

The University Struggle to Unlearn Zionism

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Linda Xheza: *In your book Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism you trace the foundations of institutions such as the museum, the practice of photography, and human rights in imperialism. These days I am reading Maya Wind's book Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom (Verso, 2024) in which she demonstrates how Israeli universities are complicit in the oppression of Palestinians. I think it is important to extend the discussion of imperial institutions you consider in your work and ask you about the complicity of Western academic institutions in relation to imperialism. What are your thoughts on the role of the latter in the legitimization of the state of Israel and the dehumanization of Palestinians?*

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: Our universities are part of these other imperial institutions (archives or museums) I'm talking about in *Potential History*. They were formed to normalize imperial plunder of all sorts: material, intellectual, spiritual, cosmic, and moral. Similarly to museums and archives, their *raison d'être* is to divert us from the truth of the colossal imperial plunder that has been part of the world destruction enterprise. These are sites of temptations that attract people with a certain promise of knowledge about the world, while obviously omitting that this knowledge and this world are those imperialism shaped. They acquired this status and power through the destruction of other forms of education and transmission, and thus arrived to impose themselves globally as a key for mobility within this world. The imperial nature is not only of the institution—it is also of many of the disciplines taught within it. The discipline of history is a paradigmatic case since it was fashioned to produce knowledge and narratives that bury what imperial violence destroys and proclaims over.

Palestine, May 1948, is a telling example. The Zionists were in the midst of their attempt to seize Palestine, destroy it, deport its people (by May only half of the total of 750,000 Palestinian expellees

had been driven out), and proclaim the establishment of the state of Israel on its ruins. How did historians and the discipline of history respond to this catastrophe? They started to provide historical narratives in which Israel figured as a given, a sovereign power capable of proclaiming a state and erasing another while neither exists or occurs only in the language. While the Zionists needed a few more years to expel the majority of Palestinians and to achieve on the ground this split reality where they are situated “within” Palestine-turned-into-Israel and thus turning the expellees into “infiltrators” threatening the new state’s sovereignty, for historians this was already *a fait accompli*. They rushed to describe a split hierarchical reality where Zionists were recognized as legally inhabiting “their” country and their actions as part of law and order, while Palestinians, expelled from their country, were depicted as intruders and a threat, identified with the categories that the international organizations of the “New World Order” crafted for people like them. The Zionist narrative of the destruction of Palestine, was invented as a story of liberation of the Jewish people. After the Holocaust this story served the New World Order that the newly founded United Nations heralded. In November 1947, the UN provided the legal basis for this split history in the form of the partition resolution, issued against the majority of Palestine’s population. This resolution, followed by Zionist violence to conquer Palestine, was enough for historians to transfer Palestine to “the past” and relate to Palestinians as the enemies of the citizens of the newly declared state.

Historians’ addiction to documents is toxic. It is also contagious since in a world imperially fabricated, their narratives enjoy a symbolic power coming from their knowledge of imperial facts (written in these documents) and their “right” order in time and space. Documents-based history assists in defeating those formations, forms of life, and aspirations that imperialism seeks to destroy. Historians are trained to relate to imperial proclamations as manifestations of truth that they amplify and disseminate as obligatory scaffolding for any historical narrative. *Potential History* is the rejection of this orchestrated attack on common *just truths*.

What are those just truths of 1948 sacrificed by history? (a) Palestine was in the process of being destroyed and this destruction could still be stopped and opposed and justice reclaimed. The leaders of Western countries, however, who had interests in the success of the Zionist narrative, supported the continuation of destruction (like we see today in Gaza) until the majority of Palestinians were expelled from their country (a process that took several years) and the invention of a Jewish state in Palestine seemed normal. (b) Many Jewish survivors of the European genocidal attack against them were forced to become part of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine (given the lack of other viable options for them as Europe and the United States closed their gates) and to accept a bargain of reconciliation with Europe, which instead of letting them rebuild their communities in Europe, “gave” them a state of their own in Palestine that was not theirs to give. (c) Diverse Jews were forced to leave their worlds behind and embrace the European relation to Arabs and Muslims as enemies, while it was not the Arabs and Muslims who were the perpetrators of the Holocaust—but rather Europeans. This new enmity was achieved quite instantly once the Zionists destroyed Palestine and proclaimed the establishment of Israel against them and their will, including against the will of the Jews who were part of the Jewish Muslim world for centuries. (d) The destruction of the millennia-old Jewish Muslim world in the Middle East and North Africa, forcing the Jews to be incorporated into the myth of a Judeo-Christian tradition invented for them as part of Europe’s absolution of its crimes.

L.X.: *Many university administrators around the world have decided to act against their own students and staff, often resulting in the latter being brutally attacked by the police. What are your thoughts about this?*

A.A.A.: I propose to look at what is going on *in* and *against* our universities as a three-pronged movement: (a) against the genocide and the entanglement of our universities in it; (b) against the failure of our universities to fulfill their role in an imaginary contract with certain segments of

