Gaza and the legacy of the British imperial master narrative: a decolonial reading

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ABSTRACT

The Palestinian issue is the bloodiest wound caused by settler colonialism in the last one hundred years, rooted in the history of 19th-century European imperialism and, even more so, in the history of British imperial and colonial history. Indeed, Britain has played a big and pivotal role in controlling and managing what the decolonial thinkers call "coloniality of power" through history. This article tries to trace the "origin" of the Palestinian Question historically and epistemologically by reading against the grain the master narrative of the British Empire in the Middle East since the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

Keywords

Palestine, British Empire, Nakba, modernity/coloniality, verbicide, genocide

Introduction

As I write, bombs continue to be poured relentlessly on the people of Gaza, who have no escape, by the Israeli government. Since October 8th, the day after Hamas's attack, IDF (Israeli Defence Army) have shelled hospitals and cemeteries, schools and universities, churches and mosques, killing defenceless civilians, women and children above all (70%). The Nakba that started in 1948 still goes on. The Nakba, that chronologically followed the Shoah (both words mean "catastrophe"), as a matter of fact has never ended. The two terms and things (Nakba/Shoah) are inextricably interwoven. As the Jewish refugee philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote, soon after the birth of Israel, the Jewish question was solved by colonizing a territory and so producing "a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people" (Arendt 1979, 290). In this regard, it is poignant to quote Israeli filmmaker Hadar Morag, who talks of when her grandmother arrived in Israel after the Shoah and the Jewish Agency promised her a house:

She had nothing, her entire family was exterminated. She waited for a long time in a tent, in an extremely precarious situation. They then took her to Ajami, in Jaffa, to a beautiful beach house. She saw that on the table there were still the dishes of the Arabs who lived there and who had been kicked away. So she went back to the agency and said "take me back to the tent, I will never do to anyone else what was done to me." (Khan 2023)

This woman did not want to be the victim who becomes the perpetrator, and it was only by recognizing her pain in the pain of the other that she broke, if only on a personal level, the chain of violence. Almost a century has passed, and that chain has not yet been broken at the State level. To try to understand why that chain is still unbroken, we have to recall what Iain Chambers calls "deep history," a history that the West removes or represses. A history that haunts the present:

Il passato non è passato. E non è nemmeno un semplice fantasma del presente. Il linguaggio stesso utilizzato, sia che ci si riferisca al «Medio Oriente», agli «arabi» o allo Stato etnico suprematista di Israele come 'democrazia', tradisce le coordinate coloniali della sua costituzione. (Chambers 2024)

What is attempted here is to historically and epistemologically trace the "origin" of those coordinates by reading against the grain the master narrative of the British Empire about Palestine. It has played a big and pivotal role in controlling and managing what the decolonial thinkers call "coloniality of power."[1]

The British and the Zionists

The Palestinian issue is the bloodiest wound caused by settler colonialism in the last one hundred years, rooted in the history of 19th-century European imperialism and, even more so, in the history of British imperial and colonial history. To put it blatantly, without the systematic political, economic, military and ideological support of the British, the foundations of Israel as a Zionist project would have hardly been laid (Ali 2022).

Zionism was born in the late nineteenth century as a movement for the liberation of the discriminated Jews, at a time when anti-Semitism was very aggressive, and when European imperialism, with its colonial territorial expansion, had reached its zenith. It was in this context that Theodor Herzl launched the Zionist project, implicating the occupation of a land somewhere outside of Europe: Argentine, Uganda or Palestine. Palestine was finally chosen on the biblical, and so mythical, reason that it was the Jews' ancient home. As he wrote in 1896, this Jewish settlement in the Middle East was to "be a sector of the wall of Europe against Asia […], the outpost of civilization against barbarism" (Herzl 1896), and in return the whole of Europe would finally guarantee the building of a home-nation for the Jews: a colonial project justified by the rhetoric of civilization and supported by the nationalist ideology (one people, one state), which involved the expropriation of other people's land. In his diaries, Herzl states that in Palestine the penniless population was to be spirited "across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country," adding that "both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly" (Herzl 1960, 88). The project, if discreetly, sheerly colonial, and thus fully belonging to the history of Western modernity, based its strategy on the

legalization of dispossession in the name of progress and civilization. From the infamous Iberian *Requerimiento* of the 1500s[2] to the British concept of *Terra nullius* of the 1700s,[3] these were the foundational tenets of colonial policy deployed to justify indigenous dispossession from their land. This is why the Zionist colonization of Palestine is rooted in the long European modern/colonial history,[4] whose main ideological precepts have been nationalism and imperialism, in other words the territorial expansion of the Nation. In particular, it was made possible by the British teachings and practices of material and immaterial dispossession of non-Western others.

