

Defining decolonial liberation in Palestine

Posted on February 8, 2025 by Muhannad Ayyash
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=””]It is often easier to define and communicate the definition of a concept by what it is not. This is particularly the case for a concept that speaks to a potentiality, a potential future that is an alternative to ‘what is,’ a promise of something uncertain but more just, something better, something that would put an end to the unbearable brutalities of settler colonialism and imperialism. This is certainly the case with the concept of decolonial liberation.

The main reason for this is that our contemporary world is utterly shaped by colonial modernity. Our language, political systems, cultural symbols, economic lives, and social fabric are saturated with the grammar of colonial modernity. It is difficult to imagine, let alone speak about, alternatives when our symbolic universe is so reliant on our daily lived experiences of, and habitation in, the ‘what is’ of colonial modernity.

We find ourselves defining an alternative with statements such as ‘well, it cannot be this or that’ experience, feature, and/or structure from the

current world of colonial modernity. We are able to more easily articulate what is wrong with ‘what is’ because we witness and experience, albeit unequally, its brutalities and injustices in one way or another.

And thus, communicating decolonial liberation for Palestine has always been a difficult undertaking for Palestinian scholars who are theorising an alternative to the abyss of Israeli settler colonialism and US imperialism. One of the most common ways of defining liberation by ‘what it is not,’ is in reference to Zionism. We can easily communicate how and why Zionism, as a political ideology born of and for the project of colonial modernity, is the problem, and therefore cannot be part of any real decolonial solution. We can say, for instance, ‘decolonial liberation in Palestine cannot take place without de-Zionization.’

But what does liberation mean in the positive sense? What does it look like? How is the alternative world going to be materially experienced on a daily basis? How will people live? How will they have and practice freedom, opportunity, dignity, and rights? And so on.

It is an unfair burden on the colonised Palestinians to have to answer these questions before the one-hundred-year settler colonial genocidal assault against them has been halted and forced to retreat. But nothing is fair or just about this world of colonial modernity. The real burden of history was never the sham of the ‘White Man’s Burden,’ but the burden of the colonised to dismantle this brutal machine of colonial modernity and create something new, something worthy of the grand ideals of humanity. This is what giants such as C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said, among many others, have always understood.

Decolonial liberation in the positive sense means different things to different people. In Palestine, some see it as the establishment of a two-state solution along the 1967 borders, others as the establishment of a Palestinian state on the whole of historic Palestine with Israelis becoming equal citizens living under Palestinian sovereignty, while others see it in various one secular state solution models (federal, confederal, multicultural constitution, binational constitution, etc.). Regardless of the answer, the focus is almost always centered on the state.

What I am attempting to do in my work, particularly in my forthcoming

book, Lordship and Liberation in Palestine-Israel: The Promise of Decolonial Sovereignties, is to shift attention from the state to the question of sovereignty. For me, sovereignty is more important than the state because in its broader conceptualisation, that is, in its conceptualisation before and beyond the age of colonial modernity, the concept of sovereignty speaks to the type of relationship that people form with the land and between each other on the land. The concept, in other words, speaks to fundamental questions about what it is to be a human being living on this planet – it deals with the ground upon which we can then debate questions about social, economic, and political systems and models.

For me, the only path towards creating a positive vision for liberation is to go back to those fundamental grounds of social and political life. To ask questions about what it means to be human, what human life ought to be about, and our relationship with the land and each other, not from the basis of colonial modernity's answers to these questions (homo economicus, instrumental rationality, lordship over land and people, dehumanising racialisation, and so on), but with the intention to oppose colonial modernity's answers and offer an alternative to them.

We start, for example, not with the individual as the site and locus of freedom and rights, but the collectivity as the site and locus of collective liberation; to understand our relationship with the earth as one of co-habitation and stewardship, not one of mastery and lordship; to understand our purpose as collectively moving together for the betterment of the whole, not a race for the maximal generation of wealth for groups and individuals; to articulate the relation of 'self' and 'other' as one of co-constituency, not as one of purity and exclusion. These are parts of the shifts that in my book I refer to as 'decolonial sovereignties,' which can be observed in the aspirations and various practices of Palestinians in our long struggle against Zionist settler colonialism.

Decolonial sovereignties in Palestine means, negatively, the end of Israeli settler colonialism, Jewish supremacy, and the dismantlement of exclusive Israeli Jewish settler colonial sovereignty. Positively, it means the right of all Palestinians to return to all the lands from which they have been expelled since 1948. It means the reestablishment of the Palestinian people's sovereign relationship with all the lands, not as a replica of Israeli settler colonial sovereignty, but as a new form of sovereignty that

emphasises communal ownership of land, the right to live in political systems that restrict the powers of a centralized authority or that operate on decentralised forms altogether, the ability to pursue collective well-being, nourishment, and prosperity, and most critically the right to live as free sovereign communities who continuously and fully participate in the social, political, economic, and legal systems through which they get to express their aspirations of what it means to live a free and fulfilling human life. Israelis can live the exact same way as Palestinians in this system, but obviously only if they give up their aspiration for mastery and lordship over the land and the Palestinian people.

