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EXTRA

The Compass of Mourning

Judith Butler writes about violence and the condemnation of violence



THE MATTERS MOST IN NEED of public discussion, the ones that most urgently need to be discussed, are those that are difficult to discuss within the frameworks now available to us. Although one wishes to go directly to the matter at hand, one bumps up against the limits of a framework that makes it nearly impossible to say what one has to say. I want to speak about the violence, the present violence, the history of violence and its many forms. But if one wishes to document violence, which means understanding the massive bombardment and killings in Israel by Hamas as part of that history, one can be accused of ‘relativising’ or ‘contextualisation’. We are to condemn or approve, and that makes sense, but is that all that is ethically required of us? In fact, I do condemn without qualification the violence committed by Hamas. This was a terrifying and revolting massacre. That was my primary reaction, and it endures. But there are other reactions as well.

Almost immediately, people want to know what ‘side’ you are on, and clearly the only possible response to such killings is unequivocal condemnation. But why is it we sometimes think that asking whether we are using the right language or if we have a good understanding of the historical situation would stand in the way of strong moral condemnation? Is it really relativising to ask what precisely we are condemning, what the reach of that condemnation should be, and how best to describe the political formation, or formations, we oppose? It would be odd to oppose something without understanding it or without describing it well. It would be especially odd to believe that condemnation requires a refusal to understand, for fear that knowledge can only serve a relativising function and undermine our capacity to judge. And what if it is morally imperative to extend our condemnation to crimes just as appalling as the ones repeatedly foregrounded by the media? When and where does our condemnation begin and end? Do we not need a critical and informed assessment of the situation to accompany moral and political condemnation, without fearing that to become knowledgeable will turn us, in the eyes of others, into moral failures complicitous in hideous crimes?

There are those who do use the history of Israeli violence in the region to exonerate Hamas, but they use a corrupt form of moral reasoning to accomplish that goal. Let’s be clear, Israeli violence against Palestinians is overwhelming: relentless bombing, the killing of people of every age in their homes and on the streets, torture in their prisons, techniques of starvation in Gaza and the dispossession of homes. And this violence, in

its many forms, is waged against a people who are subject to apartheid rules, colonial rule and statelessness. When, however, the Harvard Palestine Solidarity Committee issues a statement claiming that ‘the apartheid regime is the only one to blame’ for the deadly attacks by Hamas on Israeli targets, it makes an error. It is wrong to apportion responsibility in that way, and nothing should exonerate Hamas from responsibility for the hideous killings they have perpetrated. At the same time, this group and its members do not deserve to be blacklisted or threatened. They are surely right to point to the history of violence in the region: ‘From systematised land seizures to routine airstrikes, arbitrary 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.’

This is an accurate description, and it must be said, but it does not mean that Hamas’s violence is only Israeli violence by another name. It is true that we should develop some understanding of why groups like Hamas gained strength in light of the broken promises of Oslo and the ‘state of death, both slow and sudden’ that describes the lived existence of many Palestinians living under occupation, whether the constant surveillance and threat of administrative detention without due process, or the intensifying siege that denies Gazans medication, food and water. However, we do not gain a moral or political justification for Hamas’s actions through reference to their history. If we are asked to understand Palestinian violence as a continuation of Israeli violence, as the Harvard Palestine Solidarity Committee asks us to do, then there is only one source of moral culpability, and even Palestinians do not own their violent acts as their own. That is no way to recognise the autonomy of Palestinian action. The necessity of separating an understanding of the pervasive and relentless violence of the Israeli state from any justification of violence is crucial if we are to consider what other ways there are to throw off colonial rule, stop arbitrary arrest and torture in Israeli prisons, and bring an end to the siege of Gaza, where water and food is rationed by the nation-state that controls its borders. In other words, the question of what world is still possible for all the inhabitants of that region depends on ways to end settler-colonial rule. Hamas has one terrifying and appalling answer to that question, but there are many others. If, however, we are forbidden to refer to ‘the occupation’ (which is part of contemporary German *Denkverbot*), if we cannot even stage the debate over whether Israeli military rule of the region is racial apartheid or colonialism, then we have no hope of understanding the past, the present or the future. So many people watching the carnage via the media feel so hopeless. But one reason they are hopeless is precisely that they are watching via the media, living within the sensational and transient world of hopeless moral outrage. A different political morality takes time, a patient and courageous way of learning and naming, so that we can accompany moral condemnation with moral vision.