Despite presenting itself as the representative of an oppressed people without land to be liberated, Zionism was born as a political movement which sought its ethnic roots in a mythical dimension (narration) and its boundaries roots (nation) in that of fantasy (Bhabha 1990). Moreover, in order to weaken the Ottoman Empire, the British tried to convert also the Palestinian elites to nationalism, with the tragic deception of denying them a nation after promising it and putting an end to the coexistence (past and future) of Arabs and Jews. Then, the whole British colonial-imperial epistemological paraphernalia was offered to the Zionist movement, above all, the narrative of the "civilizing mission" that, as Conrad famously wrote in *Heart of Darkness*, was "an unselfish belief in the idea something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer sacrifice to" on the altar of the supposed Progress of humanity. Thanks to this "unselfish belief," it could be taken for granted that a great colonial power, the British Empire, could decide to offer a "land without a people to a people without land," to follow the Zionist myth that accompanied the birth of the State of Israel.

Balfour's Tragic Declaration

The "founding" moment of Israel is the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which according to Said was not just an expression of an opinion, but "a statement of policy that radically altered the course of history, if not for the whole world, then certainly for the 700.000 Arabs and their descendants, whose land was being pronounced upon" (Said 1992, 17). I think Said was not exaggerating by talking about world history if, a century later, the fate of world geopolitics is still deeply intertwined with the Palestinian Question.

What is the Balfour Declaration? It is the letter from the British Foreign Secretary James Balfour (former Prime Minister) addressed to Lord Rothschild, a major representative of the Zionist movement at that time, in which he declared that His Majesty's government was committed to considering favourably "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." As a result of this declaration and the confirmation of the commitment during the British Mandate in Palestine (following the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire and the secret Sykes-Picot agreements of 1916 between France and the UK), the Zionist movement succeeded in having the promise of a land where a wandering, persecuted and nationless

people could settle. The only problem is that this was decided without consultation with the local inhabitants, who then endured a colonization process like every other people in the history of European expansion since 1492. As Zionist historian Hans Kohn confesses:

We have been in Palestine for twelve years [since the British mandate] without having even once made a serious attempt at seeking through negotiations the consent of the indigenous people. We have been relying exclusively upon Great Britain's military might … For twelve years we pretended that the Arabs did not exist. (Cit. in Kamel 2015, 84)

Of course, the Zionist Jews did not get this present for nothing in return. It was implied that they, European Jews, were supposed to stand in defence of Western geopolitical interests in the Middle East (Herzl's wall or outpost of civilization against Eastern barbarism). In the first place, the interests of the British, which had long thought themselves "peculiarly fitted to lead and govern the populations of the East," as already said in 1853 by Colonel Charles Henry Churchill, when thinking of a solution for the Zionists in Palestine (see Kamel 2015, 9). To implement this design, the Zionist Jews seem to be perfectly suited especially after that the French preceded the British in building the Suez Canal in 1869, through which to navigate the *passage* to India (the main British imperial asset in the East). According to Thomas Clarke, the author of *India and Palestine, or the Restoration of the Jews* (1861), the British and the Jews were 'natural allies': if Britain had become great for trade, especially through the axis connecting the three great continents [the Mediterranean route to the East], and if the Jews were essentially a merchant people, who better than the latter "should be planted along that great highway of ancient traffic?" (see Kamel 2015, 10). The concrete answer to this mid-19th-century question was given at the beginning of the new century and, later on, this alliance was realized involving also the emerging American power. It was a young Joe Biden who blatantly declared in 1986: "Were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interest in the region" (Ayyash 2023). President Barak Obama, too, once said that the alliance with Israel is "unbreakable." It is still so, if on the very same day, on the one hand, the US ask Netanyahu not to attack the anthill of human despair that Rafah has become in the Strip and, on the other, they decide to send more lethal weapons in support of the Israeli government's genocidal policy.

