

Judith Butler on the terror of Hamas and the history of violence

Essay The philosopher Judith Butler asks how we can understand the emergence of Hamas' violence without relativizing its atrocities. Is there a way to value all life in the Middle East equally - and to mourn all the victims?

[Judith Butler](#)



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Especially the topics that most urgently need public discussion are those that are difficult to discuss within the framework of thought now available to us. Even if you want to go straight to the point, you run into the limits of a discussion framework that makes it almost impossible to say what you have to say.

I would like to talk about violence, about current violence, about the history of violence and its many forms. But if you want to document the violence, which means understanding the massive rocket fire and the murders in Israel by Hamas as part of this history of violence, you can be accused of "rativization" or "contextualization." We are obliged to condemn or approve, and that makes sense, but is that all that is to be demanded of us ethically? In fact, I condemn the violence perpetrated by Hamas without restriction. It was a terrible and despicable massacre. That was my first reaction, and it remains.

But there are also other reactions.

Say: Which side are you on, on Israel's or on Palestine?

Almost immediately, people want to know which "side" you are on, and the only possible reaction to such murders is an unmistakable conviction. But why do we sometimes think that the question of whether we use the right language for it or whether we understand the historical situation correctly stands in the way of a strong moral condemnation? Is it really relativizing to ask what exactly we condemn, what significance this condemnation should have and how we can best describe the political formation, or: the political formations that we reject?

It would be strange to judge something without understanding it or describing it appropriately. And it would be particularly strange to believe that the conviction requires a refusal to understand, because one fears that knowledge can only have a relativizing function, that it can only undermine our judgment. And what if it is morally necessary to extend our conviction to crimes that are just as despicable as those repeatedly brought into focus by the media? When and where does our conviction begin and end? Do we not need a critical and informed assessment of the situation to accompany the moral and political condemnation - without fearing that this assessment, this knowledge will make us moral failures in the eyes of others, accomplices of despicable crimes?

The responsibility of Hamas in Gaza

They exist: Those who use the history of Israeli violence in the region to justify Hamas. However, they use a corrupt form of moral reasoning to achieve this goal. To be clear: The Israeli violence against the Palestinians is overwhelming: relentless bombings, the killing of people of all ages in their homes and on the streets, torture in their prisons, techniques of starvation in Gaza and the expropriation of houses. And this violence in its many forms is exercised against a population that is subject to apartheid-like rules, the colonial rule of statelessness.

However, if the Harvard Palestine Solidarity Committee makes a statement claiming that "the apartheid regime alone is to blame" for Hamas' deadly attacks on Israeli targets, then it makes a mistake. It is wrong to assign responsibility in this way, and nothing should absolve Hamas of responsibility for the cruel murders it has committed. At the same time, this committee and its members do not deserve to be blacklisted or threatened. They are certainly right when they point to the history of violence in the region: "From systematic land grabs to routine air raids, from arbitrary arrests to military checkpoints, from forced family separations to targeted killings, the Palestinians were forced to live in a state of death - slow and sudden death alike." This is an accurate description, but this does not mean that Hamas' violence is only Israeli violence under a different name.

It is true that we should develop a certain understanding of why groups like Hamas have strengthened in the face of the broken promises of Oslo and the "state of slow and sudden death" that describes the lives of many Palestinians living under the occupation of Palestinians, be it the constant monitoring and the threat of detention ("administrative detention") without proper procedure or the intensifying siege that denies the people of the Gaza Strip medicines, food and water. And yet the reference to their history does not lead to any moral or political justification of Hamas' actions. If we are asked to understand Palestinian violence as a continuation of Israeli violence, as the Harvard Palestine Solidarity Committee demands of us, then there is only one source of moral guilt, and even the

Palestinians do not recognize their own acts of violence as their own. In this way, the autonomy of Palestinian action is not recognized.

The Israeli settler colonialisms

The need to separate the understanding of the profound and relentless violence of the Israeli state from any justification of violence is crucial if we are to think about what other ways there are to shake off colonial rule, end arbitrary arrests and torture in Israeli prisons, and put an end to the siege of the Gaza Strip, where water and food are rationed by the nation state that controls its borders. In other words, the question of which world is still possible for all inhabitants of this region depends on how the settler colonialism can be ended. Hamas has a frightening and appalling answer to this question, but there are many others.

However, if we are forbidden to speak of "the occupation" (which is part of today's German ban on thinking), if we cannot even have the debate about whether the Israeli military rule in the West Bank or Gaza Strip has traits of apartheid or colonialism, then we have no hope of understanding the past, the present or the future. So many people who follow the carnage through the media feel so hopeless. But one reason for their hopelessness is that they watch through the media and live in the fleeting world of hopeless moral indignation. Another political morality needs time, a patient and courageous way of learning and naming, so that we can accompany the moral condemnation with a moral vision.