I oppose the violence that Hamas has inflicted and have no alibi to offer. When I say that, I am making clear a moral and political position. I do not equivocate when I reflect on what that condemnation presupposes and implies. Anyone who joins me in this condemnation might want to ask whether moral condemnation should be based on some understanding of what is being opposed. One might say, no, I don’t need to know anything about Palestine or Hamas to know that what they have done is wrong, and to condemn it. And if one stops there, relying on contemporary media representations, without ever asking whether they are actually right and useful, whether they let the histories be told, then one accepts a certain ignorance and trusts in the framework

presented. After all, we are all busy, and we cannot all be historians or sociologists. That is a possible way to think and live, and well-intentioned people do live that way. But at what cost?

What if our morality and our politics did not end with the act of condemnation? What if we insisted on asking what form of life would release the region from violence such as this? What if, in addition to condemning wanton crimes, we wanted to create a future in which violence of this sort came to an end? That is a normative aspiration that goes beyond momentary condemnation. To achieve it, we have to know the history of the situation, the growth of Hamas as a militant group in the devastation of the post-Oslo moment for those in Gaza to whom promises of self-governance were never made good; the formation of other groups of Palestinians with other tactics and goals; and the history of the Palestinian people and their aspirations for freedom and the right of political self-determination, for release from colonial rule and pervasive military and carceral violence. Then we might be part of the struggle for a free Palestine in which Hamas would be dissolved, or superseded by groups with non-violent aspirations for cohabitation.

For those whose moral position is restricted to condemnation alone, understanding the situation is not the goal. Moral outrage of this sort is arguably both anti-intellectual and presentist. Yet outrage could also drive a person to the history books to find out how events such as these could happen and whether conditions might change such that a future of violence isn't all that is possible. It should not be the case that 'contextualisation' is considered a morally problematic activity, even though there are forms of contextualisation that can be used to shift the blame or to exonerate. Can we distinguish between those two forms of contextualisation? Just because some think that contextualising hideous violence deflects from or, worse, rationalises the violence, that doesn't mean we should capitulate to the claim that all forms of contextualisation are morally relativising in that way. When the Harvard Palestine Solidarity Committee claims that 'the apartheid regime is the only one to blame' for the attacks by Hamas, it is subscribing to an unacceptable version of moral accountability. It seems that to understand how an event has come about, or what meaning it has, we have to learn some history. That means we have to widen the lens beyond the appalling present moment, without denying its horror, at the same time as refusing to let that horror represent all the horror there is to represent, to know, and to oppose. The contemporary media, for the most part, does not detail the horrors that Palestinian people have lived through for decades in the form of bombings, arbitrary attacks, arrests and killings. If the horrors of the last days assume a greater moral importance for the media than the horrors of the last seventy years, then the moral response of the moment threatens to eclipse an understanding of the radical injustices endured by occupied Palestine and forcibly displaced Palestinians – as well as the humanitarian disaster and loss of life happening at this moment in Gaza.

Some people justifiably fear that any contextualisation of the violent acts committed by Hamas will be used to exonerate Hamas, or that the contextualisation will take attention away from the horror of what they did. But what if it is the horror itself that leads us to contextualise? Where does this horror begin, and where does it end? When the press talks about a 'war' between Hamas and Israel, it offers a framework for understanding

the situation. It has, in effect, understood the situation in advance. If Gaza is understood as under occupation, or if it is referred to as an 'open-air prison', then a different interpretation is conveyed. It seems like a description, but the language constricts or facilitates what we can say, how we can describe and what can be known. Yes, the language can describe, but it gains the power to do so only if it conforms to the limits imposed on what is sayable. If it is decided that we don't need to know how many Palestinian children and adolescents have been killed in both the West Bank and in Gaza this year or over the years of occupation, that this information is not important for knowing or assessing the attacks on Israel and the killings of Israelis, then we have decided that we do not want to know the history of violence, mourning and outrage as it is lived by Palestinians. We only want to know the history of violence, mourning and outrage as it is lived by Israelis. An Israeli friend, a self-described 'anti-Zionist', writes online that she is terrified for her family and friends, that she has lost people. And our hearts should go out to her, as mine surely does. It is unequivocally terrible. And yet, is there no moment where her own experience of horror and loss over her friends and family is imagined to be what a Palestinian might be feeling on the other side, or has felt after the years of bombardment, incarceration and military violence? I am also a Jew who lives with transgenerational trauma in the wake of atrocities committed against people like me. But they were also committed against people not like me. I do not have to identify with this face or that name in order to name the atrocity I see. Or, at least, I struggle not to.