In high words, the Zionists proposed themselves as facilitators in the economic and political penetration operations of Western capitalism in the post-Ottoman Middle East. Indeed, in a 1947 letter addressed to the *New York Times* from six notable Americans, it is stated that "American interests […] dictate speedy modernization of the Middle East in all the spheres of human endeavor" and the solution was Jewish Palestine, the only "vanguard of progress and modernization in the Middle East" (in Said 1992, 30). And this could only happen with the partition of Palestine in favour of the minority but more "advanced" Jewish population, to which the newly formed UN, through Resolution 181, gave 55% of the Palestinian territory. The

Palestinians, the majority of the population (63%), refused and waged a war with the support of the Arab Legion. At the end of the war that the Arabs lost, the Israelis seized 75% of the territory and drove away about 750,000 Palestinians from their homes (more than half of the Arab population at the time) through a full-fledged ethnic cleansing operation (Pappé 2018). The Palestinians, as previously mentioned, call this trauma Nakba, "catastrophe," the Israeli "War of independence."

Shoah and Nakba: two words for a similar modern/colonial destiny

Said argues that the experiences of Jews and Palestinians are intimately linked, and not just because one catastrophe (the Shoah) became the cause of another similar catastrophe (the Nakba) (Bashair-Goldberg 2018). If we pause for a moment, both the Shoah and the Nakba are products of the structural racism of Western modernity, the roots of which lie in the history of the conquest of America and the *Reconquista* of Arab Spain (Grossfoguel 2009). Both events date 1492 and are informed by the racial, ante-litteram, violence of European Christendom. In the case of the *Reconquista,* it was a violence against the "dark skinned" Arabs and Jews practicing the "wrong religion," which in Andalusia spoiled the purity of Christian blood that needed to be cleansed (*limpieza de sangre*). In the case of the conquest of America it was a violence against the "red-skinned" and "religionless" (as Columbus wrote) natives in the New World. The tragic paradox is that Jews (or Marranos) and Arabs (or Moriscos) - two Semitic peoples both persecuted first in the Iberian Peninsula, then throughout Europe - remained united in this fate until twentieth-century Orientalism separated them, keeping the definition of anti-Semitism for the Jews only. To Lawrence of Arabia, for example, the Semites who, by the way, have no philosophical system or complex mythology, were the Arabs (Lawrence 1973).

The tragic paradox, as mentioned, is that the Arab Semites have ended up being persecuted by the Jewish Semites. And paradox within a paradox, when Arabs rebel against Israeli occupation-persecution in Palestine, they are perversely accused of anti-Semitic racism. As Muin Bseiso (1926–1984) writes, "according to the Israeli occupation, everything in Gaza - our history books, our atlases, even the very word 'Palestine' - is anti-Semitic." (in Elhalabi 2024). Hence the current systematic destruction of universities in Gaza, even though they are not an actual military threat.

One of the hidden reasons that drove the Europeans to provide a national home for the Jews was because they felt guilty for their extermination in the Nazi camps and during the Czarist pogroms. The problem was that to make reparation for the sins, for the horrors of their own internal colonial deeds, Europe found nothing but the usual colonial procedures. The stench of this original sin can be smelled most clearly in the pages of the 1919 Balfour Memorandum:

The four great powers are committed to Zionism and Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long tradition, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desire and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land. (Said 1992, 16-17)

