Against singularity
Palestine as symptom and cause
Sami Khatib

A symptom is usually understood as something indicative of a cause, be it in the realm of medicine or ideology. Unlike in linear causal reasoning, however, a symptom cannot be derived from an assumed cause; rather, a cause needs to be constructed 'backwards' from the significance of 'its' symptom. In the realm of ideology, a symptom designates the point where ideological speech contradicts itself. The underlying hypothesis of this article is that the question of Palestine functions as the 'world community's' symptom: it marks the point where this community reveals itself as exclusive, limited, essentially Western, exposing the hypocrisy and function of its current ideology, the 'Human Rights Discourse' (HRD).[1]

This terminology and acronym (HRD) follows Robert Meister's take in *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights,*(2011). HRD refers to a set of practices and beliefs that gained ideological traction in a US-led post-Cold War world. Meister holds 'that the present political character of Human Rights Discourse is distinct from the broader concept of human rights associated with 1789, which was the topic of debate and struggle between the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ... The post-1989 politics of human rights is not meant to be contested in the same *political* way as its predecessor – rather, it presents itself as an *ethical* transcendence of the politics of revolution and counterrevolution that together produced the horrors of the twentieth century – Nazism and communism ... Today the invocation of human rights is often part of a political project fundamentally at odds with the revolutionary struggles based on human rights: it is the war cry of a self-described "international community" led by the victors in the cold war' (2011, 7).

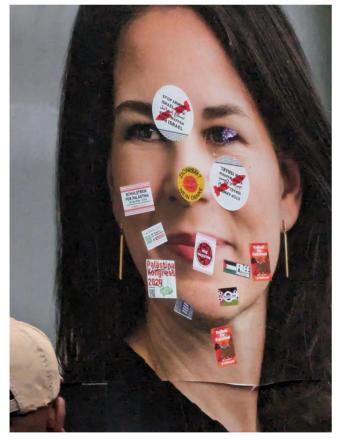In psychoanalysis, a symptom signals the return of the repressed. However, for the symptom, the return is original, it cannot directly be deduced from that which has been repressed. Rather, the symptom, although temporally posterior, is the starting point to construct what has been repressed 'in the first place'. Repression is an unconscious process, and it is only by virtue of a retroactive logic that the repressed reveals its meaning belatedly through its 'return' in the form of symptoms. In other words, the repressed cannot be properly disentangled from its distorted return and symptoms.[2] To gain a conscious knowledge of symptom formation, a psychoanalytic working-through is necessary.

In discourse and ideology, symptoms are even more difficult to discern. If the 'unconscious is structured like a language',[3] as Lacan famously phrased his take on Freud, language is the site of both unconscious repression and its symptoms. As Žižek argues with Marx and Lacan, a 'symptomatic' reading of ideology 'consists in detecting a point of breakdown *heterogeneous* to a given ideological field and at the same time *necessary* for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form.'[4] The task for a critique of HRD is thus twofold: identifying the elements that both *undermine* and *stabilise* the consistency of its ideological field and speech acts.

In its persistence and return, the Palestinian question can be read as such an element. My argument is that the Palestinian question, despite being often articulated in the language of humanitarianism, signals the breaking point of the entire ideological field of humanitarianism and the fantasy of 'conflict management', exceeding the depoliticising language of HRD and introducing an antagonistic *political* dimension heterogeneous to 'humanitarian' crisis responses. Recalling humanitarianism's repressed, the Palestinian question is articulated from a

non-identitarian position that remains non-assimilable in the current world order. An answer to the Palestinian question thus necessitates a change of this order.

The attacks of 7 October 2023 happened at a time when Israel, the US and their allies thought they had moved beyond the Palestinian question, relegating it to the status of a necropolitical management of contained space under Israeli sovereignty. This type of conflict management failed. Palestine as a signifier of political struggle and liberation is back on the centre stage of global politics. Conducting a war of annihilation in the Gaza strip and committing unprecedented massacres against its population, Israel is creating a reality that will not allow a return to the status quo ante. In their circulation of ideological content, Israel, the US and their allies acknowledge this reality (there is no way back), yet at the same time, disavow this knowledge when referring to plans for the future administration of the territory (or, what will have been left of it to govern).

Probably the most indicative utterance of this disavowing knowledge is that of the compulsive pseudo-question: 'Do you condemn Hamas?'[5] Those who act out by repeating this question already know that the addressee does not conform to the questioner's worldview.

The rationale of this pseudo-question is thus paradoxical: it only accepts a yes, yet knows that a yes is either a lie or tautological. As a question, it cancels itself out. Instead, it pronounces an ideological interpellation: do you support the Western world order, its ruling ideology (HRD), and do you condemn the entire spectrum of Palestinian resistance, from peaceful boycotts to the Hamas attacks of 7 October? Palestinians should accept their colonial subjugation, should not resist, and should, ideally, disappear and with them the annoyance of the Palestinian question.

Human Rights Discourse as counter-revolution

In *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*, Robert Meister formulated a groundbreaking critique of the post-1989 Human Rights Discourse. While HRD consists in declaring a new 'post-ideological' age that 'would repudiate past violence … by endorsing exceptional violence – that of rescue and occupation', the 'old' Holocaust functions as the foundational crime of this new age.[6] The project and mission of preventing the return of such exceptional violence would necessitate granting the self-declared survivor and victim-state, the state of Israel, impunity and constitutive exemption from international law.

