

# The Longest War

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## ABSTRACT

The merciless assault on Gaza has reduced the question of Palestinian self-determination to one of Palestinian survival. At the same time, it also marks the collapse of the post-World War II initiative to build a consensus of global ethical standards by which states should be governed. Instead, we are forced to recognise that the extreme violence we are witnessing today is just another episode in a long war waged by the North against the South that has been going on for centuries and shows no sign of abating.

## Keywords

Palestine; Gaza; North-South war; international relations

As the seventeen-year-old Karl Rossman [...] introduced himself to New York's harbour on a slowly advancing ship, he caught sight of the Statue of Liberty in a sudden, strong advance of sunlight. Her arm with the sword rose upwards now [...].  
Franz Kafka, "The Stoker"

Already by the 1980s, Edward Said began to think about Palestine and Palestinians as working in an anachronistic time frame: they were late, caught up in the dynamics of what, for the majority of peoples in the world, was an earlier age of colonial resistance. "Far from being innovators", Said argued in 1986, "we are late-comers, a people in the late twentieth-century trying to gain the right of self-determination that everyone else has..." (62). Today, the idea of Palestinian self-determination has floated even further away like a phantom into the distance and itself seems almost anachronistic – the question now has become one of Palestinian survival. The fundamental assumptions about the world on which the postcolonial was built, those mapped out by Said himself, no longer exist. In some respects, in fact, it has been the world that has gone back, with states regressing into actors of naked self-interest, in which agreements of international law developed over centuries with respect to sovereignty and the conduct of states are no longer observed. As a consequence, today, we have to rethink our own premises in the face of the fact that the post-World War II consensus out of which they were born no longer exists. After the progressive eras of anticolonialism, decolonisation, and (we were told) globalisation, what we have to recognise is that the extreme violence we are

living through today is just one more episode in a long war made by the North on the South that stretches back for centuries and shows no sign of abating. A radical schism has opened up between the eras of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Our world today has forgotten how to be human; the most powerful countries have become nothing but killing machines. Ruthless, without a shred of conscience, in pursuit of human extermination.

What we have been witnessing this century has been a breakdown of the idea that at the highest levels of government, the state should conduct itself with any sense of decency, human values, or the intrinsic worth of human life. Powerful countries now behave without any pretense of conscience or moral values, just as the Germany of the 1930s. The mistake of Said and the postcolonial theory that he inspired was to assume a divide between the moral conscience of the world of the 1930s and that of the 1980s. Today's disregard for the lives of those living in the global South shows that under the mask of apparent change since World War II, we still live in a world in which racism continues to be as much the norm as it was in the colonial and fascist eras, that the lives of those living in the South are worth far less than those who live in the North. Successful resistance to colonization was but a felicitous moment in a much longer war – for the North has been at war with the South continuously throughout the modern era, going back to the Renaissance. In the last hundred years, the Middle East has been targeted for particular punishment, and nowhere more so than Palestine and Gaza. While we protest against what is happening today in Gaza and Lebanon, it's important to be also aware that this is not just an isolated war unconnected to the multiple wars that have been made almost continuously by the North on the South over centuries. We must do as much as we can to resist and stop the war in Gaza and Lebanon, but at the same time, remain alert to the larger political structures of which it forms a part.

In 1960, in a newly discovered speech delivered in Accra during the height of the Algerian War of Independence, Frantz Fanon commented that

colonial war, more than any other war, has the terms of terror and horror incorporated in its principles. And what, in actual fact, have the French armies been doing for the past six years if not terrifying and horrifying the Algerian people? Preventive arrest, collective liquidation, concentration camps, destruction of villages, scorched earth policy, napalm bombings, smoking out, and torture, torture, torture. (Fanon 1960)

Slaughter, slaughter, slaughter: in today's war, terror and horror remain inextricably wedded together. Already in 2009, fifteen years ago, John Berger commented that "Gaza, the largest prison in the world, is being transformed into an abattoir" (Berger 2009, n.p.). A slaughterhouse, a place where animals are butchered.

It is not, though, that we have simply returned to the era of the indiscriminate killing of those who were fighting against colonialism. Something has changed, and it is actually for the

worse. Fanon was making a moral argument against the French, exposing the discrepancy between their pretense of a *mission civilisatrice* in their colonization of Algeria and the reality. The difference now is that there is not even a pretense. The mission is openly one of erasure and extermination of human beings. And what is the more remarkable is that there is no sense whatsoever of shame. The absence of any sense of shame marks the politics of war in our era as profoundly different from that of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

In the early years of the postcolonial, it operated on an underlying assumption and consensus that, at one level, was never questioned: we assumed a gulf between the present and the past whose history we were re-examining. Commentators such as myself, too glibly citing Walter Benjamin's famous aphorism, pointed to the paradoxical discrepancy between the actions of colonialism (barbarism) and its civilizing mission. But we assumed that that moral contradiction was largely of the past, that of a colonial ideology whose pure racism had now been exposed. So, too, with Said. Born in 1935, his formative years were those immediately following World War II, the years of hope that had followed Nazi defeat. His last, posthumous work, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), was still produced out of that twentieth-century milieu but, as with his project for a return to philology, was already archaic as he himself recognised with great percipience. He knew that everything that he represented was already anachronistic. And that is why his "late style" emphasises so strongly the significance of being out of time, out of joint with the era. Already by the time of his death, Said represented the values of the past.

