

HABERMAS AND OTHERS: THE WEST'S INTELLECTUAL WORLD AND BLINDNESS TOWARD PALESTINE

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- What was the post-Oct. 7 stance of Western thinkers and intellectuals?
 - Why does the Western intellectual world ignore Palestine?
- Why have thinkers, who believe the Palestinians are right and support them, become targets of 'lynching'?

Philosophy's ability to identify, make visible, debate and aim to solve problems with the present has made it important and indispensable for centuries. Such pursuits, regardless of their ability to yield solutions, triggered historic shifts at different points in time. Those ruptures were powerful enough to mark the end of a given age and the beginning of the next. The Reformation, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were among the most significant ruptures to date. In this sense, it is crucial for philosophy to respond to the needs, problems and crises of the present to remain important and functional. That is why thinkers and philosophers have a great responsibility.

Israel's ongoing massacre in Palestine remains the single greatest humanitarian and moral crisis that humanity faces today. Israel has doubled down on its war crimes and crimes against humanity, which it has been committing for years in Palestine, since October 7, 2023. It would seem, however, that the West's values and supposed moral superiority, which it derived from its material superiority and has imposed on the world by building on it, revealed their true face in the form of its response to what is happening in Gaza today. After all, Western thinkers and intellectuals appear to

have very little to say about the massacre unfolding in front of the world's eyes.

Although the Western intellectual world was overwhelmingly silent on Palestine, a group of intellectuals, including Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler and Jürgen Habermas, took it upon themselves to end that silence. Yet some of their statements were impartial and passive whereas the rest completely supported Israel. This piece analyzes how the West's leading thinkers and intellectuals reacted to Israel's post-Oct. 7 conduct in Gaza.

ŽIŽEK OFFERS SUPPORT TO ISRAEL, SYMPATHY TO PALESTINE

Slavoj Žižek's Oct. 13 essay for Project Syndicate started with a call to condemn "Hamas's outrageous acts of terrorism ... unconditionally" and proceeded to describe the Oct. 7 attack as a "pogrom." Arguing that Hamas aimed to "destroy the state of Israel and all Israelis" on that date, the author nonetheless highlighted the importance of understanding the relevant historical context – including last decade's suicide attacks and how Benjamin Netanyahu's government was turning Israel into a theocratic state. Still, the Slovenian interpreted the war between Israel and Palestine with refer-

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ence to ultra-nationalism and ultra-nationalist groups – which resembled his past comments— and argued that “ Hamas and Israeli hardliners are two sides of the same coin ” before concluding as follows: “ Utopian as this may sound, the two struggles are of a piece. We can and should unconditionally support Israel’s right to defend itself against terrorist attacks. But we also must unconditionally sympathize with the truly desperate and hopeless conditions faced by Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied territories.”¹

The first reason why Žižek’s piece jumped out at the reader was his decision to call Hamas’s attack a “ pogrom ” – a Russian word essentially meaning genocide. That phrase, which generally refers to mass violence in the Russian language, was originally used to describe acts of violence against Russia’s Jewish community. Over the following years and decades, pogrom was associated with attempted genocidal acts against Jews and others.² In this sense, the author described the Oct. 7 attack as a pogrom despite referring to Israel’s assault on Palestine as self-defense – significantly milder language that almost legitimizes what is happening. Likewise, he called on the reader to support Israel unconditionally while merely offering unconditional sympathy to the Palestinians.

It was no less noteworthy that Žižek highlighted the importance of the historical context of the Israeli-Palestinian war before discussing that context in an extremely shallow manner. Indeed, he traces back that historical context to the Palestinian suicide attacks, which occurred just a decade ago, despite highlighting its importance before arguing that the situation deteriorated under Benjamin Netanyahu’s government. At the same time, Žižek maintains that there are ultra-nationalists in Israel and Palestine alike who favor a fight to the death – which is why, he says, peace and negotiations remain unlikely. It is necessary to point out that the author portrays the “ struggle ” as a fight

between equals as opposed to a clash of asymmetrical powers. However, reducing the Israeli-Palestinian war to a struggle between ultra-nationalist groups oversimplifies the inhumane situation, which has persisted for long years, and plays down its severity and seriousness.