Explaining the blatant mismatch of Israel's human rights abuses against Palestinians and neighbouring populations, and Israel's self-image as an endangered 'victim-state', Meister contends:

> In post-Holocaust debates about human rights the violence that Israel uses to defend itself has become a laboratory for the violence that the 'world community' (and especially the U.S.) would be obliged to use in protecting an Israel that could not defend itself. The post-Holocaust security of Israel thus stands as the constitutive *exception* on which twenty-first-century humanitarianism is based.[7]

The phrase 'constitutive exception' points to the nexus of what is considered 'normal' (systemic) state violence, on the one hand, and its 'exceptional' (sovereign, colonial or otherwise) extreme, on the other. Today, Israel does not only function as a techno-scientific laboratory for exceptional state violence and its 'live' enforcement, but also as the ideological test site for the fabrication of justifications for the latter. In this way, the 'world's

most moral army' produces and reproduces the 'ethics' of the 'justified' killing of unprotected civilians. Within this 'humanitarian' battle zone, Palestinians, civilians and fighters alike are not only the physical but also the ideological target.

Walter Benjamin, writing in 1940, stated that in modern states the 'state of emergency' [*Ausnahmezustand*, or 'state of exception'] is not the exception but the rule.'[8] Already in pre-Holocaust Europe there was no excuse for the moralising astonishment that exceptional acts of state violence are 'still' possible in the twentieth century. Rule and exception are internally interrelated in the sense that the exception constitutes, produces and tests out the 'normal' functioning of rule-conforming violence. Following Meister's argument, in the exceptional case of the state of Israel, its victims, although ultimately contingent, also function as the 'necessary exception' to justify the 'normal' legitimised use of Western state violence, be it 'peacekeeping' or 'peacemaking', military invasion, 'war on terror' or suspension of basic human rights in the name of state security. In this way, the 'world community' becomes the beneficiary of its own declared 'humanitarian' mission and 'responsibility to protect potential victims of another Holocaust'.[9]

Following Meister's argument, in the case of systemic state violence, triadic relations of *perpetrators*, *victims* and *beneficiaries* are neither symmetric nor reciprocal. Beneficiaries can enjoy their gains in the spatial absence of perpetrators while condemning their deeds; the victims of structural violence (class, race, gender) can be offered compassion and charity while maintaining structures of injustice, exploitation and submission. The 'world community' (that is, the West) casts its role of an ongoing beneficiary of past 'evil' (colonialism, imperialism, fascism, genocide) as the 'rescuer' of future victims of an imagined new genocide, while denying the existence of a real genocide as it currently unfolds in Gaza. Within the logic of HRD, the question of rescue and moral responsibility is only posed as long as beneficiaries of past evil are not addressed as such, implicated in current injustice, but as compassionate bystanders, acting on behalf of innocent victims, purified of all vengeance and spite.

> A beneficiary who bears witness to the innocence of past victims can thus conceive of himself as a would-have-been rescuer rather than a would-be perpetrator. The

question for the human rights convert is always whether it is already too late to rescue, or still too soon. By agonizing over the question of his own potential guilt as a bystander, the witness to human suffering attempts to save his soul without necessarily relinquishing his position of advantage.[10]

Once a victim group is framed as terrorist or as an exponent of past evil (Palestinians as the new antisemites, as the reincarnation of Nazis), the responsibility to protect and rescue is inverted: protection becomes persecution, rescue becomes annihilation.

Meister's multi-layered argument, in consequence, can explain why the historically contingent victims of the state of Israel are necessarily framed as terrorist, barbaric and illegitimate as long as they insist on their fight for justice. Palestinians and their allies, voluntarily or not, by resisting Israel also resist the current world order of Western humanitarianism, which deems the struggle for justice and the age of revolution (roughly speaking 1789-1989) as 'past evil' – a presumably totalitarian cycle of violence and counter-violence that the post 1989 'world community' seeks to leave behind, buried in an 'evil past'. Those who resist HRD, seek violent revolution or fight against structural violence, regardless of their means of struggle, appear as the living anachronism of past evil (therefore 'terrorist'). In the current world order, the Palestinians and their allies are targeted for having failed to give up a presumably outdated, therefore terrorist and antisemitic cause. This is the meaning of 'Do you condemn Hamas?': renounce all forms of resistance, violent or non-violent, Islamist or otherwise. Current Western government policies of 'anti-antisemitism' are thus consistent with HRD.

Germany's Palestine problem

Anti-antisemitism is the ideological name of a discourse that demonises critics of the Israeli state.[11] In Germany this discourse takes shape in chiefly state-sponsored campaigns whose racist implications are particularly extreme.[12] Endorsing a politically motivated redefinition of antisemitism[13] according to which criticism of Israeli state action can be labelled antisemitic, German media and politicians have become one of the key actors in granting Israel impunity. While Germany casts its global role as humanitarian, liberal and cosmopol-

itan, it maintains its position as ongoing beneficiary of past evil (the Holocaust), economically, politically, culturally and morally. Since official Germany is *past evil*, that is past-antisemitic, the *current* agents of past evil (antisemitism, revolutionary violence, or both) can be condemned in the figure of the Palestinian and Palestine solidarity movements. In this way, current Palestinians become the externalised figure of Germany's antisemitic past – and present.