Thus, the paradigm is still that of the nineteenth-century racist anthropology: there are cultures and peoples that occupy a high position in the ladder of civilization and other cultures and peoples that are lower down. And there is nothing to be done even in the face of the overwhelming quantitative data (historical and statistical), which testify of a land, Palestine, populated for many centuries and until then by 80% of Muslims. Whose "desires," at least according to Balfour, were not as profound as those of the Jews, who in 1922 constituted only 10% of the total population, the remaining 10% being Christians. Obviously, here Balfour was talking about the hopes of the Zionist Jews, that is to say European subjects excelling so much as to make the existence of the natives marginal or invisible. In this regard, it is interesting to recall Ben-Zvi's words, the second president of Israel's history, who, comparing the British colonial administration in Egypt and the Israeli administration in Palestine, states that, if the British sought only their own good and not that of the Egyptians, the Israelis were to unite with the ancient world of the East bringing their "*brethren to the race*, a real culture, a culture of existence not a fictional one" and thus candidly solving the age-old "problem of the East" (see Pappé 2008, 618; my emphasis). In these words, there is a sort of combination between the European civilizer and the Oriental (Semitic) other: a hybrid subject genuinely altruistic toward the *pure* Orientals, who, by relying on the European Jews finally could solve their "Oriental" problems. It was a pity, though, that once again behind the mask of the noble civilizer there was the usual ruthless face of the colonizer without "restraint," as Conrad put it.

It should come as no surprise that the politician who signed the 1917 declaration was Balfour, who had considerably contributed to the rule of the British Empire that far. Like so many other British politicians of his generation he believed in the existence of "subordinate races" that should remain such, following, as it has been said, the nineteenth-century racist anthropology. Moreover, what Balfour also followed was the dictates of biblical Orientalism. Despite his somehow anti-Semitic views, he strongly sympathized with what he called "the ancient people of God" and saw the Zionist movement as an instrument of geopolitical Providence.

In some well-known pages of *Orientalism*, Said introduces the Scotsman Balfour to us as one of the most influential British politicians as far as colonial affairs were concerned, both internal and external ones. He had served the British crown since the 1870s, earlier as First Secretary of Ireland and Scotland, later as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, dealing with imperial matters ranging from Afghanistan to Egypt to South Africa. It was with this pedigree that he appeared in the House of Commons in 1910 to convince MPs that the British presence in Egypt was a right thing, both for Egyptians and for Europeans, adding:

It is not a question of superiority and inferiority. I suppose a true Eastern sage would say that the working *government which we have taken upon ourselves* in Egypt and elsewhere is not a work worthy of a philosopher - that it is the dirty work, the inferior work, of carrying on the necessary labour. (quoted in Said 1978, 33; my emphasis)

Therefore, given the Egyptian educated class's repudiation of public governance and given this people's historical habit of living under authoritarian forms of government (the infamous Oriental despotism), it was clear that such a burden should fall on the back of the British. They, anciently accustomed to democracy, willingly govern the Egyptians for the good of Eastern and Western civilization. Of course, Said points out that Balfour does not even attempt to prove that Egyptians appreciated the benefits provided by the British occupation. Nor does he let the Egyptians speak for themself. With these assumptions, it is more than natural that it could not have occurred to Balfour, a few years later, to consult the Palestinians before promising their land to Zionist Jews.

From Balfour to Churchill: From bad to worse

After Balfour, Winston Churchill in his capacity as Minister of Colonies also played an important role in facilitating the implementation of the Zionist project. In 1921, when an Arab delegation in Jerusalem asked to stop Jewish immigration, Churchill replied that it was not within his power or his will to repudiate the Balfour Declaration. And his stances were not dissimilar to Balfour's:

We think [the Jewish national home] will be good for the world, good for the Jews and good for the British Empire, but also good for the Arabs who dwell in Palestine and we intend it to be so; *they shall not be supplanted nor shall they suffer* but they shall share in the benefits of Zionism (cited in Dockter 2015, 175; my emphasis).

The arrogant and hypocritical tone of the words was typical of the colonial master who, like Balfour, knew what was good for the "the new-caught sullen peoples," to say it after Kipling ("The White Man's Burden"). Even more so, because Churchill in the wake of Wilfrid Blunt and T.E. Lawrence, through whom he had come to know the Islamic world, considered the Palestinians the worst among the already bad Arabs. On the contrary, the Jews are "the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has ever appeared in the world" (Churchill 1920), he wrote in one of the few articles he published on the topic. His stance towards the Zionist movement was not always so clear cut, since his endorsement of the Jewish cause was not always consistent. According to Tariq Ali, his reasoning veered from pure instrumentalism (Jews were useful to the British Empire for their battle against Arabs and Bolsheviks) to civilisational racism. It was indisputable that, unlike some of his colleagues, blatant racism was always an integral part of Churchill's political character (Ali 2022).

