

Daniel Bensaïd

## International solidarity, against the rise of communalism

The logic of war risks winning the day once again, and a perhaps irreversible step in the march toward catastrophe is about to be made. Western commentators have mostly chosen to see the increasing ethnic definition of the Balkan crisis as the monstrous result of the decomposition of the bureaucratic nationalist regimes (which for evident ideological reasons they persist in labelling communist). We have elsewhere argued <sup>1/</sup> that if this phenomenon really were a matter of the rigor mortis of an order in ruins, then, however tragic it may be, it would nonetheless have remained limited in extent, an exceptional case. We maintained that it instead represented, alas, a more general and deeper-rooted tendency towards the racialisation and confessionalisation of politics, a consequence of imperial globalisation and the weakening of class referents. This danger, which Hannah Arendt had already identified in the first volume of her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, is now apparent in Africa and certain regions of Asia. The development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict raises fears of a similar downward spiral.

In the context of international reaction, linked to the liberal counter-reformation, national liberation struggles have increasingly begun to look like wars of religion. Political conflicts are rerouted through tribal

or communal clashes. Frustrated national-democratic aspirations have grown apart from secular definitions of the nation based on citizenship, instead seeking their legitimacy in an archaeology and a genealogy of 'origins'. This naturalisation or biologisation of politics draws on a 'zoological' conception of the nation, such as was identified by Ernest Renan. Where are we headed, if Israel's religious leaders justify the expulsion of the Palestinians on account of the chronological precedence of Solomon's Temple or of Joseph's tomb over the holy sites of Islam? Will we tomorrow see a Papist 'third thief' accusing today's Israelites of still having the blood of the crucifixion on their hands?

This logic is, indeed, very much at work in the principle of the Law of Return, which allows any Jew from the diaspora to obtain Israeli nationality. This throwback gives Jews the same blood right that we would vigorously condemn in Germany or France, at the same time as refusing Palestinians *jus soli* and the right to land.

It is thus of the greatest urgency that we address this conflict in terms of its political stakes and its political meaning, repoliticising it in order to take it away from the terrain of religion. No, this dispute is not an opposition between two communities, two closed identities, two religions. It traverses these identities, it is greater than them, if we take the perspective of a common humanity.

Given the communalist institutions' appeal to 'all the Jews' of France and elsewhere to rally behind Israel and its leaders, as well as the identification of the whole diaspora with the Jewish State and of all Jews with Zionism, young Palestinians and young Arabs in the *banlieue* will end up believing them, thus confusing the synagogues and

the Israeli embassies, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. So yes, after once having been the 'socialism of fools', anti-Semitism could become the 'anti-imperialism of fools'. But then the exhortations of the communalist *union sacrée* will have achieved something!

That is why together with more than two hundred French Jews I signed the appeal in support of the Palestinians' rights, 'as a Jew'. Without the slightest coordination having taken place, similar initiatives were organised also in the United States, England, Canada and Australia. Such an action is no commonplace (I could not even have imagined it twenty years ago) and must remain an exception. It is partly explained by the shameful passivity of the official Left in the face of the Zionists' abuses in the occupied territories, the Israeli leaders' lack of respect for UN resolutions, and their contravention of the accords that they themselves signed in Oslo. The appeal is justified by the refusal to allow those responsible signatures to be pulled in against their will behind the Israeli State in the name of a purported communitarian solidarity.

Personally I define myself first of all as a secular and internationalist militant, a citizen of the country where I live and work. There are but two circumstances in which I assert my Jewishness: faced with an anti-Semite – out of loyalty to those who have suffered on account of being Jews – and faced with a Zionist who claims to be speaking in my name. That is not without its contradictions. But such contradictions are a product of history. The Nazi Judeocide – a 100 percent European affair, just as the Dreyfus affair was 100 percent a French issue – cast doubt on the inevitability of assimilation. As a dismayed Isaac Deutscher said at the time,

<sup>1/</sup> See Daniel Bensaïd, *Contes et légendes de la guerre éthique*, Paris, Textuel, 1999.

'We have seen the phoenix of Jewry rising again from the ashes of six million Jews. What a resurrection!' And the bureaucratic anti-Semitism of Stalinist Russia cast doubt on the 'socialist' emancipation of the Jews. The creation of the State of Israel crystallised the diaspora's fears – whether rational or not – and sparked that 'strange Zionism' which Vladimir Rabi called 'Zionism by proxy'. Such was history's judgement on this morbid return of the 'Jewish question'.

That is why this or that concrete situation obliges me to express my Jewishness – not that I am 'a Jew', but adjectivally 'Jewish' in a given context. A Jewish non-Jew, you might say. What Edgar Morin prettily called a 'Spinozant', in homage to the first of our kind.

I am today struck by the manner in which the discourse of the Israeli leaders and the communalist spokesmen claims to annex all the victims of the Judeocide to their own (malign) cause. It is a subversion of heritage, an armed hold-up of memory, an illegitimate private appropriation of the collective suffering. Before the war Zionism was still in the minority among the Jews of Europe. There certainly were Zionists among the deportees and the people who were gassed – but how many others were communists, Bundists, or Trotskyists, particularly among those who resisted? The Jewish combatants in the International Brigades in Spain, including in the Botwin brigade, did not take up arms for the sake of a 'Jewish State in the Land of Israel'. They did so in order to fight fascism – as Jews, no doubt, but also indivisibly and inextricably as communists, for the most part, as immigrants 'rejected by the world', as proletarians, tailors, cobblers and hatmakers.