Coming to terms with this twisted logic, one could speak of a quasi-transcendental anti-Palestinian sentiment in Germany. It presents a key element of what A. Dirk Moses called 'The German Catechism'[14] – a set of beliefs that underpins the German public discourse, embedded in an increasingly state-run 'memory culture' that under the watchword 'Never again' claims to have drawn the correct political, cultural and affective lessons from the Holocaust. The concluding dogma of this catechism holds that antizionism equals antisemitism, avowing unconditional support for the state of Israel.[15] This 'catechism' does not only apply to mainstream political discourse but also structurally organises who can speak and whose voices are heard where and under what conditions in public debates.[16] In a post-migrant society like Germany, this discursive gatekeeping amounts to back-door racial profiling: people from non-German backgrounds are expected to learn and get used to this 'catechism' and its specifically anti-Palestinian sentiment.[17] In effect, this 'catechism' manufactures consent to actions of the Israeli state and frames the construction of Palestinian identity under the premises of 'Israel-related antisemitism'. This can lead to the accusation that the very signifier of 'Palestine' (along with mentioning the word 'occupation') is perceived as antisemitic. A German newspaper even called the slogan 'Free Palestine' a contemporary version of the Nazi salute 'Heil Hitler'.[18] Such bizarre distortions are not accidental; they rely on a specifically German version of HRD that embraces a sort of 'redemptive' Zionism to atone for Germany's Nazi past. Seen through the lens of this redemption narrative, Germany's support of Zionism and an ethnocratically defined Israel ('Israel as a Jewish state') acquires a quasi-religious character. This critique chimes with Meister's critique of HRD as an essentially Christian or post-Christian belief system, derived from a Pauline logic of conversion.[19]

The credo of the anti-Palestinian sentiment in Germany is thus simple: the state that claims to speak in the name of those murdered in Germany's name cannot itself be a state of injustice. For if it were so, the calculation of moral reparation by the descendants of Germans from 1933 to 1945 would not add up. From the perspective of German *Staatsräson*[20] (reason of state), the unconditional support of the state of Israel, regardless of the mode of its existence, proves Germany's success in moral redemption and material reparation for the Holocaust. In this way, Israel's existence becomes the external embodiment of Germany's post-Holocaust moral goodness. Within this imaginary universe, Israel is not a real place but the narcissistic mirror image of Germany's goodness, which after the Cold War takes centre stage in the German version of HRD.[21] For such a mindset, it is inconceivable (both cognitively and emotionally) to imagine the state of Israel as a state actor of war crimes, systematic human rights abuses, apartheid policies or genocide.

Against such a *desired reality* one has to insist on a *historical reality* in which victims can become perpetrators and vice versa; at times they are both victim and perpetrator within one and the same space of history.[22] However, there is no symmetry, neither historical nor moral, between the two. The idea of pure victim and perpetrator identities and the grouping of people and their deeds into abstract collective identities, is among the most problematic legacies of the age of nation states. A common talking point of Israel's apologists is the forced emigration and violent expulsion of Jewish populations of Arab states after Israel's establishment in 1948. Heterogeneous groups of people are lumped together under abstract notions of 'Jew' and 'Arab' in order to be put into an equation with another group of people, that is non-Jewish Palestinians who lived in the land of Palestine prior to modern nation states. By way of *abstract equation*, the violent expulsion of around 750,000 Palestinians (*Nakba*) is not only rationalised but ex post legitimised – as if the violence against one abstractly defined group of people could somehow equalise the violence against the other. Such abstractions are an integral part of the violent rationale of modern 'nation-building'; it inherently creates, as Hannah Arendt already foresaw in 1951, the group of 'stateless people'.[23] Within this rationale of nation building, genocide becomes a thinkable reality, despite (or precisely because) of the Genocide Convention of

1948.[24] Once an ethno-national state project succeeds in defining itself as the representative and successor of an *exceptional* victim group, the acts of resistance against this state can be framed as illegitimate, terrorist or, in the case of Palestine, antisemitic.

The German discourse might be an extreme case; however, it is in tune with a general (post)historical shift. Enzo Traverso, echoing Meister, remarks that after 1989 the age of memory culture places the figure of the victim in the centre of its political imaginary:

> In the age of the victims, the Holocaust becomes the paradigm of Western memory, the foundation upon which the remembrance of other ancient or recent forms of violence and crimes should be built. Thus, the propensity emerges to reduce history to a binary confrontation between executors and victims.[25]

Such a binary, however, reduces the question of revolution and defeat to a depoliticised sequence of violence and counter-violence; it does not account for beneficiaries, structural injustice and failed revolutionary attempts at changing history. Past executors can thus be condemned as perpetrators while the current beneficiaries of past violence can enjoy their gains in an 'ethical' way. As depoliticised victims, the defeated of past revolutions can be memorialised without remembering the lost causes and dreams they fought for. As Traverso puts it, 'the memory of the Gulag erased that of revolution, the memory of the Holocaust replaced that of antifascism, and the memory of slavery eclipsed that of anticolonialism.'[26] In short, post-1989 memory culture comes down to a project of rethinking history without the negative dimension of antagonistic struggle. As a posthistorical ideology, it thus culminates in the self-congratulatory formula of today's HRD: the past is evil, but the evil is past.[27]

This project, however, only functions once memory culture is organised by the state or a quasi-state actor and politically linked to an officially assumed 'historical responsibility' that can speak *on behalf* of a historical victim group. In the case of the German state, this logic is particularly evident: German state actors, almost completely non-Jewish, speak on behalf of 'Jews'. Such ventriloquism only works once real Jewish people in their concrete difference and diversity are abstracted and transposed into an imaginary group of 'the Jews' who become the *object* of German state protection and assumed

responsibility.[28]