Postcolonial theory, and criticism, whether with Said willingly on board or not, had also taken on that milieu, which were his values, his assumptions, that were born directly out of the Second World War and the unfolding revelations of the horrors of the fascism of Nazi Germany, the Holocaust. Even before the war had ended, two decisive reparative moves were made at the highest international level. If the dynamics of their transformation have now waned away, their interventions do also suggest that it was once possible to transform the amorality of power, perhaps though only when it has reached such an extreme as to explode in the face of overwhelming revulsion not just at the level of individuals but at the level of the state – something that does not yet appear to be the situation today.

The first move was the acknowledgment that fascism, particularly Nazi fascism, had been grounded on racialist ideology that had led to the persecution and killing of millions of Jews, Roma, the disabled, and the mentally ill. While full knowledge of the extent of the material practice of this ideology took at least ten years to emerge, the racist policies of the Nazis were already known even before the war. At that time, their impact was limited because, at a theoretical level, the foundation of Nazi racial theory was simply that of the European and North American racial theory that had been developed since the nineteenth century. The

difference with the Nazis rested on the nationalist conclusions that they drew from it and the extreme state policies which they effected as a consequence. As a result, with the fall of the Nazi regime, the problem of racism was immediately addressed as a part of the political solution designed to create a different world. The founding of the United Nations based on the idea of a responsible, ethical, and democratic world government, already anticipated by the World Federalist Movement founded in 1937 – now largely forgotten but an important influence on its conceptualization and formation – was correlated with this question, leading to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1946, followed by the UNESCO statements on race of 1950-1951. The latter signaled that a global consensus at the level of the governments of the world was being established, that the ideology of a hierarchy of racial differences between humans had been, and must be, totally discredited. This did not mean, of course, that racism suddenly disappeared all over the world – but the point was that, for the first time, the racist assumptions of racialised knowledge and politics were discredited at the highest level. For the first time, it was agreed by states that their governments should not practice racial discrimination or persecution. Of course, it continued nevertheless, particularly in relation to colonial rule. But what was distinctive was that such governments, however racist their attitudes and policies may look today, now generally denied accusations of racism and barbarous killing and claimed to operate on different principles of equality – in public, at least. In doing so, they acknowledged the existence of a general expectation by citizens that the government should uphold values of human decency and fairness at home and abroad.

The second move on the ideological political front after the Second World War concerned the counter-ideology of humanism. This formed the other side of the coin of anti-racism and meant to ground the idea of human rights. Today, we discuss the Universal Declaration primarily in terms of rights, but the idea of the human was more of an innovation. For the hundred years leading up to 1945, almost all energy had been expended on defining racial difference rather than the nature of the human – the differences between peoples rather than their commonality. With the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all humans became henceforth equal, meriting equal treatment and consideration. The philosophy of humanism that followed was also developed in the West at a political level in response to the Soviet Union, which, as is the case for all forms of Marxism, had always asserted the value of the human against the depredations of capitalism, which operates not in the interests of the human beings of the world but those of capital. In the West, as states were signing up to the Universal Declaration, even anti-state writers such as Sartre or Fanon were also proposing humanism as a supreme value – it became a key component of existentialism. Fanon, even while criticizing French and colonial society of racism and therefore lacking in humane values, nevertheless proposed a new humanism that would apply to all human beings, not just white

ones. His critique of humanism was, therefore, absolutely based on humanist values. And this was the world and set of public values in which Edward Said grew up, and like Fanon, he came to centre his political thinking on the same values of the human or, rather, the new humanism that Fanon had called for.

What was remarkable was this post-war consensus: everyone at that time began to espouse the value of the human. As the Cold War developed, the strong attraction of communism and socialism was that they had been founded on humanism all along. In response, the West began to make the same claim more vocally for itself, for the first time identifying its value of freedom with that of the human, not to be sure of the humanity of the community and an existence lived for others, but as a value for the individual. Without, however, emphasising that, as Kafka had recognised in changing the object held by the raised hand of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour from a torch to a sword, the other side of the political ideology of freedom has always been the right to bear arms, the freedom to kill. With the sudden importance of values of the human, western governments quickly abandoned their racist ideology of colonialism and turned to promoting those human activities which engendered and supported the new ideal of humanity, not just by social policies or promoting art and literature but also by expanding those disciplines in the universities that used to be called the Arts (still preserved in the degree title, Bachelor of Arts) but which were gradually and not insignificantly renamed the Humanities.