We can't all be historians and sociologists for Israel and Palestine - can we?

I reject the violence exercised by Hamas and have no alibi to offer. When I say that, I represent a clear moral and political position. I do not allow ambiguity when I think about what this condemnation presupposes and implies. Anyone who joins this conviction might wonder whether a moral condemnation should be based on a certain understanding of what it is directed against. One could say: No, I don't need to know anything about Palestine or Hamas to know that what they have done is wrong and to condemn it. And if you leave it at that and rely on the current media coverage without ever asking whether they are actually right and useful, whether they let the stories be told, then you accept a certain ignorance and rely on the discourse framework provided. After all, we are all very busy, and we cannot all be historians or sociologists. This is a possible way of thinking and living, and many well-meaning people also live the same way. But at what price?

What if our morality and politics did not end with the act of condemnation? What if we insisted on asking what form of life would redeem the region from violence like this? What if we not only wanted to condemn the willful crimes, but create a future in which this kind of violence comes to an end? This is a normative claim that goes beyond a short-term conviction. To achieve this, we need to know the history of the situation, the strengthening of Hamas as a militant group in the catastrophic post-Oslo phase for those in the Gaza Strip who have never fulfilled the promise of self-government; the formation of other Palestinian groups with different tactics and goals; and the history of the Palestinians and their pursuit of freedom and the right to political self-determination, for liberation from colonial rule and pervasive military violence. Then we could be part of the fight for a free Palestine, in which Hamas is dissolved or replaced by groups with non-violent efforts to live together.

Those who stop at outrage cannot learn from history

Those whose moral position is limited solely to condemnation do not aim at all to understand the situation. Moral indignation of this kind is equally anti-intellectual and limited to the present. However, indignation can also lead to delves into the history books to find out how such events could have occurred and whether the conditions could not change in such a way that a future full of violence is not the only possible future. It cannot be that a "contextualization" is considered a morally problematic activity, even if there are forms of contextualization that can serve to blame others - or to relieve them of responsibility.

Can we distinguish between these two forms of contextualization? Just because some believe that the contextualization of despicable violence distracts from violence or, worse, rationalizes it, does not mean that we should capitulate to the claim that all forms of contextualization are morally relativizing in this way. If the Harvard Palestine Solidarity Committee claims that "the apartheid regime is solely to blame" for Hamas' attacks, then it follows an unacceptable version of the attribution of moral responsibilities. It seems that in order to understand how an event came about or what significance it has, we have to learn some history.

The power of language and historical classification

This means that we must broaden our view beyond the horrific present without denying its horror, and at the same time refuse to regard this horror as the entire horror that it can represent, know and fight. The contemporary media mostly do not report on the horror that the Palestinian population has experienced for decades in the form of bombings, arbitrary attacks, arrests and killings. If the horrors of the last few days have a greater moral significance for the media than the horrors of the last seventy years, then the moral reaction of the moment threatens to push into the background the understanding of the radical injustices that occupied Palestine and the forcibly displaced Palestinians have to endure - as well as the humanitarian catastrophe and the loss of human lives at this moment in Gaza.

Some people rightly fear that any contextualization of Hamas' acts of violence is used to justify Hamas, or that contextualization distracts from the horror of their actions. But what if it is the horror itself that makes us put it in context? Where does the horror begin, and where does it end? When the press speaks of a "war" between Hamas and Israel, it provides a framework for understanding the situation. In truth, she understood the situation in advance. If the Gaza Strip is understood as an occupied area or referred to as an "open-air prison", then a different interpretation is offered.

It seems like a description, but the language limits or facilitates what we can say, how we can describe and what we can know. Yes, language can describe, but it only gets the power to do so if it adheres to the limits of what can be said. If it is decided that we do not need to know how many Palestinian children and young people were killed this year or in the years of occupation both in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, that this information is not important to learn about or evaluate about the attacks on Israel and the killing of Israelis, then we have decided that we do not want to know the history of violence, grief and indignation as it is lived by Palestinians. We just want to know the history of violence, grief and indignation as lived by Israelis.

As a Jew, I also live with the intergenerational trauma of atrocities

An Israeli friend who describes herself as an "anti-Zionist" writes on the Internet that she is afraid for her family and friends, that she has lost people. And we should feel with her, I do. It is undoubtedly terrible. But isn't there a moment when her own experience of the horror and loss of her friends and family is seen as what a Palestinian could feel on the other side, or what she feels after the years of bombing, imprisonment and military violence? I am a Jew who lives with a intergenerational trauma as a result of the atrocities committed against people like me. But they were also committed on people who are not like me. I don't have to identify with this face or name to name the atrocities I see. Or at least I'm fighting to make sure it's not like that.