Indeed, Churchill's racism was as old as 1899, when he covered as an embedded journalist the war against the Sudanese who wanted to free themselves from the Anglo-

Egyptian yoke. In his reportage *The River War. An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan*, his judgment of the damage caused by Mohammedan culture on black primitive culture was stark. According to young Churchill, in Africa the Arabs had created "a debased and cruel breed, more shocking because they are more intelligent than the primitive savages" (Churchill 1902, 8). Churchill's racist views came out blatantly in the proceedings of the 1937 Peel Commission, which was established after the violent suppression of the Arab revolt, a reaction to the systematic discrimination to which Palestinians were subjected in favour of Jewish settlers under the British Mandate. The committee interrogated Churchill about the questionable way of governing, given the brutal methods employed which, though not comparable to those of the Italians in Addis Ababa (the reference was to Mussolini's massacres in Ethiopia), had nevertheless caused the destruction of entire villages. Churchill replied harshly that they had the right to go hard thanks to their authority. Then, casting off his mask, he added:

I do not admit that the dog in the manger has the final right to the manger, though he may have lain there for a very long time [. . .] I do not admit for instance that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been to those people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher grade race or. . . a more worldly wise race. . . has come in and taken their place. I do not admit it. . . I do not think the Red Indians had any right to say 'the American continent belongs to us' (quoted in Dockter 2015, 178).

Kipling's natives, "half-devil and half-child," with Churchill have now turned into ordinary dogs. If Western imperialism was implicitly genocidal from the very beginning of the colonial settlement process, it goes without saying that to an imperialist and supremacist like Churchill, although he declared the Palestinians were not to be displaced, they had no actual right to exist as a people.

"Palestinians do not exist": dehumanization and genocide/epistemicide/verbicide

Ten years after these declarations, in 1948, the Palestinians would suffer a fate similar to that of the Native Americans, as they would be massacred or expelled *en masse*, just like dogs from a kennel, from their own land. It is easy for Said to comment bitterly: "For whatever it may have done for Jews, Zionism essentially saw Palestine as the European imperialist did, as an empty territory paradoxically 'filled' with ignoble or perhaps even dispensable natives" (Said 1992, 81). In short, we are in the brutal colonial depths of de-indigenization and its tragic fiction of *Terra nullius*.

For Walter Mignolo, the legalization of the expropriation of territories by Europeans was "a foundational strategy of the rhetoric of modernity (constitution) and the logic of coloniality (destitution)" (Mignolo 2021, 172). Therefore, the Israeli-Palestinian question is more than a local and present-bound issue. Understanding it within the colonial horizon of modernity sheds

light on how the colonial matrix of power works and what fundamental role the category of the nation-state has played in its formation and transformation. Ultimately, the Israeli-Palestinian question is embedded in the global order, whose historical foundations are to be disclosed in the so called European violent "discovery" of America (Mignolo 2021). The presentation strategy that a young Palestinian man adopted during a public speech on Gaza events now becomes clearer to me: instead of talking about Palestine and the Palestinians, he spoke mostly about the massacre of Native Americans and their bison (showing the notorious photo of the huge mountain of bison skulls with a proudly posing white man at its base), connecting it only at the end to the risk of extinction of the Palestinian black goats and their herders.

From the beginning, the Israeli plan has been erasing the existence of the Palestinians through their physical (genocide) and cultural (epistemicide) elimination. Churchill *docet*: Israeli Jews, in their capacity as "a higher grade race," were permitted to do to the Palestinians what the British did to the "Red Indians of America" and the "black people of Australia." As a matter of fact, the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé reminds us that, on March 10, 1948, the Zionists initiated a specific plan: the so-called "Plan D" or "Dalet Plan" (Dalet means "plan" in Hebrew). This plan contained the description of the methods to be used to drive out the population by force: siege and bombardment, burning and demolition of houses, mines in the rubble to prevent the return of the inhabitants (nothing new, we could say, compared to the current destruction of Gaza, except for the much more monstrous intensity). In short, after a six-month operation, "more than half of the original Palestinian population, nearly 800,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages destroyed and 11 urban neighbourhoods emptied of their inhabitants" (Pappé 2007, xiii). We are talking about a genocidal action that began then and has continued over the decades. Pappé, indeed, speaks of "incremental genocide" as the correct term to describe the Zionist policy of elimination of Palestinians over time in Gaza and in the Occupied Territories.[5] Reading his passage at length is worth the effort:

after the onset of Operation Cast Lead in 2009, I have opted to call the Israeli policy an incremental genocide. I hesitated before using this highly charged term, and yet cannot find another to accurately describe what happened. Since the responses I received, among others from some leading human rights activists, indicated that a certain unease accompanies such usage of the term, I was inclined to rethink it for a while, but came back to employing it recently with an even stronger conviction: it is the only appropriate way of describing what the Israeli army has been doing in the Gaza Strip since 2006. (Pappé 2018, 123)

What has happened in Gaza since October 7th clears away any residual doubts. But how is a genocide designed? It is devised through the usual process of dehumanizing the colonised other. A process that Jews knew too well on their own skin, their extermination having been conducted as a "trivial" but efficient bureaucratic activity, as if it did not concern human beings (see Arendt 2006). Theodor Adorno, the Jewish philosopher who repaired to America to save himself from Nazi raids just before the finding of the lagers, spoke of the "instrumental reason"

of the Enlightenment: methodical and scientific not only in advancing humanity but also in regressing it to bestial levels. In fact, Nazi methods were frequently used in previous centuries by whites on blacks. This is why Aimé Césaire puts us in front of a mirror when he reminds us that after all what bourgeois Europe

ne pardonne pas à Hitler, ce *n'est* pas le crime en soi, le crime contre l'homme, ce n'est que l'humiliation de l'homme en soi, c'est le crime contre l'homme blanc, et d'avoir appliqué à l'Europe des procédés colonialistes dont ne relevaient jusqu'ici que les Arabes d'Algérie, les coolies de l'Inde et les nègres d'Afrique. (Césaire 1955, 87-88)

This is the Nazi scandal. And his pupil Franz Fanon utters definitive words about it: "Le malheur de l'homme de couleur est d'avoir été esclavagisé. Le malheur et l'inhumanité du Blanc sont d'avoir tué l'homme quelque part. Sont, encore aujourd'hui, *d'organiser rationnellement cette déshumanisation*" (Fanon 1952, 187, my emphasis).

If we keep Fanon's words well in mind, it is not difficult to understand what the decolonial thinkers mean by "coloniality of being" (Monaldo-Torres 2007). Because of this specific coloniality, in the history of modernity individuals have been distinguished between humans (the colonizers) and sub-humans or non-humans (the colonized). If according to the Cartesian cogito, one exists because one thinks, it is clear that if the subject is animalized, there is an absence of thought, and therefore of humanity. Which is, by the way, the 18th century version of the so-called 16th century Valladolid debate on the intellectual and religious capacity of the American Indians.

Churchill's simile between Palestinians and dogs is just one more tragic confirmation of the coloniality of being. And speaking of dogs, Somdeep Sen in his recent field study in Palestine reports a dialogue between an Israeli tour guide and his customer, following an attack at gunpoint on passers-by in Jerusalem by two Palestinian teenagers, who wanted to avenge a brother of theirs who was shot in the head by an Israeli soldier. The guide explains that life there worked like this: whether or not they were teenagers with only scissors in their hands made no difference; they had to be eliminated. Just as, he adds, a pregnant woman killed in Gaza: "crazy dogs get pregnant too. That doesn't mean that we don't kill them" (Sen 2020, 21).

This episode in all its narrative heinousness, however, pales in the face of the violent "genocidal messages" of the Israeli rulers after the Oct. 7 attack; messages that were brought by the U.N. International Court of Justice as evidence in support of the hypothesis of genocide in the Gaza Strip. Suffice here to just quote the Defence Minister Gallant, after ordering a "complete siege" of the Gaza Strip: "We *are* fighting *human animals* and we are acting accordingly" (Fabian 2023, my emphasis). After all, according to the typical zoological process of the colonist referring "constantly to the bestiary" (Fanon 2004, 7), in Israeli discourses Palestinians have always been considered animals: grasshoppers, rabbits, cockroaches. That is why, Mourid Barghouti speaks of verbicide:

The Israeli occupation imposes a double, triple, endless redefinition of the Palestinian. Call him militant, outlaw, criminal, terrorist, irrelevant, cancer, cockroach, serpent, virus-- the list becomes endless. Be the one who makes the definitions. Define! Classify! Demonize! Misinform! Simplify! Stick on the label! Then send in the tanks! Kill the enemy! (Barghouti 2011, 41).

