

Groups and Criticism

A response to Joel Finkel and Paul Eisen

by Anis Hamadeh, June 27, 2005

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Among the worldwide community of people who seek to end the conflict in Israel/Palestine there are many different groups and individuals with different notions of justice, of peace, of violence and of discrimination. Arguments and views are exchanged, and naturally there also are struggles involved in the debate. As the past decades have not led to more peace in Palestine/Israel, most participants in this discourse are not happy, neither with the situation, nor with the discourse. Maybe there was something crucial missing in the discussion so that things could not change due to lack of mentioning the center of the problem. There might also be a trend that people in the 20th and 21st centuries have lost their faith in the word and the argument altogether in a way that political discourse and political action have more or less become two separate, hardly overlapping realms. Motto: watch the daily news then you know that it is meaningless to talk, no matter how well one talks. Or maybe the discourse is wrong, e.g. when certain people are excluded because of their opinions. - Why have the past decades not led to more peace in Palestine/Israel? Is there really something missing in the discourse and if so, what? Why has the world lost this amount of faith in word and argument? What is my own contribution to the positive and to the negative aspects of the discourse and of the world?

In an essay called "Jewish Power", Paul Eisen in London, director of Deir Yassin Remembered, criticized Judaism/Jewry in a general and in a provocative way.¹ This led Joel Finkel from "Not in My Name" in Chicago to formulate a response in which he argued that "Jewish Power" displays a discriminating and unacceptable view.² It is assumed here that both authors want the conflict to end and that this is their primary goal, whatever the conclusions may be they arrive at. A lively discussion has aroused among human rights advocates all over the world, chiefly about two issues which are usually called "anti-Semitism" and "Holocaust Revisionism". As both concepts are quite abstract and used as battle-concepts it seems adequate to describe the phenomena rather than to label them. The discussion is important and should not be underestimated for the redundancy of its arguments or some unpleasant words in the heat of the debate or the fear that this discussion distracts people from focussing on human rights violations. In this essay I try to sketch a framework of coordinates to bring some general and underlying aspects of the discourse to awareness.

Limits of Criticism and Opinion

When we talk about limits of criticism and opinion we need an overall measure, a measure which can be applied to everybody. Fortunately, the global community has created such a measure by adopting and proclaiming the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Article 2, for instance, reads: "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (...)"³. Concerning the freedom of thought we have the guideline of articles 18 and 19 which state that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." And: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

These texts indicate that everybody has these rights, even people we don't like, even criminals. But is it really true that we can say whatever we want? Are we allowed to lie about others or to slander their names, may we accuse them and call for their exclusion or punishment whenever and however we like? Certainly not. Article 12 says: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks." But where are the borders between the freedom of opinion and arbitrary interferences or attacks on honor and reputation? The

¹ Paul Eisen (August 19, 2004): "Jewish Power", see www.righteousjews.org/article10.html

² Joel R. Finkel (September 21, 2004, postscripted in June 2005): "A Response to Paul Eisen's 'Jewish Power', see www.nimn.org/Perspectives/american_jews/000308.php?section=American%20Jewish%20Voices

³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948, see www.un.org/Overview/rights.html

Declaration contains concepts like "justice", "morality", "public order" and "general welfare" (e.g. in article 29), concepts which are open to interpretation and which thus have to be discussed further. This is comparable with definitions concerning racism and discrimination like: "unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of prejudice"⁴. Who tells us what is fair and what is prejudice? It is impossible to define it with logical means, because there is always subjectivity involved as a constitutive feature. And what consequences should a violation have?

In the definition of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Article 1 states: "In this Convention, the term 'racial discrimination' shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life."⁵

When pondering on such questions of definition one is tempted to join the mainstream prescriptionism and to define discrimination as precisely as possible, maybe listing distinctive features like the use of demonizations, conspiracy theories, mono-criticisms, cliches and stereotype images or aiming at destroying the other.⁶ Many groups worldwide have a "We are against racism and discrimination" clause and many of them formulated don'ts and more don'ts. Often we find mottos like "Against racism and anti-Semitism"⁷ which inform us that anti-Semitism is seen to be a prototypical kind of racism. It reaffirms the general uncertainty and feeling of insecurity about racism and discrimination and how to deal with them, as if racism needed a prototypical group to be associated with. But having joined the mainstream prescriptionism one will find that the problems have remained unsolved. Some people are being excluded from the discourse, by right or not, yet we have not come any step closer to peace in Jerusalem and in the world. Therefore it can safely be concluded that prescriptions are sometimes necessary while prescriptionism is not the ultima ratio.

