

“Thinking and Talking”

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The question that names this session, “What Should We Talk About When We Talk About The Arab-Israeli Conflict,” appears to answer itself. It reminds me of the advice one sometimes hears students receiving as they prepare for exams: find how the phrasing of the question provides hints for a response. Here the answer is obvious: we should talk about the conflict, the historical dimensions, the points of dispute, the prospects for peace. I know that the other speakers will pick up aspects of this approach.

But there is something else to talk about: Why is it we, professional scholars of literature, who should be talking about this? Rephrased as a query into what literature scholars should address regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, the challenge appears in an altogether different light, since what we, or our professional association can bring productively to the table is not at all clear. Most of the relevant approaches to the Arab-Israeli conflict—political, historical, diplomatic—lie outside the sort of specialization that we cultivate in our professional lives. What is left for us to talk about?

Of course we could build on our professional advantage by pursuing specifically literary analyses of, say, novelistic representations of the conflict, about which we could speak authoritatively as literary scholars focusing on a very narrow, albeit important, topic. Indeed within the MLA there are experts in Arab and Israeli literature, and they very likely also discuss the representation of the conflict in literature. Yet, by way of contrast, in this session, in other sessions, and in the broader MLA discussion about the campaign to boycott Israel, the topic is much more ambitious. Asked to “talk about the Arab-Israeli conflict,” we are effectively being urged to go beyond our primary professional roles in the specialized world of literary scholarship and to speak to the conflict itself. It is that further step, in which we claim authority to pronounce on topics beyond our training that interests me, one might say, as a methodological problem: what drives it, and what are the consequences, if we choose to take it.

So prior to determining what we might want to say about the conflict on the ground, let’s consider why it is we who we are talking about it at all and who, through the boycott campaign, are being asked to commit our professional association to a political position. For it is not at all obvious that we scholars of literature should be doing this. Our mission, and the mission of the association, is the research and teaching of the modern languages and their literatures, as stipulated in the MLA Constitution. We would remain neatly within the terms of the Constitution if we were to restrict ourselves to literary treatments of the conflict. Yet the nature of the debate has long surpassed such a narrow,

disciplinarily specific solution. We are now asked to stop thinking as scholars of literature in order to speak as historians or political scientists. A key feature of the discussion about the conflict is precisely this anti-aesthetic move way from literature into disciplinary arenas significantly beyond our professional homes and certainly far outside the chartered purpose of the MLA.

Yet the method problem goes even further, since when we are asked to “Talk About the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” we in fact face pressure to do more than just talk, that is, to do more than engage in scholarly research, discussion and writing. Instead we are directed to go beyond so-called mere talking in order to act, specifically by participating in the boycott of Israeli academic institutions. Not only does the exhortation to address the Arab Israeli conflict take us onto the thin ice where we have no disciplinary expertise (excepting of course for the specialists in the relevant fields). We are also directed to go beyond scholarship as such through participation in a political campaign. What I want to emphasize here, in this presentation, is not the incompatibility of that boycott campaign with academic freedom—although that is certainly the case: the boycott is indeed a threat to academic freedom. Instead I want to underscore what might be viewed as the prior step: the insinuation that thinking and talking are insufficient and that we scholars should engage in some notionally more real action, in this case, the anti-Israel boycott. What I find of interest then is this double problem: first, we are supposed to step outside the realm of our disciplinary identities in order to masquerade as historians or political scientists; and second, we are directed to

go beyond standard academic autonomy and impartiality in order to enlist in a political action. Needless to say, both moves are inconsistent with established professional expectations and with the purpose of our professional association.

Now it is certainly possible, even desirable, that some of us might have interdisciplinary training in History or Political Science as well as area specialization in the Middle East. Similarly, it is also possible that some of us, out of civic responsibility, might choose to engage in political activities. One would however be doing so as a citizen in the public sphere rather than as a professor speaking *ex cathedra*. Each of these models however, interdisciplinary knowledge and civic engagement, is not a necessary element in our professional lives: scholarly excellence does not require either. We have every right to think and talk about literature without politicization, and we are not therefore lesser scholars.

So, at least one of the topics we should be talking about when we, here in the MLA, talk about the Arab Israeli conflict is in fact not the conflict itself but the adamance with which some of our colleagues are prepared to surrender professional norms in order to pursue a political agenda. Yet when we politicize our classrooms, we abuse our students to whom we should offer enhanced capacity to understand and appreciate complex texts as well as tools for critical thinking. When we abandon literature in order to dabble in other fields, we can quickly succumb to amateurism. And when we redefine the role of the humanities as a matter of partisan advocacy rather than scholarship, we undermine the

implicit contract with the university and society and threaten the status of our profession: our own, self-generated crisis of the humanities. Max Weber famously mocked this inclination of would-be charismatic leaders in the lecture halls to offer prophecy rather than scholarship. All that is different today is that the same prophetic professoriate has discovered Twitter, which has hardly improved the quality of the propaganda.