The singularity-effect of Holocaust memory culture

This dehistoricised version of the past relies on a transformation of Holocaust memory culture in which historical specificity is substituted by ahistorical singularity. In Holocaust studies, the widely accepted criterion of historical singularity is 'uniqueness' and 'unprecedentedness'.[29] 'Unprecedentedness', however, is not a sufficient criterion for uniqueness as it leaves open which historical event can become a precedent for another.[30] And likewise, uniqueness is not singular; all historical events are unique as they are relational. In historical terms, singularity can hardly refer to the spatio-temporal singularity of the mere fact, but must aim at grasping the contexts and conditions of the constitution of these facts.[31]

As soon as we enter the realm of history, there are only mixed relations, mediations, combinations of new and old factors, whose historically singular constellation is not immune to structural repetition. Thus, the historical notion of singularity only comparatively makes sense, discriminating between more or less 'singular' historical events. As has been pointed out in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, historical scholarship thrives on its comparative capacity, on comparing historical events, structures and motivations. The work of comparing is not the one of equating; it preserves the status of the historical as context and does not level the individual event to the general concept. The qualitatively new, therefore singular, aspect of the Holocaust as a state-organised extermination programme consisted in a new combination of factors that, in retrospect, had their precursors in other, colonial, racist contexts of violence of capitalist modernity.[32] The current debate on the singularity of the Holocaust, however, seems to have moved beyond this historical meaning of singularity, lapsing into the misty realm of metaphysics and theology.[33]

Proponents of the singularity thesis usually bring forward the ideological self-referentiality of exterminatory antisemitism. The Nazis intended to kill the Jews *as* Jews, not for some profane gains; annihilation was perceived as an end in itself. The Nazis, while intentionally 'coining' the term in its racialised arbitrariness,[34] killed real people in the abstract name of the 'Jew', enacting a

monstrous transformation of human to number, concrete life to abstract death, a 'multitude of "unpronounceable names"' into a 'master signifier'.[35] This is one of the specificities of the Holocaust as historical complex that exceeds the explanatory framework of genocide, if the latter is reduced to a positivist account of mass killings of victims in relation to an assumed intent of perpetrators. However, if one modifies the notion of genocide and acknowledges that psychopathological fantasies, conscious or not, are integral to the genocidal mindset and actions of perpetrators, the explanatory framework of genocide can be extended beyond the legalistic terminology of the Genocide Convention of 1948. A. Dirk Moses argues that genocidal end goals are often driven by the paranoid fantasy of 'permanent security'.[36] Perpetrators pre-emptively kill entire groups of people in the present in order to achieve guaranteed security in the future. The paranoid intention of 'self-defence' can yield similar effects as genocidal intent. Moses' criticism implicitly puts into question whether the assumed (ir)rationality of political ends provides a supra-historical standard of judgment for historical events. The discrimination of means and ends is itself a relational one, it does not designate an absolute separation.

Once the Holocaust is understood as an assumed end in itself – a self-referential hate crime, devoid of any further political or historical purposiveness – it can be singularised and separated from other 'generic' genocides like modern slavery during colonialism or the Rwandan genocide. The question, whether violent means (from 'accidental' genocide to 'collateral damage') can be clearly distinguished from their colonial or imperial ends, makes sense only for those who regard these ends, be their names power, profit, 'progress', or 'civilisation', as rational, at least in theory. However, even the basic dogma of bourgeois theories of violence according to which 'just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means used for just ends'[37] is not universally accepted. Therefore, for the victims of these teleologies of violence, the conceivability of an absolute distinction between violent means (colonial genocide) and violent end (Holocaust) cannot be assumed. If reason and unreason, rationality and irrationality, civilisation and barbarism, contain each other dialectically, the *Zivilisationsbruch*, 'rupture in civilization'[38] of the Holocaust appears as a rupture only from the *particular* perspective of the *false universality* of bourgeois commodity economy.[39] As argued by Horkheimer and Adorno, the 'dialectic of enlightenment' inherent in rational purposiveness indicates that Western rationality and irrationality, civilisation and barbarism, violence and peacefulness, are not external opposites. 'With the spread of the bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating.'[40]

Regardless of these objections, the singularity thesis has already created a political epistemology and reality. These consequences drive a general logic that Fredric Jameson, although in a different context, calls the 'singularity-effect'.[41] Without getting into the details of his intricate argument,[42] one could summarise it as a late postmodern strategy of dehistoricisation and decontexualisation. Jameson warns that 'the concept of singularity is itself a singular one, for it can have no general content, and is merely a designation for what resists all subsumption under abstract or universal categories'.[43] Jameson's term proves instructive when read with and against posthistorical tendencies within contemporary discourses on antisemitism and Holocaust memory culture.