Slavoj Žižek made headlines yet again on 18 October, when he spoke at the Frankfurt Book Fair – whose openly pro-Israeli management had just cancelled an award ceremony for Palestinian author Adania Shibli. Describing that decision as “ scandalous, ” the Slovenian started his speech by unconditionally condemning Hamas’s attack and recognizing Israel’s right to self-defense.³ He was compelled to reiterate those points several times due to his audience’s negative reaction yet underscored that people were being massacred in Gaza, there can be no peace in the Middle East without addressing the Palestinian question and it was necessary to hear the Palestinians out.⁴ Those remarks admittedly added some level of humanity to his notably noncommittal essay. It is possible to argue that Žižek changed his tone due to Israel’s Oct. 17 attack against the Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital that claimed many civilian lives. In other words, intellectuals seem willing to tolerate civilian casualties until they become statistically worthy of their reaction – which is noteworthy.

JUDITH BUTLER’S WEAK VOICE AND THE COMPASS OF MOURNING

Judith Butler also received attention in recent days for her remarks –which, albeit not particularly strong, were somewhat bolder than what Slavoj Žižek had to say. In an Oct. 19 essay for the London Review of Books, the Jewish thinker condemned Hamas’s attack “ without qualification. ” Notwithstanding, she stressed that Israel had been committing overwhelming acts of violence against Palestine which resulted in the killing, dispossession and torture of Palestinians: “ From systematised land seizures to routine airstrikes, arbi-

1. Slavoj Žižek, “ The Real Dividing Line in Israel-Palestine ”, Project Syndicate, 13 Ekim 2023.

2. History, “ Pogroms ”, https://www.history.com/topics/european-history/pogroms#section_9, (Erişim Tarihi: 16 Kasım 2023).

3. Saeed Saeed, “ Slavoj Zizek Brands Frankfurt Book Fair 'Scandalous' for Cancelling Palestinian's Award ”, The National News, 18 Ekim 2023.

4. Elizabeth Grenier, “ Israel-Hamas War Impacts Frankfurt Book Fair ”, DW, 18 Ekim 2023.

trary detentions to military checkpoints, and enforced family separations to targeted killings, Palestinians have been forced to live in a state of death, both slow and sudden.”⁵ Still, Butler posited that Israeli violence would not absolve Hamas.

To sum up, the author condemned Hamas’s attack yet placed what happened into its historical context that included the long-standing inhumane treatment of the Palestinians. Still, she had to repeatedly stress that contextualization must not be seen as absolution or whitewashing.

Judith Butler also criticized the media for failing to “detail the horrors that Palestinian people have lived through for decades” and insisted that letting people know about the violence, mourning and anger experienced by Israelis alone was not alright – that we must highlight that the Palestinians, too, experience them. Failure to do that, she warned, would amount to “racism.”

Recalling that she subscribes to a politics of non-violence, Butler wrote that “without equality and justice, without an end to the state violence conducted by a state, Israel, that was itself founded in violence, no future can be imagined” before asking for a world “that would ... support Palestinian self-determination and freedom.”

87 academics and thinkers, including Butler and the feminist author Nancy Fraser, proceeded to issue a statement condemning the massacre in Gaza and urging their colleagues to join them. They stressed that it would be a mistake to trace the origin of the ongoing violence to Hamas’s Oct. 7 attack, provided that the West Bank and Gaza had been under occupation for 56 years, and argued that it was time to make peace.⁶

That call on academics and thinkers to speak up against the massacre, however, faced serious criticism from many people. Seyla Benhabib, a professor of political science and philosophy at Yale University, accused the authors of glorifying Hamas and Hamas’s

Oct. 7 attack as a legitimate act of resistance against an occupying force. She nonetheless conceded that Israel deserved to be condemned for failing to have done everything in its power to not bomb the civilian population of Gaza, where over 9000 had been killed at the time. Still, Benhabib claimed that Hamas had deliberately stored its weapons beneath hospitals and mosques – which, she said, could not be disregarded.⁷

JÜRGEN HABERMAS AND THE “PRINCIPLES OF SOLIDARITY”

Most recently, Jürgen Habermas, Nicole Deitelhoff, Rainer Forst and Klaus Günther published an open letter titled “A Statement on the Principles of Solidarity” in which they argued that Hamas’s attack – whose intention, they claimed, was to “eliminate Jewish life” – prompted Israel to retaliate. In this context, the authors fundamentally agreed with Israel, warning that it would be wrong to accuse that country of intending to commit genocide. Meanwhile, the letter referred to Germany’s past as follows:

“Israel’s actions in no way justify anti-Semitic reactions, especially not in Germany. It is intolerable that Jews in Germany are once again exposed to threats to life and limb and have to fear physical violence on the streets. The democratic ethos of the Federal Republic of Germany, which is orientated towards the obligation to respect human dignity, is linked to a political culture for which Jewish life and Israel’s right to exist are central elements worthy of special protection in light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era. The commitment to this is fundamental to our political life. The elementary rights to freedom and physical integrity as well as to protection from racist defamation are indivisible and apply equally to all. All those in our country who have cultivated anti-Semitic sentiments and convictions behind all kinds of pretexts and now see a welcome opportunity to express them uninhibitedly must also abide by this.”