Different political models can help achieve these aims. But whatever political model is employed, it can be constructed and developed as decolonial liberation only if the process of imagination and construction begins from a decolonised ground. It is precisely this decolonised ground that my concept of decolonial sovereignties attempts to speak to, illuminate, and outline.

Photo: *Ramallah by Paweł Wargan (*[author at Peoples Dispatch](#)*)*
[/vc_column_text][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_toggle title=”Reading group event details” open=”true” css=””]Date: 4th December 2024
Title: Decoloniality in the midst of genocide with Muhannad Ayyash
Speaker: Muhannad Ayyash
Chair: Teodora Todorova
Minutes by: Nadeen Dakkak[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title=”Selected minutes” css=””]Muhannad:

> The gist of my talk is that we have to understand Zionism through the paradigm of settler colonialism, and that we need to understand Palestinian liberation as part of decolonial liberation. The aim of my article that I shared with you, “Zionism, Settler Colonialism, and Nationalism: On Motivations and Violence,” is to move us away from all the qualifying that people do when they talk about Zionism, when they say that it is too complex or nuanced. This tendency to qualify is rampant in academia when

it comes to the situation of Israel and Palestine, as if no other context is complex and nuanced. Complexity does not and should not stop us from explaining things. When academics use the line “it is more complex than settler colonialism,” they have no idea what settler colonialism or colonial modernity are. They only have a political view of these issues as having a bad reputation in academia, which shows that they do not have a complex understanding of these paradigms and theories. The truth of the matter is that all contexts of settler colonialism are complex.

We have had enough of these qualifications that attempt to suggest that Zionism is a diluted form of settler colonialism. I wanted to challenge these not by looking at texts that are easy to criticize, but in relation to big and complex texts that have worked within the settler colonial paradigm, but with which I have taken issues, texts including the work of Ilan Pappe, for example, and even Rashid Khalidi. My work is not an argument against these scholars per se, but rather shows that there are versions of the “Zionism as a diluted form of settler colonialism” discourse even in this complex scholarship.

I have taken an issue with critical historiography that argues that Zionism is a diluted version of settler colonialism because it wasn’t just about the generation of wealth and imperialism but the creation of safety for persecuted Jews, hence its complexity as a national project. There is a spectrum of different critical historiography: some scholars say the above while others want to drop the paradigm of settler colonialism all together. But this argument on nationalism making the Zionist project difficult to understand using the settler colonial paradigm is not convincing. There are already many theorizations of nationalism at the heart of other settler colonial contexts, and this we can also see in Benedict Anderson’s writing on nationalism.

The argument on Zionism not fitting the settler colonial paradigm because it was not triggered by an imperial project that sought to generate wealth is also not convincing. There always was a tension between the settler colony and the

metropole on the question of generating wealth. Many colonizers were themselves escaping persecution and this doesn't make them any less colonist. Refugees have been settler colonist throughout history, so this is not unique to Zionism. Of course, there are always differences and similarities and that's why we have comparative studies. No structure of power looks the same everywhere. There are differences across history and geography. It's a political move to use these justifications to say that Zionism can't be understood as a settler colonial project.

Why is this all important? Because the only way we can understand decolonial liberation is by understanding what it is up against. Zionism is a project born from and for colonial modernity. Even in its foundation, it did not challenge colonial modernity nor racialization, specifically dehumanizing forms of racialization. Zionism accepted and never challenged the notion of Jews being Europe's persecuted racial other. Furthermore, it carried this racialization into its colonial project outside Europe, recreating that racial hierarchy in the land of the Orient. It created a European-like state at the expense of natives who were and still are seen as a lesser race. Zionism as a political ideology is thus entirely irredeemable in the project of decolonial liberation. In fact, it formulates a notion of collective identity and a form of nationalism that can only exist with the forceful expulsion of Palestinians.

We, of course, do not want to lose sight of the persecution history of Jews in Europe. But for this history to be open for a potential decolonial liberation, it has to be itself decolonized. This will have to happen for any solidarity to be formed between Palestinians and Israelis. This is much more difficult today, of course, but for me it remains the only real option for decolonial liberation. Anybody who talks about a decolonial future that includes Zionism has a misunderstanding of both Zionism and what decolonization mean.

Academic institutions in North America, for example, speak using the language of decolonization without really ever being serious in their commitment to this cause. To me, Palestine is a

litmus test. Whether academics, individuals, research centers, or departments, whoever is enabling this genocide that is currently happening truly shows where they fall on the question of decolonization. One cannot be a scholar of decolonization if they are actively complicit, or even if they are silent. This is what motivated me to write this piece on the imposters. Irrelevant of what their internal thinking is, imposters claim something and do something else. And imposters are rewarded in the world we live in. True commitment to a cause, however, means that this system of reward does not concern us that much. We have to continue calling out the genocide, and also calling ourselves out when we hesitate and qualify, and when we have internal doubts.

