Fifty Faces Of Post-Zionism

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In his book *God's Testament*, the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy points to what he calls "the mysterious and special rhythm" that has characterized the views of Western intellectuals regarding the state, which have since the eighteenth century consistently oscillated between blind allegiance and an equally blind revulsion. "One moment they are prophesying in the language of noonday ideologies such as Marxism and classical Jacobinism, which do not even entertain the *possibility* of salvation outside of gigantic [political] machines whose purpose is inducing human happiness…; the next moment, they change their minds, and, like a fury that has spent itself, turn towards twilight thoughts, and find that … they have no more urgent task than suddenly to deny the state, which has turned into the source of all defilement, the embodiment of total, despised evil."

Over the years, Israel's radical-Left intelligentsia has principally embraced the second of these poles. The Jewish intellectuals who opposed the activist Zionism of the 1930s and 1940s and the academic elite that today constitutes the vanguard of post-Zionism share a deep loathing for the exercise of political power as embodied by the state. Nevertheless, there is one significant difference: While the former were guided by the naive belief that peace and fraternity among all peoples and at all times could in fact be realized, the latter are motivated chiefly by resentment. At their core, the views of the intellectual Left in Israel consist of little more than a posture of unbridled

"criticism," rarely tainted by so much as a hint of a concrete program that could serve as an alternative to the political reality they find so horrifying.

One would be hard pressed to find a better example than the recent special issue of the journal *Theory and Criticism,* published jointly by the Van Leer Institute and the United Kibbutz Movement Press and with the support of the Education Ministry, devoted to the fiftieth anniversary of Israel's independence. In the years since it first appeared in 1991, *Theory and Criticism* has become the Jewish state's most influential platform for what is referred to—both in Israel and elsewhere—as "critical" academic writing, and as such it has also become the flagship organ of post-Zionist thought. And the appearance of this publication's special edition, entitled "Fifty to Forty-Eight," is an event worth noticing: Its fifty articles, filling more than five hundred pages, present a comprehensive chronicle of "critical moments in the history of the State of Israel," as viewed by some of Israel's most outstanding academic figures. The result is the most ambitious attempt yet to create a post-Zionist catechism which can guide one's footsteps in attempting to determine politically correct opinion on virtually everything that took place during the first fifty years of Israel's history.

In its effort to achieve this goal, *Theory and Criticism* presents its readers with what can only be described as a panoramic view of the crimes, sins and afflictions of the Zionist state. In his introduction, the publication's editor Adi Ophir (who is also a lecturer of philosophy at Tel Aviv University) warns the reader that "the volume before you is no celebration, despite the fact that it marks Israel's jubilee. This volume also remembers those [Israeli citizens] for whom this is a holiday celebrated by others on their behalf, against their will and often to their great sorrow. It gives voice as well to those who feel that, although this is supposed to be their celebration, there is really nothing to celebrate." It is in this spirit that this collection of articles goes about cataloguing and analyzing every complaint, protest and frustration that has arisen against the "existing order" in Israel since its founding. The identity of these opposing voices changes from one piece to the next—included are the views of intellectuals, cultural figures, artists, social-protest movements, national

minorities and so on—yet no matter what perspective is being treated, the message which arises from these scholarly articles is somehow always the same: "The contributors write out of fear that control over the Palestinians in particular, and the adoption of the political forms of an ethnocentric and racist nation-state in general, are turning Israel into the most dangerous place in the world for the humanity and morality of the Jewish community, for the continuity of Jewish cultures, and perhaps for Jewish existence itself."

The message of most of the articles in "Fifty to Forty-Eight" is that Zionism, the belief in the idea of a Jewish state and the political effort to create such a state, is by its very nature an oppressive phenomenon—nationally (toward Palestinians), socially (toward Sephardi Jews) and sexually (toward women and homosexuals). In other words, post-Zionist discourse, like similar critical theories (especially post-colonialism and gender theory), is characterized by an obsessive concern with identifying and denouncing oppressive relationships in all spheres of society and culture. In the eyes of *Theory and Criticism* contributors, even a seemingly innocent project like the compilation of a dictionary is exposed as doing the dirty work of the "national-Zionist-male establishment that has anchored its interests in the Hebrew language…." As Tamar Mishmar of Tel Aviv University explains, "Compiling a dictionary … involves selecting and choosing what is to be included or excluded from the dictionary, and is therefore an essentially 'bourgeois' act of canonization … an authoritative act, an act of control, dominion and appropriation."

Viewed from this perspective, every aspect of public and private life is an expression of "control," "domination" and "appropriation," but the oppressed themselves are frequently unaware of their plight. It therefore remains to critical intellectuals to tear the mask off of reality's dark and hidden face. "The Israeli state … is ethnocentric," write Tamar Barkai and Gal Levi, "while at the same time its universal image functions to disguise the dominant status of Jews of European origin (Ashkenazim), who have been able to

perpetuate their control of key positions in Israeli politics and economy through their appropriation of the Zionist ethos." Likewise, Oren Yiftahel of Ben Gurion University's Geography Department disputes "the common assumption regarding the state's democratic nature." An alternative political analysis, he concludes, "points to a governmental reality which I term 'ethnocratic.'"