It is consistent with the logic of the singularity-effect, if modern antisemitism is no longer understood as a *specific* form of racism in general, but as the name of a hate crime *sui generis* that, at least in principle, can be detached from its history in Christian anti-Judaism. For such a singularising theory of modern antisemitism, the historical relationship of antisemitism as *abstract worldview* and antisemitism as *concrete history*, ranging from hate crimes to genocide, appears, in the last instance, contingent.[44] The historical difference between religious and modern antisemitism, however, cannot be explained without the pseudo-scientific concept of race and modern racism since the nineteenth century. With the singularisation of antisemitism, these relations become reified and dehistoricised. As a result, the analytical difference between antisemitism and racism is transformed into an absolute one. While in singular antisemitism the abstract concept seems to coincide with its own concretion (the antisemitic phantasma of the Jew is abstract and, in its abstractness, still addressed to concrete people), in 'non-singular' racism only the merely conceptual abstraction remains. In this way, any concept of racism that does not also include antisemitism disintegrates into the abstract concept of its own theory on the one hand, and the concrete experience of its historical phenomena on the other. In contrast to racism and its conceptual challenges to account for *particularity* and *universality*, antisemitism becomes the theory of its own *singularity* and, accordingly, the singular source of its own definition. Conversely, as soon as racism as *really existing concept* can no longer be addressed in reality, only particular anti-X-racisms remain (anti-black, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim), which tend to get singularised and ontologised.[45] As a consequence, the general term of racism enters into competition with antisemitism and is increasingly addressed as an abstract particularity devoid of universal meaning and concrete reality. Against this singularising tendency, one should insist with Etienne Balibar that
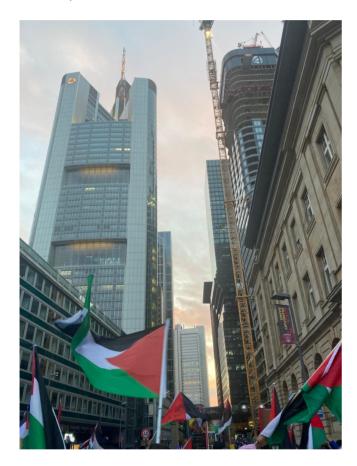
> a general category of racism is not an abstraction which runs the risk of losing in historical precision and pertinence what it gains in universality; it is, rather, a more concrete notion of taking into account the necessary polymorphism of racism, its overarching function, its connections with the whole set of practices of social normalization and exclusion ...[46]

Such a concept of racism, in which concreteness is mediated with universality, could counteract the singularity-effect of competing definitions of antisemitism and also refrain from making its 'irrationality becoming its own cause'. How then to avoid, as Balibar puts it, 'the exceptional character of Nazi anti-Semitism turning into a sacred mystery, into a speculative vision of history which represents history precisely as the history of Evil'?[47] If one only changes its preferred victim group, historical event or main protagonist, one is certainly doomed to repeat the logic of this singularity-effect.

In terms of Holocaust memory culture, the singularity-effect has a retroactive direction, originating in more recent and contemporary debates rather than in the historical aftermath of the event. As a historical event, the extermination of the European Jews during the Second World War was the paradigmatic case that led to the Genocide Convention in 1948, although the concept dates back to the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. In both cases, their historical singularity and universal significance as crime against humanity for world politics were intrinsically connected. In the case of the Holocaust memory culture, however, particularly since the advent of HRD in post-1989 Europe and North America, universal significance and historical singularity parted ways. As a result, it is possible today to speak of genocides in the plural – regardless of their status under international law – and *the* Holocaust as genocide sui generis in the sense of a singular 'radical evil'.[48] Accordingly, the universal significance of the Holocaust for human history can appear only in an ahistorical horizon of singularity as supra-historical or metaphysical uniqueness.

The subsequent stages of this singularity-effect are well known: the singularisation of the victim collective of the Holocaust was followed by the singularisation of the state that claims to speak in its name. At the end of this chain, we arrive at a singular situation: blatant violations of international law, which otherwise other state actors are blamed for, are not only *not* sanctioned, but appear as the necessary consequence of the unique morality of the state of Israel and its 'most moral army'. The morality of these violent relations is grounded here in the singular security needs of a singular state that claims to speak on behalf of a singular group of victims and

their descendants. The latest edition of this singularity-effect even frames the Hamas attacks of October 7th as Holocaust-like pogroms, expressions of a singular anti-semitic mindset, as leading Israeli politicians and their Western allies keep telling the world. In a bizarre moment during his speech at the UN Security Council in late October 2023, Israel's UN ambassador, Gilad Erdan, wore a badge shaped like a yellow star on his suit, referring to the notorious yellow star that German authorities forced Jewish people to wear during the Holocaust. Eventually, the singularity-effect comes full circle: tautology meets obscenity.

Palestine as universal cause

I have argued that the question of Palestine is a symptom that marks the breaking point of the ideological edifice of HRD and its supplementing discourses of anti-antisemitism, memory culture and singularisation. The Palestinian struggle does not seek the world community's recognition as a singular, higher-ranked victim group, singularised by the ontological valence of their actual

or inherited experience of violence. Rather, it exposes the hypocrisy of a moralised version of realpolitik in which Western beneficiaries can enjoy their gains in an 'ethical' way by reaching out to depoliticised 'innocent' victims and persecuting victims that keep on fighting for their rights. From a Palestinian perspective of struggle, international humanitarianism, its major players, perpetrators and beneficiaries, reveal themselves as the 'ethical' successor of the old evil, the counter-revolutionary project that fights those who fight for their own and their neighbour's justice.

While exposing the 'exceptional' violence of rescue and occupation, the Palestinian struggle exceeds the imaginary of humanitarian politics in post-humanitarian times. It cannot be given a proper place within the ideological fantasy of the non-existing 'two state solution' and conflict management plans that the beneficiaries of HRD have drafted. Of course, the Palestinian cause can be defeated militarily. Pankaj Mishra might be right that '[p]erhaps Israel, with its survivalist psychosis, is not the "bitter relic" George Steiner called it – rather, it is the portent of the future of a bankrupt and exhausted world.'[49] However, while 'Israel today is dynamiting the edifice of global norms built after 1945',[50] the Palestinian cause is not the agent of edifying a new system of international relation within global 'too late capitalism'.[51] As a universal cause, understood and supported globally, the Palestinian struggle reaches beyond the imaginary of institutionalised forms of global injustice and undermines the singularity-effect that grants Israel and its policies impunity.