society that recognize them as sites of knowledge production and actually enables their existence (more than the donors!); (c) against the expansion of a class of administrators whose job is to implement a condition of thoughtlessness in the daily life of the university. I borrow the term *thoughtlessness* from Hannah Arendt, to describe the way the managerial framework that administrators imposed over the years under the umbrella term “reforms” limits the ways students, faculty, and staff can think, ask questions, account for the world, and act and interact with each other and with others. That we are punished for doing what we assume ought to be the heart of our academic work—thinking, i.e., asking what is going on in Gaza and naming it genocide, interacting with the truth-tellers of Gaza, asking questions about the involvement of our universities in the genocide—exemplifies this. Arendt developed this term in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to describe the failure of the capacity to think with and through others and to grasp the meaning of what one is doing through the ways it impacts others. Thoughtlessness is a direct effect of a world imperially shaped, where instead of acting and interacting with others who also act, people are trained and expected to operate technologies and abstain from thinking with others. What is being marketed today as the advanced technology of AI, where machines think for us, is something that we have been already experiencing for decades through the expansion of this class of administrators whose form of governmentality leaves less and less room for thinking, and thinking through others, without which resistance is eroded and the world becomes destroyed. This condition of thoughtlessness in our universities became even clearer as from the beginning of the genocide not a single university initiated study groups or task forces dedicated to the genocide, seeking to understand the conditions that enable this horrible enterprise of violence to last for so long, to study the concerted effort to gaslight its occurrence while it unfolds in real time in front of our eyes (and not after the fact), or to disaffiliate the institution from it and express solidarity; rather, many of these universities established task forces to punish those of us who dare to think and do it with others. Calling the police into the campuses was not unprecedented or surprising, but a means to terrorize us as we were revolting against the condition of thoughtlessness and acting against the genocide and its normalization.

In this sense, I propose to relate to this movement whose major sites are the campuses as a truth-telling movement, a revolt against thoughtlessness as the condition under which a genocide unfolds in Gaza and we are being commanded to move on with business as usual, while we know that our institutions and many of their programs are funding and are funded by the genocide and contribute to it on many different levels. Hence, I find it necessary to recur to a certain imaginary contract between the society and the university in order to ground our struggle against what those who rule the university are doing and acting as if they have the right to determine what is right and what is wrong. This mass movement of encampments is not (or not yet) a walkout from the university but an attempt to take seriously our role as constituencies of these imperial universities and rehearse what we believe the university should do. This movement foregrounds the cleavage or incommensurability between the commitment of the class of administrators to protect thoughtlessness and the capital these institutions accumulate through their donors, and the commitment of segments of the constituencies of the university (among students, staff, and faculty) to the truth and its telling, i.e., to anticolonial justice. This police violence exercised against the constituencies of the university when they rehearse this contract with society is thus not surprising, but inscribed in the agenda of this class of administrators. Just to make it clear—rehearsing this imaginary contract is not shared governance with administrators whose mission is to trap us under the condition of thoughtlessness—but rather rehearsing a different condition as the outcome of our power as the constituencies of the university without which they will not exist.

L.X.: *You have argued that the strike should not be considered as the right to protest oppression, but rather should be seen as a collective opportunity to “unlearn imperialism with and among others.” Is this what we are witnessing at the student encampments? The media often frame these*

encampments as pro-Palestinian camps, but according to your conception of the strike, it seems to me that what is also equally important is the refusal of the imperial world that is emerging there.

A.A.A.: The biggest achievement of this movement is in its success to disrupt globally and publicly the narrative about Palestine and Israel that the Zionists and the West have imposed since 1948 by using different violent means—including through our universities—and to expose and amplify the truth about Palestine and the genocidal nature of the Israeli regime. Calling this movement “pro-Palestinian” is a symptom of the condition of thoughtlessness where denouncing violence against one group is being depicted as being pro- this group and not against this violence and the enduring injustice that allows its perpetuation. The demands addressed to our universities to divest from Israel and from arms companies should be understood as part of the actualization of this imaginary contract with the university. If there were not such a contract many of us would not spend many years of our life there and would not try over the years to create a university-within-a-university that allows us to carry on part of what we believe is our mission. It is not surprising though that all the encampments were formed as a university-within-a-university in which people can come together to study, think, and respond to the genocide in Gaza with others, i.e., with the truth-tellers from Gaza who broadcast it daily despite the efforts to eliminate and silence them. I deliberately speak about a contract not only with us who are *in* the university, but with society in which it exists. Otherwise, we won’t see members of the society participating in the actualization of such a contract like the judge in Providence, Rhode Island, who in May found that the 41 students arrested by Brown university are not guilty. His judgment supersedes the failure of the president of the university to act as a president of a university first by commanding their arrest and then by refusing to drop the charges despite the multiple demands from students, staff, and faculty.

L.X.: *Last year when I taught your book Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism, some of my students thought that what you argue there is maybe “too radical,” but this year the majority of them are protesting in the streets. Do you think we are now at a historical moment where the imperial shutters are being loudly and powerfully challenged and rejected—perhaps one of the very few times this has occurred to such an extent? How did the genocide of Palestinians manage to form a decolonial coalition with many of us around the world?*

A.A.A.: Yes, we are at this important moment when the metanarratives generated and imposed with so much violence in the late 1940s as part of the “New World Order” as a way of ending World War II are collapsing. One paradigmatic example is the truth about the nature of the Israeli regime as a genocidal one, which can no longer be hidden behind the justifications Europe provided as a way of absolving itself from its responsibility for the genocide it perpetrated against the Jews, as well as for the termination of the Jewish Muslim world in the Middle East and North Africa. The state of Israel destroyed Palestine, dispossessed Palestinians of their lands and worlds, and destroyed the diverse forms of life of Jews everywhere. This genocide in Gaza opens up the two questions that the West invented in the nineteenth century and acted as if they could only be resolved through their fusion—the Jewish question (which should rather be described as the question of the Jews) and the question of Palestine. This fusion enabled the Nakba and the promotion of the genocidal regime of Israel as a Jewish liberation project, which is at the basis of the current genocide in Gaza. It is not a coincidence that the persecution of the growing number of anti-Zionist Jews, protesting against the genocide and against Israel, is especially expansive in France and Germany, who understand the danger of having Jews joining other colonized people in denouncing the European imperial enterprise and the monster it created in the form of the Zionist state as their compensation for the genocide. We anti-Zionist Jews, as well as others in this movement, state it out loud—we will not let any university administrator command us what we have the right to think or what we can say when we see genocide.