In the case of Paul Eisen's mentioned essay the main objection concerns essence thinking.⁸ Eisen works with concepts like "Jewish identity", "Jewish essence", "Jewish spirit", "Jewish power" and suspects an ideology therein. Finkel responds that there are actually ideologies which try to promote such ideas of an essence and that Eisen stepped into the trap of these people by believing them or by sharing their way of argumentation, respectively. (I concur with Finkel here.) Eisen, however, maintains that "the crime against the Palestinian people is being committed by a Jewish state with Jewish soldiers using weapons displaying Jewish religious symbols, and with the full support and complicity of the overwhelming mass of organised Jews worldwide. But to name Jews as responsible for this crime seems impossible to do."⁹ Eisen renders fear as the reason for this alleged impossibility.

⁴ Dictionary definition of "discrimination" www.answers.com/topic/discrimination

⁵ see www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/d_icerd.htm. Found in John Sigler, July 22, 2004: "The Enemy of Our Enemy is Not Necessarily Our Friend. One State Advocacy and Israel Shamir": www.eccmei.net/onestate/features/ShamirExpose.html, footnote 1. Also mentioned in this context is the Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/14 (53rd meeting 17 April 2000): Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance - [www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/E.CN.4.RES.2000.14.En?Opendocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/E.CN.4.RES.2000.14.En?Opendocument): "33. Urges all Governments to cooperate fully with the Special Rapporteur with a view to enabling him to fulfil his mandate to examine incidents of contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, any form of discrimination against, inter alia, Blacks, Arabs and Muslims, xenophobia, Negrophobia, anti-Semitism and related intolerance;"

⁶ cf., for example, Robert Wistrich's enumeration of anti-Semitic features in the letter exchange with Brian Klug published on 26 June 2005 in the Frankfurter Rundschau: www.fr-aktuell.de/ressorts/nachrichten_und_politik/standpunkte/?cnt=692557. (Wistrich there also says: "For me every decision of boycotting Israel cannot be explained without the anti-Semitism.")

⁷ Google has 6.100 entries for "against racism and anti-Semitism" and 19 entries for "against racism and Islamophobia"

⁸ see petition at www.sd-il.com/politics/statements/signLetter.php, wording: "We Oppose Anti-Semitism: We, the undersigned individuals who are active in the search for justice and peace between Israelis and Palestinians, state our opposition to the anti-Semitic ideologies that are being articulated within our movement. // Irrespective of political differences we may have, we stand together against anti-Jewish sentiment and to challenge the idea that the ruinous conflict has anything whatsoever to do with a "Jewish spirit" or "Jewish essence." We note that parallel attitudes about Islam lead to a similar reduction of the conflict to a matter of essence, which is just as dangerous and abhorrent. // This ideology is represented in the writings of Paul Eisen, co-director of Deir Yassin Remembered. His essay, "Jewish Power" appears on the "Righteous Jews" website, which refused to print this response. His essay, "The Holocaust Wars," appears prominently on the Nazi Zundelsite as well as on Israel Shamir's website. Each appears on other websites. // We reject the notion, posited in these essays, that there is a "Jewish essence" that naturally leads to the crimes against Palestinians that have been, and continue to be, committed by the State of Israel. // We further condemn the attempt to introduce Holocaust Revisionist history into our movement. The health and welfare of neither Palestinians nor Israelis is served by Holocaust denial. On the contrary, their collective interests, and our movement, are seriously undermined by this attempt to "prove" that European Jewry was not systematically exterminated by Nazi fascism. // We reject Paul Eisen's suggestion that the Palestinian solidarity movement, and Palestinians themselves, adopt this Revisionist history and "consider lobbing a few stones" at "world Jewry and its primary arm, the Holocaust." // We find these ideologies repulsive and denounce all attempts to introduce them into our movement."

⁹ „Jewish Power“, Introduction

It is necessary to examine the context of each criticism here, because we are dealing with a typical case in several ways. The peace camp has been divided on the issue of the Human Rights for a long time. Otherwise there would be much more peace in the world, because the application of the Human Rights would indeed secure a lot more peace than is extant. Their articles were, actually, specifically formulated for this reason. Still we have severe violations in many countries in the world. An extra-terrestrial visitor would come to the conclusion that the organized humans do not believe in the Human Rights. Maybe they made them in advance, he might think, like giving the Nobel Peace Prize to Arafat and Rabin. They do believe in the application of parts of the Human Rights for parts of the people in parts of the time, but not as a consequently binding text. But why is that?

