antisemitism on campus and plagiarism. She was Harvard's first Black woman president. While Harvard scored a victory by appointing a Black woman as president, the all-too-common confusion of anti-Zionism with antisemitism was likely too much for her administration to bear.

Perhaps this was one of the first cases in the U.S. where hard power was enacted to maintain the truth of a single story. In the public sphere, hard power is not expressed in economic or military might but through other means. Katherine Frank is a law professor at Columbia University. She quickly fell into disgrace for taking side with students protesting the Zionist genocide in the Gaza strip. *The Intercept* reported that “the university recently deposed tenured law professor Katherine Franke as part of an investigation stemming from an interview she gave to *Democracy Now!* in January” (Thakker 2024).

Ethnographically, similar cases could be cited. But beyond the implementation of hard power in the public sphere to disavow relational reasoning and opposing stories, the rarified atmosphere that the defense of the single story by means of hard power poisons the conditions for dialogue, exchange, and respect of differing opinions. The exacerbation of the single story could lead to authoritarian institutional regulations, to the divisions in the public sphere, and to the exacerbation of hatred. This is currently the situation in the North Atlantic. I do not have information about the public sphere in West Asian countries surrounding Israel.

Single stories that are dangerous are never isolated, and they are never singular in their intentionality. They form part of a family of stories with the same roots. The Russian invasion of Ukraine (in Western vocabulary) was “unprovoked”. We hear that again and again. Similarly, after Hamas’s assault on southern Israel violated human rights, we hear that Israel has the right to defend itself. The dominant single story condemns both Russia and Hamas and shatters any possibilities of engaging in relational reasoning that understands all the parties involved and the motives behind Russia’s initiation of the “special military operation” (in Kremlin terminology).

Though distinct, they are managed in the mass media and the public sphere by the enactment of the same single story: the universal rightfulness of Western values over all other values. This does not deny anyone the right to embrace and promote Western values, but it exposes the aberration of believing that Western values are universal. It is at this point that a single story becomes dangerous; more so when the single story in question is being confronted, as I mentioned before, with opposing single stories based on ontological reasoning as well as stories open to the pluriversity of relational reasoning, which is the decolonial perspective.

IV

Decolonial analysis investigates the formation, transformation and management of the colonial matrix of power. In this regard, a few items of its formation and history until today are relevant in “the battle for language,” which means a battle of narratives. Decolonial thinkers do not have the possibility of imposing sanctions on Israel, the U.S., the E.U., Russia, China, or Iran.

However, we do possess the power of the word, although we have limited resources when it comes to the dissemination of our narratives.

There is nothing *ontic* that can legitimize the concept of race (Mignolo 2008). Race is from the beginning *onto-logical*. Once race was invented, its history followed two trajectories until today. One was to establish a hierarchy. The first trajectory was to establish a hierarchy, meaning that races were not only different but some were considered superior to others. In Spain, the superior race over Moors and Jews were Western Christians. In the New World, where religious conflicts did not exist in the same way, the Spaniards saw themselves as superior to both the Indigenous peoples and the Africans.

The second trajectory consisted in the “scientific” demonstration, since the eighteenth century until today, of the existence of races. The trick is simple: once you assume that races exist, you seek scientific evidence to support their existence. This is only possible because of the Western fusion of the denotation with the denotated, the narration with the narrated and the explanation with the explained. All mechanisms that supported and promoted the veracity of a single ontological story, after losing their hegemony, become mechanisms of defense and repression. When such a story transcends the context in which it emerged attaining the status of uncontested reality, we face the danger of an ontological story.

The announcement of this special issue stated: “We are persuaded that ‘the battle for language’ is pivotal in the battle for decolonial justice,” i.e., we recognize “the power of the word to transform the world.” However, at this point, even the ICJ seems to implement its judgments. My contributing goals here are to insist that the “battle of language” is not only the battle for the content of what is said. It is also urgent and necessary to engage in two decolonial endeavors: to reveal the terms (the assumptions) and the logic sustaining the danger of the hegemonic or dominant single story, as well as to build, through analysis, decolonial narratives that would/could transform – in the public sphere – disrespect of other human beings displacing hatred with love. This claim may sound idealistic, but only in the given context of robotization that has transformed state leaders and administrative bureaucracies (such as NATO) into machines of hatred and destruction and the mass media into promoters and defenders of the dominant single story. The stories from Gaza, and now Lebanon, prove these conclusions daily.

Notes

¹ See TRT World (2024) and Gill (2024)

² For a lengthy explanation of Western ontologizing of Russia, see the clear explanation provided by Jeffrey Sachs (a non-decolonial, perhaps liberal, but not neoliberal) relational thinker with Tucker Carlson (*The Tucker Carlson Show*).

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