Also the *refusenik*, the Israeli conscientious objectors who refuse to become militaries, testify that a soldier is persuaded that the Palestinians are subhuman. This is how savagery becomes institutional. As U.N. Secretary General António Guterres has said, "It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum" (Guterres 2023). Where did they happen? In the context of nearly a century of dehumanization of the Palestinians to the point of their *en mass* physical elimination.

As to Boa ventura De Sousa Santos, in order to perform a genocide, another kind of killing is needed: epistemicide, or "the murder of knowledge" (Santos 2016, 149). It is the systematic erasure of the cultural-historical existence of a people from maps, history and geography books, and archives; the destruction of archaeological sites, museums, universities, mosques; the appropriation of cultural products (even food). Only via decades of epistemicide and verbicide, can one get to the recent ludicrous postulate by the current PM Netanyahu's son who tweeted: "there is no such thing as Palestine because the letter 'P' does not appear in the Arabic alphabet" (Middle East Eye 2019). Palestine in Arabic (Falasteen) has no "p" just like in Hebrew there is no "j" in the words "Jew" or "Jerusalem".

To return to our basic argument, the claim "a land without a people" has required the invisibilisation of Palestinians. Through this epistemological device, a legacy of the colonial matrix of power, in Palestine there was no people worthy of the name. As Chaim Weizmann wrote to Balfour in 1918, it was true that there were five Arabs for every Jew in Palestine, and that therefore everything led to the creation of an Arab Palestine, but only if there were "an Arab people in Palestine." For, he specifies, "the fellah [peasant] is at least four centuries behind the times, and the effendi [landowner] is dishonest, uneducated, greedy, and as unpatriotic as he is inefficient" (see Said 1992*,* 27-28). Fortunately, though, there were the de-orientalised Zionist Jews who – unlike Palestinians in a kennel (Churchill) and the prejudiced Arabs (Balfour) - had already emancipated themselves from the Oriental problems and could contribute to the wealth of the nations by creating a modern people, i.e. a nation-state, in Palestine. After almost a century of modern/colonial rhetoric and thanks to the actual grammar of coloniality, there is only one state: Zionist Israel.

To close after Mourid Barghouti, both verbicide and epistemicide lead to genocide and if we want to get decolonial justice "the battle for language" has to be stubbornly fought. Alas, we are far from seeing that horizon yet. Nevertheless, let us consider these pages like stones to be thrown against the tanks of the "coloniality of the present", as Gaia Giuliani puts it. Articulating Quijano's concept of "coloniality of power", she insists on it to "capture the persistence of colonial mentality and its variations according to modes of accumulation and

conservative 'grammars of the nation'" (Giuliani, forthcoming). Thanks to the colonial Anglosphere, Israel has kept coloniality according to a national grammar that is the most brutal and dehumanizing grammar in the global present.

Notes

[1] The decolonial concept of "coloniality of power", devised by Aníbal Quijano, refers to an epistemological power structure, a matrix, having an intimate relation with race, European modernity, capitalism, and knowledge (see Quijano 2024).

[2] The declaration-injunction of sovereignty read by the conquistadores to the natives of the New World to regularize the conquest.

[3] John Locke's possessive individualism and his labour theory of property provided a base for the legal doctrine of *terra nullius,* or desert (uninhabited) and uncultivated land, to be legally dispossessed because not industriously and rationally cultivated by the natives.

[4] From a decolonial perspective, "modern/colonial" means that there is no modernity without coloniality: coloniality is the dark and invisibilised side of modernity (Mignolo 2020). In other words, coloniality is constitutive of modernity, in the same way as the Atlantic slave trade is constitutive of European civilization.

[5] The Israeli historian points out: "Connecting the dots of killings between a period of a few months when 'only' a small number of people are being shot daily and massacres that spread over more than 70 years is something that is not easily accepted as proof of genocidal policies" (Pappé 2023).

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