Calling out anti-Palestinian racism and the atrocities of the genocidal war in Gaza is thus not simply a demand for ending the hypocrisy of HRD; rather, it is part of the critical project of *exposing* and *undoing* global capitalism's teleologies of violence. The Palestinian struggle has shown that ultimately the singularised teleology of Zionism (the creation of a 'Jewish state') is not so different from 'generic' colonial or imperialist teleologies of power, profit, 'progress', or 'civilisation'. As a symptom, the Palestinian question has opened a rift between Zionist means and ends, exposing a fragility at the heart of Zionist goal setting.

Although Israel is the only sovereign state actor in the area of former Mandate Palestine ('from the river to the sea'), Zionism is not a sovereign project of its own.

It relies on Palestinian-ness as oppressed and repressed. The disavowal and implicit affirmation of this dependency is spelled out in the Zionist claim that 'there are no Palestinians'. While the last horizon of the Zionist imaginary is a life without the neighbour, 'the last sky' of that neighbour escapes this horizon: Palestinians have always belonged and will belong to the land (rather than claiming that the land is theirs as property).[52] This Israeli fragility might express itself in paranoid extinction fantasies and biblical tropes. For as long as Palestinians are existing and resisting, Israel faces the impossibility of its Zionist project.[53] In this way, the question of Palestine marks the symptom in the sense defined above: while it spoils the spoils of Zionist land theft, its removal would threaten all of its so far achieved, yet unaccomplished goals. This conjuncture, however, does not imply its reverse: Palestinian-ness does not rely on Zionism. Rather, Palestinian-ness and the Palestinian struggle introduce an element of asymmetry and unsublatable negativity into the logic of the return of the repressed (genocidal violence) and its symptom (the Palestinian question). The answer to the Palestinian question is thus not to be found in the compulsive repetition of worn-out answers of HRD but in changing the question: What are the universal conditions of possibility for the particular, Palestinian, emancipation? Unlike bourgeois teleologies of violence, the Palestinian revolution is not a goal of capitalist 'progress' but the latter's frequently miscarried, ultimately achieved, interruption.

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Notes

1. The author would like to thank Salma Shamel, Lilly Markaki and members of the *Radical Philosophy* editorial collective for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2. Cf. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth, 1973; Karnac, 1988), 398–99 and 446.

3. Jacques Lacan, 'Television', trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, *October* 40 (1987): 7–50, 24.

4. Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 16. Regarding Žižek's own, probably disavowed, belief in Western liberalism, as demonstrated in his incoherent remarks on Palestine and Israel after October 7, 2023, see Jamil Khader's opinion piece in Al Jazeera, 17 Dec 2023, 'Do you condemn Žižek?', https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/12/17/do-you-condemn-zizek . Khader's critique is right to insist that 'Despite his ambivalent position on the Palestinian genocide, Žižek should not be dismissed as an irrelevant thinker. After all, the core truths of many philosophies exist beyond the biographies of their authors.'

5. Questions of this kind are not new but testify to the persistence of an Orientalist, racist framing of Palestinians as terrorists. In academic discourse, even Edward Said was asked such questions, cf. Edward Said, Peter Osborne and Anne Beezer, 'Edward Said: Orientalism and After', *Radical Philosophy* 63 (1993), 22–32: 'The first question to me … was: "When are the Palestinians going to stop terrorism?"' A more recent example can be found in the *CBS* interview with Husam Zomlot, Palestinian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, aired on 5 November 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/husam-zomlot-palestinian-ambassador-to-the-united-kingdom-face-the-nation-transcript-11-05-2023/.

6. Meister, *After Evil*, IX.

7. Meister, *After Evil*, IX.

8. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bollock and Michael W. Jennings, Vol. 4 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

9. Meister, *After Evil*, IX.

10. Meister, *After Evil*, VIII.

11. For the global dimensions of this project see Gil Anidjar, 'When Killers Become Victims: Anti-Semitism and Its Critics', *Cosmopolis: A Review of Cosmopolitics* 3 (2007), 1–24. Its political epistemology is further explored in Elad Lapidot, *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of anti-anti-Semitism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).

12. The 'Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism', Felix Klein, who has no legislative function, defines his mission as 'to raise awareness among the public and to encourage them to get involved in combating antisemitism, while also encouraging those who have so far remained silent to speak up when that is called for.' According to his definition of antisemitism and perception of political reality, '[a]ntisemitism today has returned with renewed strength. In Germany, Jews and people thought to be Jews are insulted, spit on and threatened in public, on social media, they face an absolute barrage of abuse. Antisemitism has become so obvious and visible that we need new strategies

to fight it', https://www.antisemitismusbeauftragter.de/Webs/BAS/EN/home/_documents/beauftragter.html. The results of such campaigning are already felt in the domains of culture, politics, education and the arts, overwhelmingly targeting non-German persons and projects. The website 'Archive of Silence', a crowdsourced archive documenting silenced voices in Germany, lists at least 157 cases since 7 October 2023 (as of 28 June, 2024) in which events were cancelled or persons disinvited under the pretext of 'fighting antisemitism'. The cancellations were enforced by state-sponsored as well as privately-run institutions. See: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Vq2tm-nopUy-xYZjkG-T9FyMC7ZqkAQG9S3mPWAYwHw/edit?gid=1227867224#gid=1227867224 and https://www.instagram.com/archive_of_silence/.

13. The widely used, yet scholarly disputed 'working definition' of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) relates the examples of application of its definition primarily to so-called 'Israel-related anti-Semitism' and therefore lends itself – intentionally or not – to delegitimising political criticism of Israeli state action as anti-Semitic, https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/de/resources/working-definitions-charters/arbeitsdefinition-von-antisemitismus.