Ultimately, however, the problem is not simply a failure of empathy. Because empathy arises above all within a framework that enables an identification or a translation between the experience of another and my own. And if the prevailing framework considers some lives to be better mournable than others, then it follows that one kind of loss is more horrific than another kind of loss. The question of whose lives are worth being mourned is an essential part of the question of whose lives are worth respecting. And this is where racism comes into play in a decisive way. If the Palestinians are "human animals", as the Israeli Minister of Defense claims, and if the Israelis now represent "the Jewish people", as Joe Biden claims (and allows the Jewish diaspora to merge with Israel, as the reactionaries demand), then the only reparable people in this scene, the only ones who are entitled to mourning, are the Israelis, because the "war" is now taking place between the Jewish people and the animals who want to kill them.

The racist designation of Palestinians as "animals"

It is certainly not the first time that a group of people who want to free themselves from colonial shackles have been portrayed as animals by the colonizers. Are the Israelis "animals" when they kill? This racist classification of contemporary violence repeats the colonial contrast between the "civilized" and the "Animals" who must be pushed back or destroyed in order to protect the "civilization". If we adopt this framework to express our moral resistance, we find ourselves involved in a form of racism that goes beyond expression and affects the structure of daily life in Palestine. And for this, a radical reparation is certainly due.

If we believe that the moral condemnation must be a clear, selective act, without reference to any context or knowledge, then we inevitably accept the conditions under which this condemnation takes place, the stage on which the alternatives are staged. In this recent context, accepting these conditions means reproducing forms of colonial racism that are part of the structural problem that needs to be solved, the ongoing injustice that needs to be overcome. So we cannot afford to refrain from the history of injustice in the name of moral certainty, because with this we risk committing further injustice, and at some point our certainty will falter on this not very solid ground. Why can't we condemn morally despicable deeds without losing our ability to think, know and judge? Sure we can do both, and we have to.

How can we mourn the dead in Israel and Gaza alike?

The acts of violence that we observe in the media are terrible. And in this time of increased media attention, the violence we see is the only violence we know. I repeat: We are right to deny this violence and to express our horror. I've been sick for days. Everyone I know lives in fear of what the Israeli military machine will do next, whether Netanyahu's genocide-like rhetoric will be reflected in the mass killing of Palestinians. I wonder if we can mourn without restriction both the lost lives in Israel and those in Gaza without getting bogged down in debates about relativism and equivalence. Perhaps the broader framework of mourning serves a more substantial ideal of equality, an ideal that recognizes the equal mournability of lives and evokes the indignation that these lives should not have been lost, that the dead deserved more lives and the same recognition for their lives.

How can we even imagine a future equality of the living if we do not know that Israeli forces and settlers have killed almost 3,800 Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 2008, even before the current fighting began, as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has documented. Where is the world's grief for these people? Hundreds of Palestinian children have died since Israel began its "revenge" military action against Hamas, and many more will die in the coming days and weeks.

A non-violent world is created by non-violent liberation struggles

It does not have to threaten our moral position if we take the time to learn about the history of colonial violence and to examine the language, narratives and framework conditions used today to report on and explain the events in this region - and to interpret them in advance. This kind of knowledge is crucial, but not to rationalize existing violence or to legitimize further violence. Their goal is to convey a more truthful understanding of the situation than an undisputed representation of the present alone can do. In fact, there may be other positions of the moral opposition that can be added to those that we have already accepted, including a rejection of the military and police power that permeates the lives of the Palestinians in the region and deprives them of the right to mourn, to know and express their indignation and solidarity, and to find their own way to a future in freedom.

Personally, I represent a policy of non-violence, knowing that it cannot possibly function as an absolute principle to be applied at every opportunity. I claim that liberation struggles that practice non-violence help to create the non-violent world in which we all want to live. I unequivocally condemn the violence and at the same time, like so many others, I want to be part of the idea and the fight for true equality and justice in the region that would make groups like Hamas disappear, end the occupation and make new forms of political freedom and justice flourish. Without equality and justice, without an end to the state power exercised by a state, Israel, which was itself founded in violence, no future is conceivable, no future of true peace - which does not mean "peace" as euphemism for normalization, which means that structures of inequality, lawlessness and racism are maintained. But such a future cannot arise without having the freedom to name, describe and oppose all violence, including Israeli state power in all its forms, without fear of censorship, criminalization or the malicious accusation of anti-Semitism.

The world I want is a world that opposes the normalization of colonial rule and supports the

self-determination and freedom of the Palestinians, a world that actually corresponds to the deepest desires of all inhabitants of these areas for living together in freedom, non-violence, equality and justice. This hope undoubtedly seems naïve, even impossible, to many. Nevertheless, some of us have to cling to it like wildy, refusing to believe that the structures that now exist will exist forever. For this we need our poets and dreamers, the untamed fools who know how to organize themselves.

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