Aspects of Criticism

In the following I want to reflect upon some aspects of criticism in order to come closer to understanding why we don't believe in the Human Rights. For it can be seen as an indication of that criticism as such failed. Pluralistic democracy needs criticism as a regulation form and when criticism fails than democracy fails and we continue to live in a jungle. The first thing that comes to mind here is the "critic is adversary" thinking which we know from parliamentary politics. It is deeply rooted in our minds, constitutional for camp thinking and embedded into a general dualist worldview. Left against right, rich against poor, one-state against two-states, east against west, north against south, ingroup against outgroup. As long as dualism prevails, criticism will tend to affirm camps rather than to overcome or reconcile them.

Taking a closer look at the scope of criticism we will find that there are actually no inherent limits. The limits basically relate to the place of criticism, the presentation of criticism, the intention and self-limitations. The place of criticism is actually decisive: in a private atmosphere one is allowed more than in a public atmosphere, because a different kind of responsibility is concerned. There are e.g. critical expressions which might be helpful for some people, inspiring and important and still I do not want to see them in a newspaper or otherwise publically focussed upon. Some people would too easily misunderstand or exploit this criticism for ideological agendas. Such texts at least need to be accompanied by a comment. Gilad Atzmon, artist and critic, talked about such a case, searching for general patterns for publically dealing with them:

"Today I am going to talk about a man who has been removed from our intellectual discourse. Considering his immense influence in the first half of the 20th century, his complete disappearance must raise some questions. Wittgenstein regarded him as a major influence, James Joyce drew upon him in the writing of Ulysses. The man inspired Robert Musil and Herman Broch. I can easily trace his thoughts in Lacan and Heidegger. Freud was debating with his ideas and even Hitler mentioned him, admitting that "there was one decent Jew but even he killed himself". Otto Weininger was one of the most influential intellectual figures in the first four decades of the 20th century and yet, I assume that not many in this room are familiar with his thoughts or have even heard his name before. I assume that I should tell you why. Ladies and Gentleman, Otto Weininger was a racist, an anti-Semite and a radical misogynist. He didn't like Jews or women but guess what, he was a Jew himself and as far as historical research can reveal any truth at all, he was an effeminate one. (...) Let me say it loudly, Weininger is outrageous. Some of my female associates who saw the text dismissed it before they reached the end of the first paragraph and yet I do insist that almost every sentence in Weininger's text falls into the prestigious category of thought provoking literature. Indeed Weininger is a racist, he is a sexist, he hates women, he hates Jews, he hates almost everything that fails to be Aryan masculinity, his tendency towards mathematical formulation is slightly childish and no doubt dated. He makes some categorical mistakes but he made me think. And with your permission I would like to share with you my thoughts about the man."¹⁰

This kind of approach is unfamiliar in our media publics. We expect to get the message whether Weininger is in or out. A double message is in conflict with our dualism and camp thinking. This phenomenon originally has nothing to do with criticism but with psychology and with mass psychology. As long as there is no general awareness of this psychological aspect the place of criticism needs special consideration.

¹⁰ Gilad Atzmon, "Sex and Politics. A talk in Bookmarks, London's Marxist bookshop, 17.6.05", www.gilad.co.uk/html%20files/sexpolitics.html

The aspect of presentation was mentioned above in order to recall the difference between a pamphlet and a song.¹¹ One reason for the failure of criticism as a democratic means may lie in a general underestimation of the progressive nature of art. Bob Dylan, despite his personal social success, has suffered from that. Especially after the Charles Manson case western societies have developed a fear of art and have more and more given up the option of prophylactic conflict recognition in inspired art. In the history of humanity some people have always believed in the significance of art and some people have always believed in human rights. There are many forms of presenting criticism at our disposal, enough to develop successful conflict resolution patterns. Professor Galtung has resolution patterns¹², the UN has, only we as a collective do not take them seriously and routinely try to avoid conflicts instead, in the small and in the big.

The intention and motivation of criticism is a major aspect because on the way of resolving conflicts we all make mistakes. And I mostly mean our own intentions and motivations here, not the ones of the others. Self-limitation is a necessary aspect of criticism, it entails questioning one's own feelings and judgements and the ability of self-criticism. It entails giving permanent evidence for the fact that one does not act double-morally oneself. Double standards are not the privilege of some weird meanies but a human quality which we all share. I find these aspects important in the question of political communication as represented in the discourse. The discourse failed, it needs to be revived. Unresolved value conflicts have devalued values.