Many of the issue's articles take this line of argument even further, promoting conspiracy theories according to which every historic, social or cultural event or process is the deliberate and malicious work of a ruling elite. Even in cases in which Israel's governing institutions seem to have been reaching out a hand to the oppressed, it was only an illusion. Thus in their article on the Kedma School in Tel Aviv's Hatikva neighborhood, which is dedicated to promoting a Sephardi cultural identity, Barkai and Levi argue that "the state appears to support Kedma … [because] it wants to contain, and in this way perhaps even neutralize, those seeking to challenge it…." Similarly, in his article "Iraqi Jews and the National Interest," Tel Aviv University sociologist Yehuda Shenhav asserts that "when looking for the roots of the antagonism between Jews from Islamic countries and Arabs, … one should not disregard the manner in which the Zionist movement, and later the State of Israel, served as a provocateur between Arabs and Jews from Arab countries…." According to Shenhav, it was not the depredations experienced by the Jews living in Islamic countries that led them to resent the Arabs and flee to the Jewish state after independence, but rather the manipulations of European-born Zionists, who were responsible for creating what he terms an "emigration psychosis" among the Jews of Iraq.

The hegemonic Zionist, Jewish, Ashkenazi, male identity of Israeli society may be the focus of the radical left-wing criticism of *Theory and Criticism*, yet the theoretical basis on which it rests does not stop at rejecting contingent characteristics of the State of Israel, but its very essence.

The roots of the opposition to the Jewish state date back to the early years of the twentieth century, and can be found in the ideas of left-wing Jewish intellectuals of Brit Shalom ("The Peace Association")—and later of Ihud ("The Union Association," which advocated political union between Jews and Arabs)—during the pre-state period, including leading figures at the Hebrew University such as Judah Magnes and Martin Buber. Such intellectuals, long considered beyond the pale in Israeli political discourse because of their longstanding opposition to the establishment of the State of Israel, are now being rehabilitated in *Theory and Criticism*. Thus Buber is the subject of a laudatory article by Ronen Shamir of Tel Aviv University's Sociology Department and Dan Avnon of Hebrew University's Political Science Department, who examine Buber's "social criticism" as a source for his opposition to Zionism and for his aversion to the violence involved in the decision to establish the state: "Beginning with the 1940s, Buber saw the sanctification of the state and the victory of the principle of national sovereignty as the source for the growth of a society which would come to place militaristic principles at the core of its national existence." And Magnes, who was founder and president of the Hebrew University, likewise believed that the establishment of a Jewish state would cause the Jewish people to renounce the moral purity that characterized its non-political existence. In a speech favorably quoted in *Theory and Criticism*, Magnes therefore dismissed the conflict between the mainstream Zionist leadership under Ben-Gurion and the rightist-Zionist underground organizations Etzel and Lehi as concealing the real issue: "The argument between the official institutions and the dissidents is tactical. They agree on the sanction to kill.… The people Israel is the greatest dissenter in human history.… Judaism tried to distance itself from all bloodshed.…"

It was precisely such views which brought Magnes to spearhead the Jewish diplomatic campaign *against* the founding of the Jewish state in 1948, and it is this idea which today informs the historical and political views of a large portion of the contributors to *Theory and Criticism*. Now, one does not have to be an exceptional political thinker to understand that the existence of every state depends, in the final analysis, on the ability to use force when it is

threatened from without or from within. Yet advocates of the critical approach embodied in *Theory and Criticism* find it impossible to reconcile themselves to this reality. In his introduction, Adi Ophir writes that "the critical thought presented here cannot be satisfied with the law of the state," because "like the state, … law is founded on violence and is managed by force. Law is born out of a violence that establishes it, and is maintained by a violence that preserves it." This aversion to the reality of the political state appears in other articles as well. Thus in an article on Yesh Gvul ("There Is a Limit"), an organization which encouraged Israelis to refuse to perform military service in Lebanon or the territories, Sara Helman of Ben-Gurion University concedes that conscientious objection in the Israeli armed forces has brought about "the systematic undermining of the most outstanding mark of the state's power as a state—the monopoly it demands on the use of violent means—and the undermining of the state's autonomy in formulating its geopolitical goals." Yet this does not stop the author of the article from praising Yesh Gvul for having "promoted a different perception of citizenship—a perception that gives precedent to rights over duties" to the state.

Inevitably, the inclination to view state power as being wrong in itself destroys the basic distinction between regimes that are on the whole just and those that are simply evil—since both democracies and tyrannies are predicated on the reality of power relations. And the resultant inability to draw moral distinctions between states that are really totalitarian, and states such as Israel which are not, is on prominent display in *Theory and Criticism.* This is why Henriette Dahan Kalev of the Hebrew University Political Science Department, in writing about the riots by Sephardi Jews in Wadi Saliv in 1956, quickly concludes that the riots were caused by the "Zionist ethos," which dominated a society that was "totalitarian, oppressive and lacking in tolerance towards others." And this is why Jose Brunner of Tel Aviv University's Law faculty has no difficulty in comparing the anti-terrorist activities of the Mossad to those of a depraved assassin such as Yig'al Amir. As Brunner explains, "Yitzhak Rabin's murder was a distorted imitation of an accepted, maybe too accepted, pattern of behavior, which is part of the framework of practices carried out by the messengers of the Israeli government against its

enemies…. Rabin's murder was an extreme anti-critical act meant to prevent self-criticism regarding Zionist and Israeli practices of violence…. Yig'al Amir's goal was to perpetuate the hegemonic discourse in Israel as a discourse of violence and oppression. And in this he succeeded."