There has been a lot of fretting in recent years among academics about the decline of the Humanities, how to save the Humanities etc. Those discussions are typically set up in terms of a division between the Humanities and STEM sciences. What's never recognised is that the decline of the Humanities has been a direct consequence of the waning of state support for the Humanities since the end of the Cold War. With socialist humanism safely defeated, there was no need for humanism any more – it could be simply discarded. And hence the decline since the 1990s of any pretence by the state to uphold the values of the Humanities, the storehouse of ethical values of governments and public bodies that were developed after World War II in response to Nazi atrocities.

At the end of World War II, there were many attempts to rethink humanism and to elaborate its basis in the absence of any theological foundation (Sartre, Heidegger, Arendt, Fanon). And equally there was much discussion about the idea of shame (Adorno, Anders, Michel Leiris, Fanon again). Indeed, it was the prevalence of the sense of shame at the moment of the Allied victory that propelled the idea of humanism, as well as the self-critique, that ended in the gradual dismantling of racialism and ethnocentrism. What's different between then and now is not just the decline of the values of humanism in the state but also the total absence of shame at any level with regard to immoral actions that the state may be carrying

out. We are back in the world of Machiavelli and Hobbes. For all the easy attacks on the Enlightenment made over the past thirty years or so, usually transforming it into a single entity, a uniform mode of thought equally prevalent throughout Europe that can be set up like a target in a field at which to shoot leisurely, complacent arrows, it remains the case that however contradictory Enlightenment ideas may have been, and by-passed in practice, governments and states at least paid lip service, tried to appear to be following ethical standards. Perhaps this was the effect of a continuing belief in religion with its forms of morality, but Enlightenment philosophers, not the least of them Kant, had been concerned with making philosophical, rational arguments with regard to moral questions. Certain standards came to be expected in public life and even in the conduct between states – producing agreements such as the 1864 Geneva Convention, for example, the first codified agreement with respect to the treatment of the dead and the wounded on the battlefield. Even war began to be fought by certain agreed rules that introduced a modicum of decency at one level. States and governments attempted to appear at least to be run on defensible ethical standards, however distant from reality. The revelation that they were not caused by embarrassment produced shame. The post-World War II situation generated a whole new initiative to create accountable standards of public life. Those values were no longer based on ideas of civilisation or religion but were affirmed as universal ethical values, and no greater text survives from that period than the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

When I first read Giorgio Agamben's claim in *Homo Sacer* (1998), a book published after the end of the Cold War, that states operated according to other, earlier principles, based on the camp and the reduction of human beings to bare life, I was mystified why after fifty years he was taking us back to the world of the 1930s and early 1940s. But his intervention turned out to be prescient, for what he saw in operation was that states either had never left or were returning to a world of the total absence of human values. In the twenty-first century, politicians no longer even pretend to be decent or to abide by the law when in office; we then see the same thing being openly played out in the international arena. By the same token, ours has been a time when states have given up the pretence of operating by human values. They have stopped being embarrassed by atrocities and genocide. Instead of unethical behaviour in secret, as was often the case in the colonial era, or acts that involved a discrepancy between the moral standards of individual actors and the colonial state, now the states themselves have felt free to practice it openly and proudly, with no sense of shame. A state today can commit genocide not only with impunity but without repercussions. How many countries have broken off diplomatic relations with Israel or the US or recalled their ambassadors in protest at the actions in Gaza and Lebanon? Just eleven, most of them significantly in South America. As many have observed, Israel and the US have become

indistinguishable in this context since the destruction is continuously enabled by the supply of US weapons. As others have also pointed out, the only thing that will make it stop, not just now but in future decades, would be if the supply of weapons were halted. From Germany also, it should not be forgotten.

As Agamben recognised, it's not the horrors of the previous century that thought today, which is politics, has to deal with – it is the horrors of the present one. Postcolonial thinkers never noticed how the realities of the present were creating another framework, such as that prevailed in the days of colonialism, except that it was worse, because it knows no shame, makes not even a pretence at ethical or moral values. And that is another reason the Humanities are declining, not just because their waning mirrors that of human values at the level of the state, but because in defending them, we assume too static a notion of the humanities and the human, as if we can fall back on the humanism of the 1940s and 1950s as adequate concepts for the present. But that moment of universalism born of 1945 is not the world of today. If anywhere, we are back in the world of the 1930s or the 1890s. The world of camps, of genocide, of concentrationist thought is once again our world. Here again, Agamben (1993) saw better. We have to rethink the assumptions on which the idea of the human was built, because they are no longer operative today. The Humanities will decline as long as they look backwards, rather than open themselves up to the present conditions in which the value of the human is once again no longer recognised as a universal. We are back in a world where there are humans and non-humans, those whose lives are of no account, and perhaps in truth, we never left it. The humanism of the late twentieth century has been defeated or discarded. The problem with that humanism was that the human was identified with Leonardo's Vitruvian man: a universal man but not one in history.

It is our task to reconceptualise the human under the historical conditions of today – in the world in which we live composed of inhuman states. We are not born human; we become human. Humanity is not a given.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Timothy Bewes's important *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) discusses the question of shame as articulated in some literary and philosophical texts in that earlier era.

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