The logic of communalism tends to abolish any other belonging, effacing the contradic-

tions taking place also within the community. Read, re-read, Bernard Lazare's *Le Fumier de Job*. With the Dreyfus affair forcing him to re-engage with his Jewishness, Lazare understood very well – he knew from his experience – that a class divide traversed this 'community'. He had seen in the flesh the cowardice and hypocritical inattention of the embourgeoisifying Jewish bourgeoisie and the religious institutions. He said it frankly: 'The Jews are again dispersed, fragmented'; 'the bourgeoisie, having acquired privileges has become separated from the people'. He thus called on Jews not to content themselves with being revolutionaries 'in someone else's society and not their own'. He even called on them to rise up 'against the oppressor within'. He spoke in pitiless words of anger, justice and prophecy: 'You are hugging the rich among you too closely, you can't see anything else!' Lazare was certainly no Zionist, saying 'Our homeland is made of so many things – so many memories, so many regrets and joys, so many laments and pains – that a tiny barren and desolate patch of land would never be able to bear it'.

Again today, history gives us the right to stand up against this 'oppressor within', against the unwarranted appropriation of the living and the dead, against the state monopoly of memory. But it is above all the way to open a breach in the communalist cement, distinguishing among things that some people hope to identify, and dissociating ourselves from that which some people hope to mix us up with. It is a way of combating anti-Semitism by showing that Jews and the Israeli leadership are not the same thing.

When we stand on the terrain of political

reason and not religious or communalist unreason, when we seek the social and political meaning of a conflict, then we can always find – on the other side of the border, beyond the bells and the chapels – another one of ourselves. I thus feel closer to Palestinian militants and intellectuals than to Laurent Fabius, Dominique Strauss-Kahn or the rabbi Sitruk, without even needing to mention Sharon or Barak. And in turn I hope that fighters for the Palestinian resistance can find more in common with me, with Rony Brauman, with Michel Warschawski (and so many others!) than with Mubarak, Ben Ali, or the petromonarchs of Saudi Arabia. In any case, the appeal for Palestine authored by French people of Arab origin and Arabs resident in France, which appeared in the 18 November *Le Monde*, is testament to this. While reaffirming its strong support for the Palestinians' rights, it made an equally strong condemnation of 'any racist or confessional drift and any racist act or discourse, particularly the profanation of synagogues and attacks against Jewish schools'. However modest they may be by comparison to the gravity of the situation, these reciprocal symbolic gestures put a bit of grit in the gears of the growing communitarian dynamic and keep alive a small internationalist flame. This struggle is about far more than the tragic conflict in the Middle East alone.

In these columns, my intention is simply to voice my concern at the rise of ethnic and religious points of reference and to express my support for the legitimate demands of the Palestinian people – and not to claim to be offering some sort of miracle solution. As the Viennese writer Karl Kraus put in, in a

confused situation we opt for the truth. And the truth, in this situation, is that the territories occupied since 1967 are Palestinian territories and that Israeli army's behaviour there is that of an army of occupation. The truth is that it is necessary to start by applying the UN's resolutions, dismantling the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, recognising the Palestinians' right to a sovereign state and that the people expelled in 1948 have a right of return. Doubtless this would not be a sufficient solution, but an important step in the direction of peace.

After all, the contradiction inherent to the very creation of the State of Israel is fundamentally highly explosive – between its character as a semi-confessional Jewish state and its claim to be a secular and democratic state. This contradiction feeds the logic of separation and the temptation to carry out a fresh 'population transfer', as certain Israeli military figures and political forces have advocated. But an apartheid policy of ethnic and territorial cleansing and

of bantustans can only put the problem off for another day. It undermines the conditions for a lasting peace and, contrary to the pretensions of the Zionist leaders, does not guarantee the safety of the Jews of Israel – quite the contrary. The headlong rush to war provides further cement for the national and social mosaic that makes up a state – repeating its founding act – but not for building a nation. How laden with neuroses, pathologies, and panicking about identity is any society built like this, on the fear of the other? For how long, how far, until when, will the logic of war allow it to shirk the real questions?

1967 saw the publication of Nathan Weinstock's book – *Zionism, False Messiah* – a symbolic and prophetic title. In a 1970 article Weinstock stated that, although he recognised the existence of the Israeli nation in Palestine, the future of the region would nonetheless involve a de-Zionisation of the State of Israel, that is, the destruction of the existing socio-political structures. Moreover, a genuine peace process would involve the

recognition of equal civil rights for Arabs and Jews, which would also imply the recognition of Palestinians' right to self-determination and sovereignty. It remains an open historical question whether the co-existence of the two peoples will take the form of two separate secular and democratic states, a regional federation of states, or a single binational state. There could be a number of institutional issues to address. But for these issues to be able to come to light, it is necessary to begin by redressing the wrongs done to the Palestinians.

Conversely, the Israeli leadership is boxing itself into the logic of a besieged fortress mentality. This is a tragic impasse also for the Israelis themselves. That is why it is necessary to fight their policy: not because we are Jews, but because we are Jewish and concerned to avoid a fresh catastrophe.

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