14. A. Dirk Moses, 'The German Catechism', *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 23 Mai 2021, https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/the-german-catechism/print/.

15. The latest iteration of this policy manifests itself in a new legislation for migrants seeking German citizenship: applicants for naturalisation must declare 'Israel's right to exist' as part of a mandatory loyalty test for new citizens, cf. Haaretz, 26 June 2024, https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2024-06-26/ty-article/report-new-german-citizenship-law-requires-applicants-to-declare-israel-right-to-exist/00000190-54ef-d31c-afb9-dcff82b40000 .

16. The firing of the German-Palestinian journalist Nemi El-Hassan, who had worked for the German public TV station, demonstrated the limits of these conditions, cf. Hanno Hauenstein, 'Triumph of the BILD: Nemi El-Hassan's firing was just plain wrong', *Berliner Zeitung*, 4 October 2021, https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/en/triumph-of-the-bild-nemi-el-hassans-firing-was-just-plain-wrong-li.186770.

17. Esra Özyürek notes in *Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory and Muslim Minority Belonging in Post-War Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), that '[d]espite its commitment to antinationalism and antiracism, German memory culture failed to include members of society who are not ethnically German ... As a result, Muslim-background Germans could not be included in the postwar German social contract, through which

a new and free (West) German society was allowed by the Allies to emerge on condition of having learned the correct lessons from the Holocaust.'

18. *Die Welt* podcast, 'Free Palestine ist das neue Heil Hitler', https://www.welt.de/podcasts/welt-talks/article248996436/Rapper-Ben-Salomo-Free-Palestine-ist-das-neue-Heil-Hitler.html?wtrid=socialmedia.socialflow....socialflow_twitter.

19. Meister, *After Evil*, 41–42: 'For those who claim to be *converted* by the events of Auschwitz or Hiroshima or both, new ways to save the innocent from a return to twentieth-century violence are not more of the same; instead, they are a way of bearing witness to the cyclicity of that violence so as to end it.' For German politicians, the claim that the Holocaust marks a biographical motivation to enter politics is a common trope. A well-known example is the former German foreign minister Heiko Maas ('I entered politics because of Auschwitz'), cf. Federal Foreign Office, 20 August 2018, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/service/laender/polen-node/maas-polen-auschwitz/2128686.

20. Cf. the speech of the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Israeli Parliament on March 18, 2008, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/bulletin/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-dr-angela-merkel-796170.

21. The psycho-political implications and underlying structure of desire of this imaginary relation to Israel have been explored further in Hannah C. Tzuberi, '"The Sun Does Not Shine, It Radiates": On National(ist) Mergings in German Philosemitic Imagery of Tel Aviv', in *The Future of the German-Jewish Past: Memory and the Question of Antisemitism*, ed. Gideon Reuveni and Diana Franklin (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2020), 179–192.

22. Cf. Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

23. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harvest and HBJ, 1951, 1973), 290: 'After the war it turned out that the Jewish question, which was considered the only insoluble one, was indeed solved – namely, by means of a colonized and then conquered territory – but this solved neither the problem of the minorities nor the stateless. On the contrary, like virtually all other events of our century, the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people. And what happened in Palestine within the smallest territory and in terms of hundreds of thousands was then repeated in India on a large scale involving many millions of people. Since the Peace Treaties of 1919 and 1920 the refugees and the stateless have attached themselves like a curse

to all the newly established states on earth which were created in the image of the nation-state.'

24. The limitations and problems of this convention are discussed in detail in A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

25. Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press 2016), 16.

26. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 10.

27. Cf. Meister, *After Evil*, 69.

28. In this context, it worth rereading the official denomination of Germany's commissioner for the fight against antisemtism: 'Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism.' The federal government commissioner is joined by local official antisemitism commissioners in 14 of Germany's 16 federal states, as Peter Kuras writes in his comprehensive report 'The Strange Logic of Germany's Antisemitism Bureaucrats', *Jewish Currents* (Spring 2023), https://jewishcurrents.org/the-strange-logic-of-germanys-antisemitism-bureaucrats. Kuras's report highlights the fact that 'some of the antisemitism commissioners have sought to burnish their authority by associating themselves with Jewishness', although most (if not all) are non-Jewish Germans. Such acts of patronising travesty can go as far as attempting to discipline Jewish Israelis to tone down their voices. In this vein, as Kuras reports, Federal Government Commissioner Felix Klein 'told the *Berliner Zeitung* in a January 2021 interview that "tendentially left-leaning Israelis in Berlin" should "be sensitive to Germany's special historical responsibility" when they criticize Israel.'

29. Cf. Steffen Klävers, *Decolonizing Auschwitz? Komparativ-postkoloniale Ansätze in der Holocaustforschung* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 17.

30. Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 20.

31. The differentiation into 'ordinary uniqueness', 'unique uniqueness' and 'transcending uniqueness' that Eckardt and Eckardt propose can be read as a symptomatic attempt at turning a tautology into a paradox. See Alice L. Eckardt and A. Roy Eckardt, 'The Holocaust and the Enigma of Uniqueness: A Philosophical Effort at Practical Clarification', *The Annals of the American Academy*, 450 (July 1980), 165–178). If one accepted this terminology, historically speaking only 'unique uniqueness' as a historical singularity makes sense; otherwise, one merely signifies the spatio-temporal uniqueness of all historical events, or slides into the metaphysical-theological language of a mystery that defies scientific investigation.

32. Cf. A. Dirk Moses, 'Colonialism' in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 68–80.

33. An overview of current debates is provided by Klävers, *Decolonizing Auschwitz?* and the volume *Historiker Streiten*, eds. Susan Neiman and Michael Wildt (Berlin: Ullstein, Propyläen, 2022).