In the end, though, the problem is not simply a failure of empathy. For empathy mainly takes form within a framework that allows for identification to be accomplished, or for a translation between another's experience and my own. And if the dominant frame considers some lives to be more grievable than others, then it follows that one set of losses is more horrifying than another set of losses. The question of whose lives are worth grieving is an integral part of the question of whose lives are worth valuing. And here racism enters in a decisive way. If Palestinians are 'animals', as Israel's defence minister insists, and if Israelis now represent 'the Jewish people' as Biden insists (collapsing the Jewish diaspora into Israel, as reactionaries demand), then the only grievable people in the scene, the only ones who present as eligible for grief, are the Israelis, for the scene of 'war' is now staged between the Jewish people and the animals who seek to kill them. This is surely not the first time that a group of people seeking release from colonial shackles has been figured as animals by the coloniser. Are the Israelis 'animals' when they kill? This racist framing of contemporary violence recapitulates the colonial opposition between the 'civilised ones' and the 'animals' who must be routed or destroyed so as to preserve 'civilisation'. If we adopt this framework in the course of declaring our moral opposition, we find ourselves implicated in a form of racism that extends beyond the utterance to the structure of everyday life in Palestine. And for that a radical reparation is surely in order.

If we think that moral condemnation must be a clear, punctual act without reference to any context or knowledge, then we inevitably accept the terms in which that condemnation is made, the stage on which the alternatives are orchestrated. In this most recent context, to accept those terms means recapitulating forms of colonial racism which are part of the structural problem to be solved, the abiding injustice to be overcome. Thus, we cannot afford to look away from the history of injustice in the name

of moral certitude, for that is to risk committing further injustice, and at some point our certitude will falter on that less than firm ground. Why can't we condemn morally heinous acts without losing our powers to think, to know and to judge? Surely we can, and must, do both.

The acts of violence we are witnessing in the media are horrible. And in this moment of heightened media attention, the violence that we see is the only violence we know. To repeat: we are right to deplore that violence and to express our horror. I have been sick to my stomach for days. Everyone I know lives in fear of what the Israeli military machine will do next, whether Netanyahu's genocidal rhetoric will materialise in the mass killing of Palestinians. I ask myself whether we can mourn, without qualification, for the lives lost in Israel as well as those lost in Gaza without getting bogged down in debates about relativism and equivalence. Perhaps the wider compass of mourning serves a more substantial ideal of equality, one that acknowledges the equal grievability of lives, and gives rise to an outrage that these lives should *not* have been lost, that the dead deserved more life and equal recognition for their lives. How can we even imagine a future equality of the living without knowing, as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has documented, that Israeli forces and settlers had killed nearly 3800 Palestinian civilians since 2008 in the West Bank and Gaza even before the current actions began. Where is the world's mourning for them? Hundreds of Palestinian children have died since Israel began its 'revenge' military actions against Hamas, and many more will die in the days and weeks to come.

It need not threaten our moral positions to take some time to learn about the history of colonial violence and to examine the language, narratives and frameworks now operating to report and explain – and interpret in advance – what is happening in this region. That kind of knowledge is critical, but not for the purposes of rationalising existing violence or authorising further violence. Its aim is to furnish a truer understanding of the situation than an uncontested framing of the present alone can provide. Indeed, there may be further positions of moral opposition to add to the ones we have already accepted, including an opposition to military and police violence saturating Palestinian lives in the region, taking away their rights to mourn, to know and express their outrage and solidarity, and to find their own way towards a future of freedom.

Personally, I defend a politics of non-violence, in the knowledge that it cannot possibly operate as an absolute principle to be applied on all occasions. I maintain that liberation struggles that practise non-violence help to create the non-violent world in which we all want to live. I deplore the violence unequivocally at the same time as I, like so many others, want to be part of imagining and struggling for true equality and justice in the region, the kind that would compel groups like Hamas to disappear, the occupation to end, and new forms of political freedom and justice to flourish. 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, no future of true peace – not, that is, 'peace' as a euphemism for normalisation, which means keeping structures of inequality, rightlessness and racism in place. But such a future cannot come about without remaining free to name, describe and oppose all the violence, including Israeli state violence in all its forms, and to do so without fear of censorship, criminalisation, or

of being maliciously accused of antisemitism. The world I want is one that would oppose the normalisation of colonial rule and support Palestinian self-determination and freedom, a world that would, in fact, realise the deepest desires of all the inhabitants of those lands to live together in freedom, non-violence, equality and justice. This hope no doubt seems naive, even impossible, to many. Nevertheless, some of us must rather wildly hold to it, refusing to believe that the structures that now exist will exist for ever. For this, we need our poets and our dreamers, the untamed fools, the kind who know how to organise.

13 October 2023

14 October: An earlier version of this piece referred to 'lives lost in Tel Aviv'. This has now been corrected.