Criticism of Ideologies and Collective Responsibilities

Another important aspect is the object of criticism. It is a difference whether a policy, philosophy, ideology is concerned or a religion, culture, person. In the Eisen/Finkel argument we find an agreement in that violent ideologies may and should be criticized and opposed. The disagreement is about the question whether Judaism or Jewry can be called or associated with an ideology or policy. At closer glance, this is not a simple case, for several reasons. For one thing, basically all religions are faced with being "hijacked" by some groups with violent attitudes, be it in Islam, in Christendom or Judaism, claiming to speak in the name of this religion. It is a trap to focus on these groups, still these groups exist and they have a varying amount of support/tolerance from within their own ingroups. Not from the whole ingroup.

Secondly, all these religions/cultures/civilisations have a political aspect. All three initially have produced ingroup-laws, all are meant to effect society, all have messages. All prophets acted politically, this was an essential part of their jobs. The whole enlightenment was accompanied by a thorough critique of religion. Monotheism in the Mediterranean sense has a political/social implication. Professor Jan Assmann, for example, an Egyptologist from Heidelberg who wrote the book "Moses the Egyptian", poses the interesting thesis that the idea of monotheism, which changed the world, is based on an exclusive concept of truth, meaning that it defines itself via demarcation by nature. "No god but God!" in the three monotheistic religions therefore means the exclusion of alternative belief systems: "For all three religions accord in a strong concept of the other against whom they define themselves, in different ways, by persecution, by courting, missionary action, subjection or simply by excluding them as goyim, gentiles, pagani, unbelievers, heretics, respectively."¹³ Monotheism would be about demarcation, not about the one, says Professor Assmann, and therefore it would be exclusive. As a reflecting historian he speaks about the principle of the translatability of values in an "inclusive monotheism" in which all gods are one and he calls this an "intercultural transparency" in which the other can be understood inherently in his own terms.

Thirdly, collective responsibilities do exist, only to what extent is hard to say. I can speak for myself and say that my Muslim identity does give me a feeling of responsibility. Islam literally means devotion to God, it means peaceful devotion. It does not mean lack of conflicts, though. But is there a collective of Muslims which can be addressed in any way or made responsible for violent Islamist groups, for example? This is really a difficult one, just as difficult as the qualification of violence and its demarcation from resistance. May anyone speak in the name of a religion, at all? Would this not imply a hierarchy, a political system? But even if so, like in states, in how far may one address the collective in issues of guilt and responsibility? As a member of the western collective I myself do feel

¹¹ A joke, if it works, has no limits of criticism, because its inherent requirement is not one of morals etc., but solely one of success. Note the distinction between public and non-public utterance made above.

¹² www.transcend.org

¹³ Quotes translated from an article in the Sueddeutsche Zeitung, September 15, 2004. This "exclusive monotheism" in my terminology is a we-them dualism.

responsibility for the effects of colonial times. These effects are visible for me and I miss the readiness of my own people in western publics to actively re-establish or to establish a balance which would make the violent effects disappear. As a member of the Muslim collective I do feel responsibility for a lack of reform toward a less violent and more enlightened, free community. I do feel responsibility as a German concerning the past, present and future of my country and my way of thinking would be different if I was raised in Tibet. I did also accuse Germany for not having coped with its history and it feels right to me that I did. As a Palestinian I feel a responsibility to be in solidarity with the oppressed Palestinian society at home and the refugees in exile. I also want this society to find inner harmony and security at last. But if I left out criticism of the Palestinian society in consideration of their feelings I would make the same mistake as people who do not criticize their Israeli ingroup for the same reason.

What to Do when People Go too Far in the Discourse?

Integral part of the disentangling process in the guilt issue is the question of how to react to discriminatory or hurting acts. Let us start with the thought that the Middle East conflict by nature of its severity and continuation of violence has produced a heap of guilt. Violence does lead to guilt, it is useless to not talk about this or to deny it. Let us state that every further discriminatory act will increase this guilt and will not solve the conflict. In my opinion our major goal should be to develop a systematic and practical way of decomposing the heap. And if such methods exist that we promote and apply them. It is a myth that people or peoples can be evil, the evil is in the situation and people generate these situations, they take part in them and they acquiesce to them.