The hostility towards the state championed by Buber and Magnes in the 1930s and 1940s is therefore at the core of contemporary post-Zionist ideology, but such thought frequently expresses itself today in terms taken from French post-modernist thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. The main source of inspiration for "critical thought" among intellectuals throughout the West is, of course, the work of Michel Foucault, and it is Foucault's spirit which hovers over almost every page of this issue of *Theory and Criticism*. As Foucault put it in his *History of Sexuality*, "power is everywhere," and "wherever there is power there is opposition"; and this means that wherever one finds power, one can find an opposition to identify with if one is so inclined. And *Theory and Criticism* is so inclined. As Adi Ophir explains in his introduction, the goal of the special edition is to present:

> anything that embodies criticism of the "existing order" (the "consensus," the "hegemonic culture," the "ruling ideology" and the like), that refuses to accept this order and expresses this in overt resistance or subversion, as long as it possesses the ability to undermine the basic assumptions of that order.

In other words, the writers appearing in *Theory and Criticism* are not only against the particulars of the Jewish national state, but against the political order in general—because of its hegemonic nature, because it is the object of a consensus—in short, because it constitutes an order. And it is this central premise of post-Zionist discourse which, even as it gains in influence and proceeds towards the delegitimization of the State of Israel, nevertheless prevents it from ever being able to advocate any kind of realistic program for change. Most of the contributors to *Theory and Criticism* demonstrate a superior

capacity for critical thinking, yet they are silent, or else evidence a pronounced detachment from reality, whenever it comes to proposing practical political alternatives. Precisely because they are intellectuals, they are frequently inclined to impart exaggerated importance to the theoretical, and to pin their hopes for change on changes in consciousness—the only area in which they feel their activity may leave some mark, and in which they are willing to assume a measure of responsibility.

A clear expression of this can be found in an article by Baruch Kimmerling of Hebrew University's Sociology Department on the subject of "The Palestinian Tragedy: *Al Nakbah*," which discusses the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs during Israel's War of Independence. After mounting his critique of the Jewish leaders in Palestine who were willing to accept war and tragedy as the price of establishing a Jewish state, Kimmerling offers the following conclusion:

> The Palestinians expect that even if we don't return their land and houses to them—because we are the strong ones here and they are weak—that at least we should acknowledge their tragedy and suffering, and the fact that our society and state has, to a large extent, been founded and built on the ruins of the Arab society and culture. They do not even expect us to ask forgiveness—only that we acknowledge the facts.

In the same spirit, Adi Ophir explains that the "critical thought presented here does not seek to eliminate one regime in order to replace it with another, or to establish a new law in place of the old. It only asks that the law look its victims in the eye and acknowledge its debt to those whose claim it declared, in advance, to be unjust."

In passages such as these, the pretension of the post-Zionist intelligentsia to speak for the oppressed is exposed in all its helplessness; the oppressors' "acknowledgment" of their victims' suffering may satisfy Ophir and Kimmerling, but it is unlikely to be of much use in the real world. Post-modern academics cannot come to terms with the "existing order," but they do not know how to change it without turning today's "oppressed" into

tomorrow's "oppressors." They do not know how to wage an effective fight against the evil, which, in their view, is inevitably rooted in political reality. Lacking the possibility of engaging in practical action, all they have left is negation for its own sake.

Despite the impression conveyed by some of its articles, *Theory and Criticism* is not the ephemeral publication of a fringe group. Unfortunately, it presents us with a reliable picture of a mode of thinking now accepted as the norm in important circles in Israel's academia, especially in the humanities and social sciences. In light of this fact, it is impossible to avoid certain depressing conclusions about the role played by the academic elite in Israeli society.

Most Israelis expect that their institutes of higher learning will contribute to the advancement of the public discourse in Israel; that the tens of thousands of young people who enter the universities each year will benefit from their education by becoming better citizens, and learning to make intelligent political decisions within a democratic framework. Yet Israel's campuses are gradually becoming hothouses for political anarchism, as the Israeli intelligentsia busily educates towards resentment of the Jewish state and the values that permit it to exist. Academic "post-Zionism" does not even play the important positive role that intellectual opposition sometimes does in a pluralistic society; it does not bother to advance realistic alternatives or formulate a creative, inspiring vision which offers a kernel of hope. In its cultivation of chronic and sterile resentment, bereft of both responsibility and imagination, the trend represented so powerfully by *Theory and Criticism* in the end offers nothing more than "theory" and "criticism."

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