In particular, the emphasis on providing special protection to Jewish life and Israel’s right to exist with

5. Judith Butler, “The Compass of Mourning”, *London Review of Books*, Cilt: 45, Sayı 20, (Ekim 2023).

6. “A Call to Philosophers to Stand in Solidarity with Palestine Against Apartheid and Occupation”, *Mondoweiss*, 2 Kasım 2023.

7. Seyla Benhabib, “An Open Letter To My Friends Who Signed ‘Philosophy for Palestine’”, *The Hannah Arendt Center*, 4 Kasım 2023.

reference to the mass crimes of the Nazi era clearly demonstrated that some German intellectuals would not hesitate to make the Palestinian people pay for their country's historical crimes in an attempt to absolve themselves and whitewash their past.

It is possible to argue that Habermas responded differently to past wars. For example, he defended and supported the Gulf War⁸ and NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia.⁹ By contrast, Habermas joined French philosopher Jacques Derrida in 2003, against the backdrop of the Iraq War, to highlight violations of international law and urging Europe to embrace Enlightenment values anew.¹⁰

However, the German thinker (who coined terms like "deliberative democracy" and "communicative rationality") completely abandoned his thought system and values to unconditionally support Israel's violations of international law.

Another important point is that Habermas never expressed anti-Israel views in the past. Indeed, his remarks on the Israeli-Palestinian question have traditionally been quite noncommittal.¹¹ For example, in a 2012 interview, the German philosopher was asked about Israeli politics – which he refused to answer, noting that it wasn't the job of an ordinary German citizen from his generation to engage in a political assessment of the Israeli government and its policies.¹² His emphasis on his generation, of course, appeared to highlight Germany's history of violence against Jews

and the historical shame associated with it. Yet it is unacceptable to create new "others" in an attempt to make up for the past alienation of Jews.

To conclude, the Western intelligentsia appears to have generally opted for silence regarding the Israeli-Palestinian question. The supporters of Palestine either could not make their voices heard and/or were undermined by their contemporaries. Meanwhile, it is possible to argue that the slightest expression of support for Palestine and the Palestinian people tends to be "terrorized" with reference to "Hamas" and labeled as "anti-semitism." That appears to be the reason why both Žižek and Butler were compelled to repeatedly state that Hamas needed to be condemned without reservation. By contrast, a handful of intellectuals, including Habermas and his friends, could not even dare to remain impartial and, possibly in an attempt to erase the Nazi past of Germany and perhaps their own families, sided with Israel. Their statements seem to rest on the premise that the war between Israel and Palestine started with Hamas's attack on 7 October 2023. The same circles describe any objection (with reference to the historical context and continuity) as an attempt to whitewash Hamas and promptly criminalize it. That is how some Western intellectuals are forced to lower their already weak voices.

In conclusion, Western thinkers, intellectuals and philosopher seem to be lagging behind the masses once again, as various protests erupt across the West over Israel's massacre. The intellectual class, which used to launch social movements and thus spearheaded change and the emergence of new orders, have ultimately chosen silence, failing to keep up with the people. Although some objections have been raised in this context, they either proved ineffective or opted for impartiality or failed to cross the threshold of "conditional condemnation." That, in turn, shows that the Western intellectual world and values are now devoid of any function in practice.

8. Anna Geis, "Legal Wars Versus Legitimate Wars", *The Habermas Handbook*, ed. Hauke Brunkhorst, Regina Kreide ve Cristina Lafont, (Columbia University Press: New York, 2017), ss. 581-585.

9. Ulrich Rippert, "How Jürgen Habermas Defends the Balkan War", World Socialist Web Site, 5 Haziran 1999.

10. "Philosophizing About Europe's Rebirth", DW, 6 Mart 2003. Orijinal metni için bkz; "Nach dem Krieg: Die Wiedergeburt Europas", FAZ, 31 Mayıs 2003.

11. Ahmet Dağ, "Filistin Meselesinde Batı Filozofisinin Riyakarlığı", *Umm-an*, Sayı: 281, (Ocak 2018), s. 45-49.

12. Noa Limone, "Germany's Most Important Living Philosopher Issues an Urgent Call to Restore Democracy", Haaretz, 16 Ağustos 2012.