It is one question to decide whether and to what extend someone in the discourse went too far and it is another question how to deal with such a situation. Prescriptionism is the usual answer, a system of rules and punishments to maintain the rules. From my networking experience I can say that the exclusion from the discourse is one of the routine reactions. Especially in Germany and Israel, also in Palestine, we find a high rate of control thinking. It is, for instance, no secret that many relevant German media and political parties etc. have a so-called "special relationship" of solidarity with Israel and with Jews which often can be called philo-Semitic. Whenever feelings of Jews are hurt and recognized as such these public groups in Germany feel a responsibility.¹⁴ Never have I experienced a case in this department which was not handled in a repressive way. A lot of energy is necessary to keep people and opinions banned and suppressed, but it is done, because these people are seen to be the meanies. Hitler's "Mein Kampf" is prohibited in Germany and other countries, because it is seen to be a mean and dangerous book. It surely is a mean and dangerous book, only the prohibition brings in a new aspect and a repressive pattern. To deny the genocid against the Jews is against the law in Germany and persecuted. This is the same pattern. It stretches further to a philosophy of repressive "conflict-solving" without providing, maybe even without accepting, complements or alternatives. Control seems to be the only way to deal with such matters, but the heap of guilt remains untouched by such action.

I have and may have violated limits myself in the past. Some of them I noticed, some I might not. Quite some time I have apologized to people when I realized that I went too far. My earlier writings are different from my newer writings, there is a tendency toward less aggression and less harsh criticism. People change when they learn, this is normal. It is especially difficult to talk about Jews, but I cannot accept that forever. In the satirical series "Bamboo History" I have written a piece about Cro-Magnons, one about the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Greek and the Romans, then I came to the Christians and then to the Muslims. There I noticed that I had forgotten to write a satire about the Jews. It was impossible for me to leave it out, because I didn't want to single out Jews, so I wrote it. And changed it five times. In the end I did not like it still and have not continued the series since for frustration.

I will not prescribe what to do when people go too far in the discourse, because it is impossible to solve the problems with a set of rules. For my part, I often react in words or art and rarely cut the contact completely. I have so far never called for the complete exclusion of anybody. There are people who I like personally or as artists, but oppose some of their philosophies, and the other way around. Let us not close the discourse further! Is basically all I can say. Let us learn together...

"Revisionism" is such an abstract concept and label. It simply is impossible to not revise history, because one main feature of history is that it steadily changes in our minds. Recently, the discovery of

¹⁴ See point 2.4.3 of my study: "The Reproach of Antisemitism in Critical Reflection. Representation and Analysis of German Press Sources. Study for the Attac Workshop 'Semitism/Middle East', 14./15. February 2004 in Hannover, February 2004", in German with English summary: www.anis-online.de/1/essays/14/14e.htm

the sky disc of Nebra, for example, has changed history completely.¹⁵ The publication of Herzl's diaries changed history. We are not alive anymore when our history ceases to change. In some situations we are confronted with dogma like the prohibition of denying certain historical events. Few people regard it as important to work for creating a social situation in which such dogmas become unnecessary.

Even "essentialism", the search for an essence in peoples, religions or societies, is not necessarily a bad thing. It has negative effects on the political level like in the mentioned essay "Jewish Power". But early romanticism has some connection to it, too, e.g. when the great Novalis called for a rediscovery of the genuine (essential) meaning of life to overcome alienation. A handbook states: "Romanticism is the historically necessary response to an enlightenment which has become rigid."¹⁶ Thus essentialism can also be related to the human search for a home and an identity. That this is a double-edged sword can be seen at the example of film-maker and photographer Leni Riefenstahl who was looking for essence first in the Germans (or even Aryans, I don't know) which led to the production of dangerous and harmful propaganda films like "Triumph of the Will". The aesthetic aspect here is by far overshadowed by the political aspect. It was history which proved that. Later she photographed the African tribe of the Nuba in Sudan. These photos have no political implications, they are a search for some kind of essence and identity, but for aesthetic and romantic reasons. Finally she filmed the underwater world in the same harmless and beautiful way. Therefore I think it is not right to reject her art, but to learn from her fate, including the criticism she was confronted with.

We as the human collective will not be able to use the tool of the Human Rights if we do not develop a method and routine in resolving conflicts, especially asymmetrical conflicts like in family constellations or in the Israel Palestine conflict or the Russia Chechenia conflict or Sudan or or. What we need are successful precedences for orientation and encouragement. When even a Paul Eisen and a Joel Finkel cannot come together, how shall we make peace in Jerusalem? So let us work to solve these problems and to come to peace.

¹⁵ www.himmelsscheibe-von-nebra.com

¹⁶ J.B. Metzler (2nd edition 1984): „Deutsche Literaturgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart“, p. 167