The reason I suggested reading Darwish's Absent Presence is because this book really shows the role of art in invigorating political and theoretical imagination. In those beginning pages of the book, you start to lose any sense of time and temporality. When you start to let go of your conventional understanding of linearity, the seamless continuation between past, present and future, you start seeing how things that may be impossible in your conventional perception of linearity may appear possible. What this book does for me is allow me to not compartmentalize things historically, to do comparative work but also see connections, to see that boomerang effect that Aimé Césaire talked about. What happened to Jews in Europe is not disconnected from what happened to colonized peoples in other parts of the world.

Reader:

I want to ask about the concept of Indigeneity. How should we respond to arguments on the Indigeneity of Jews to Palestinian land?

Muhannad:

> No body denies that there has been Jewish presence on Palestinian land for thousands of years. But historical records make clear that they are not the only Indigenous residents of the land. Multiple groups of people lived on this land. The notion that Jewish history has the only authentic presence on the land, that all other cultures, religions and ethnicities need to be removed, has no historical evidence and is pure political ideology. This land has had an intermixture of people moving in and out across history. Another point is that Palestinians before Zionism understood themselves as a sovereign people who have practiced sovereign existence on the land for centuries, even if they were under one form of empire or another. Then Zionism as a European colonial ideology came and said that this land cannot be owned in this "backward way" and that those are not valid forms of sovereignty. Indigeneity here is a political identity, a political positionality, precisely because the settler colonial project says there is a stark difference between the settler, who comes to later be identified as the Indigenous, and the other. In other words, even when Zionists make the dubious claim that they are the true Indigenous people of the land, the same hierarchy and same logic of expulsion continue to remain intact in their worldview.

Reader:

> What is decolonial liberation in this context?

Muhannad:

> It means eliminating the structure of settler colonialism, which is an absolute sovereignty that cannot tolerate other claims to the land and operates with the logic of expulsion, and replacing it with decolonial sovereignty. We cannot replicate that structure because it is inherently one of coloniality. Decolonization means an alternative form of sovereignty. I understand sovereignty in

> an abstract sense as the type of claim that people make to conceive of their relationship to the land as well as their relationship amongst themselves. The type of sovereignty that is all over the world how and that is maybe 200 or 300 years old is only the newest version of sovereignty and we should not confuse it with sovereignty in the abstract sense. There are different kinds of sovereignty, including imperial sovereignty as well as layered and shared sovereignties. Prior to the arrival of British Empire, Palestinians had communal ownership of land. Even the land that was state-owned by the Ottoman Empire was still communally owned. I argue for something like that in this context where Palestinians and Israelis will share land and sovereignty. This necessarily demands de-Zionization and letting go of the notion of an indivisible Israeli Jewish sovereignty. De-Zionization, redistribution of land and shared sovereignty are how I envision decolonial liberation.

Reader:

> What is it about the ideology of Zionism that makes it incapable of having this model of shared sovereignty?

Muhannad:

> Israel is not unique in this. Canadian settler colonialism, for example, has never accepted the notion of Indigenous sovereignty. It still hasn’t. Celebrating Indigenous culture has not led to accepting sovereignty. All states today operate on the notion of this indivisible sovereignty, and this has been creating violence all over the world. I theorize decolonial liberation purely in the context of Palestine; how it looks like in different contexts will need to be worked out. People often mishear me saying that shared sovereignty will operate under the existing structure of sovereignty (Canadian, for example), but there should be a dismantling of absolute sovereignty. Zionism belongs to the age

of colonial modernity and this is why shared sovereignty is not possible. Patrick Wolfe argues that Indigenous sovereignty is resisted and not tolerated precisely because it is meant to replace, rather than operate under, the existing settler colonial sovereignty.

Reader:

Since you mention Patrick Wolfe, there is a lot of solidarity amongst Indigenous Australians for Palestinians. One of the things they are pursuing is a treaty, because they never had any. What role would treaties play in the future in this context, because it is very important in the Australian context? Would a treaty have a role?

Muhannad:

Treaties in Canada have been used to dispossess the Indigenous population, but of course, there have been various degrees of success in using treaties in courts, so the picture is mixed. In a place like Canada, there is no real talk of decolonization without land back and the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty. When it comes to treaties, the specifics will be different in every context, but I believe there has to be a call for land back and resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty. This is a critical part of decolonial liberation.

Reader:

Are there any global cases that provide examples of how a shared sovereignty may be articulated? Although it is far from having achieved equality, can we think of post-apartheid South Africa as an example?

Muhannad:

> Racial, economic and spatial apartheid is alive and well in South Africa. You see it when you go there and it’s difficult to see how they are going to get out of it because things got muddier than they were before with the rise of a class of black and brown elites that are part and parcel of that economic structure. This makes things less easy to articulate. We can go back and say that they should have had wealth and land redistribution at that moment in time, but the question is whether that might have even been possible, because they were under a lot of economic pressure from the US and other states and that put them in a difficult position. There has not been true decolonisation in South Africa.

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