34. Recall the infamous dictum 'I determine who is a Jew', attributed to Nazi Reich Marshall Hermann Göring.

35. Cecile Winter, 'The Master-Signifier of the New Aryans: What Made the Word "Jew" into an Arm Brandished Against the Multitude of "Unpronounceable Names"', in Alain Badiou, *Polemics* (Verso, 2014).

36. Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*.

37. Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', *Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 236–252, 237. I have commented on this passage in 'Chapter 37: Society and Violence', *Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, Vol. 2, eds. Werner Bonefeld, Beverley Best, Chris O'Kane (Newbury Park: Sage, 2018), 607–624.

38. This is the title of Dan Diner's edited volume *Zivilisationsbruch: Denken nach Ausschwitz* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988).

39. Diner remarks: 'Only against the background of a largely secularized world view are the contours significant to the events of the Holocaust able to be depicted; in view of the Enlightenment permeating the Western worlds of life, including the forms of thought of Enlightenment philosophy, the Holocaust emerges as what it also was in view of such an advanced disenchantment: a breaking through of all levels of reason, a rupture of civilization.' See Diner, *Countering Memories: On the validity and impact of the Holocaust* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 104–105.

40. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

41. Fredric Jameson, 'The Aesthetics of Singularity', *New Left Review* 92 (March/April 2015), 122.

42. Cf. Sami Khatib, 'Singularitätseffekte', *Historiker Streiten*, eds. Susan Neiman and Michael Wildt (Berlin: Ullstein, Propyläen, 2022), 59–74.

43. Jameson, 'Aesthetics', 126.

44. The aporia of the missing link between practical and theoretical antisemitism was taken to its logical conclusion by Moishe Postone in his influential article 'Anti-Semitism and National Socialism', first published in *New German Critique* 19 (Winter 1980), *Special Issue 1: Germans and Jews*, 97–115, subsequently reworked and translated into German. The explanatory framework of how *antisemitism as abstract ideology*, rooted in the natural-

ising mindset of capitalist 'commodity fetishism' (Marx), relates to the *concrete history of modern antisemtism* relapses into a truism. In capitalist modernity, the 'fetishized form' of thought structurally underpins all kinds of worldviews. Hence the isomorphism of capitalist value and characteristics that Nazi antisemitism attributed to Jews (i.e. abstraction, invisibility, automation, impersonal domination) applies to all forms of thought that (mis)take a concrete form of appearance for a naturalised, personified, concretised essence. Postone cannot sufficiently explain why the Nazis actually 'naturalized and biologized' the 'abstract dimension of capital' in the figure of the Jew and not in a different figure. For such a theory, one would need to study the actual history of modern European and global antisemitism. Implicitly acknowledging this aporia, disciples of Postone have coined the term 'structural antisemitism', which applies to all critiques of modernity and capitalism that do not limit themselves to the critique of abstract relations of domination. See Lars Rensmann and Samuel Salzborn, 'Modern Antisemitism as Fetishized Anti-Capitalism: Moishe Postone's Theory and its Historical and Contemporary Relevance', *Antisemitism Studies* 5:1 (Spring 2021), 44–99, 81). Conveniently, the term can be mobilised to label any strand of anti-capitalism as 'antisemitic' once relations of capitalist domination are addressed in a concrete manner, pointing at real persons, companies or institutions. It is worth mentioning that one co-author of the cited reference, Samuel Salzborn, currently serves as the Berlin commissioner of antisemitism (see e.g. https://www.antisemitismusbeauftragter.de/Webs/BAS/DE/service/laenderbeauftragte/laenderbeauftragte.html).

45. An example might be the discourse of Afropessimism, which singularises anti-Blackness as derived from 'the singular structure of anti-Black violence'. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 216. The crucial political question is whether anti-Blackness is a form of racism 'incommensurable with all other forms of social domination'. See Salma Shamel, with Gary Wilder, 'From Image to Flesh in a World Seen from the South: A Conversation with Gary Wilder', *Social Text* 158 (March 2024), 119.

46. Etienne Balibar, 'Racism and Nationalism', in Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* [(London: Verso, 2011)], 49.

47. Balibar, 'Racism and Nationalism', 51.

48. Cf. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 62.

49. Pankaj Mishra, 'The Shoah after Gaza', *London Review of Books* 46:6 (21 March 2024), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/n06/pankaj-mishra/the-shoah-after-gaza.

50. Mishra, 'The Shoah after Gaza'.

51. I borrow this apt term from Anna Kornbluh's title *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2024).

52. Cf. Peter Linebaugh, 'Palestine and the Commons: Or, Marx and the Musha'a', *CounterPunch*, 1 March 2024, https://www.counterpunch.org/2024/03/01/palestine-the-commons-or-marx-the-mushaa/. I owe this reference to Marwa Arsanios.

53. Jacqueline Rose notes that 'Herzl's projects for the creation of a Jewish state all crumbled on their own diplomatically fueled grandeur (kaiser, sultan, one imbroglio after another). But Herzl may also, in his magisterial failure, have been wise to something. Like the unconscious, Zionism had to be staged (as only a playwright might understand). Zionism was a conjuring act.' See Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 67. Such a conjuring act first has to remove the traces of Palestinian-ness to feel 'safe' and become thinkable, at least on stage or in literature. For the latter see also Ghassan Kanafani, *On Zionist Literature*, trans. Mahmoud Najib (Oxford: Ebb Books, 2022), particularly chapter 7.