Instead we have an obligation to preserve the value-neutrality of our teaching, to recognize the significance of works of art, especially literature, and to maintain the integrity of scholarship. This means resisting the pressures toward political conformism and the *Gleichschaltung* of professional associations. But it also means trying to analyze and diagnose the willingness of colleagues to substitute political mobilization for literary scholarship: this is what we should be talking about when we talk about the Arab Israeli conflict. Whence our colleagues' obsession? That obsession is after all a part (no matter how marginal) of the conflict, as North American universities are turning into collateral damage to the Middle East wars. Or this holds at least for the humanities fields, especially English departments: disciplines with greater objectivity, firmer funding, and clearer career prospects for their students, i.e. the STEM fields and the social sciences, have shown no patience to give up on important scholarship in order to opt for poor politics. It is up to us to explain the idiosyncratic willingness of our anti-Israel colleagues to jettison professional standards. I want to discuss three aspects.

First, in political terms, their discussion of the conflict is characterized by what I call a left-wing Orientalism. This phenomenon belongs to the “left” in the sense that it subordinates a range of values historically treated as progressive to what it views as an anti-imperialist program. It involves endorsing culturally regressive positions or at least prefers to postpone any discussion of gender equality, gay rights or capital punishment (let alone organizational corruption or class divisions) until after the demolition of Israel. This subordination of progressive values to anti-imperialism has been the norm rather than the exception in the modern history of the left. The literary discourse on the conflict is furthermore Orientalist because of its romantic celebration of the Palestinians that at the same time infantilizes them, shielding them from any responsibility in the long history of the conflict. Instead it offers the reified binaries of colonizer and colonized, with no room for nuance, hybridity or historical agency. In lieu of complex political analysis, left-wing Orientalism only provides absolutized oppositions, that Fanonian kitsch, where good and evil, black and white, victim and victimizer are juxtaposed with caricaturistic simplicity. To this flatness of thought we can add a myopic vision, the tunnel-vision refusal to consider the conditions in the wider Middle East: not the slaughter in Syria, not the regime in Egypt, not the Turkish occupation in Cyprus, not the wave of capital punishment in Iran. To be sure, it is not necessary to talk about all cases in order to talk about one. Yet the allergy against reflecting on any comparative cases, especially those in the same geographical region, adds a material narrowness to an interpretive

lack of depth. In the end, left-wing Orientalism operates in an intellectually tiny space, which explains why it has so little to add. There is perhaps some irony in that the initial refusal to respect disciplinary boundaries—leaving specialized literary scholarship behind—turns into the limiting focus on a very isolated topic, to the exclusion of any wider considerations. Ultimately, we have the worst of old style scholarly narrowness, but now without disciplinary qualification.

Left-wing Orientalism feeds into a second obsession with the conflict, an endemic anti-Semitism. This draws in part on left-wing sources, especially (but by no means exclusively), the Soviet era discourse that launched the mythology of Zionist conspiracies, which still contaminates broad swaths of the left. In part however it incorporates aspects of the anti-Semitism in the Muslim world: not merely criticisms of specific Israeli policies, or even of Israel in general, but hostility to Jews as such.¹ This spills over into the broader anti-Israel campaign. The leaders of the campaign have not been willing to distance themselves from anti-Semitism except in perfunctory and ineffective manners.

Of course, facing the allegation of anti-Semitism, they reject it with the claim that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are not identical; that is surely correct, nor however are the terms mutually exclusive, and the campaign's leaders' clearly prefer to denounce any discussion of anti-Semitism rather than to address the pathology at the heart of their movement. Long before the riots in Paris in the summer of 2014, anti-Zionist attacks were not limited to demonstrations outside of, say, Israeli embassies but have gone after synagogues too and Jewish

community organizations. To be blind to this metamorphosis of anti-Zionism into anti-Semitism is to be complicit. This is the context for the obsessive focus on Israel, not only in the streets but at the MLA as well.

A stereotypical defense against the allegation of anti-Semitism is the prominent display of Jewish colleagues who oppose Israel. Yet this is hardly a counter-argument. A minimal familiarity with the scholarship on the history of anti-Semitism would alert one to this phenomenon, however one chooses to understand it. In perhaps the most prominent current example, Judith Butler has tried to find Jewish “sources” for anti-Zionism in order to prove that it cannot **ever** be anti-Semitic. To do so, she significantly distorts some of the figures she treats, especially Levinas, and in her discussion of Arendt, she builds on, rather than critiques, Arendt’s own troubling unwillingness to distance herself from anti-Semitic practices. Butler is also inconsistent: regarding Jews, she flaunts an anarchism, but when it comes to the Palestinians she is a statist. This is a complex matter that cannot be unpacked here. Suffice it to say that the efforts to prohibit a discussion of anti-Semitism build on a long history of repression that is being repeated within the contemporary discussion of Israel, just as aspects of the critique of Israel, Jewish state sovereignty, draw on anti-Semitic tropes and stereotypes deeply rooted in Western cultural history. The refusal by progressive anti-Zionists to address anti-Semitism therefore involves not only a lack of self-reflection but also a curiously apologetic account of the same West that the

cultural left would otherwise reject. This too is something we should talk about when we talk about the conflict.

Thirdly and finally, talk about the conflict is about nothing if not about the appeal to boycott specifically academic institutions. We should talk about the curious target choice. If the MLA were to endorse BDS, it would condemn, for example, my speaking at an Israeli university, but it would have nothing to say if, for example, I were to be invited by the Israeli Defense Forces to speak to troops in the occupied territories: what are the implications of the choice to prohibit academic rather than military or any other contacts? There is a political explanation, according to which the universities represent the center of the left-liberal sectors most open to peace, and the boycott movement is therefore, following a standard left strategy, more interested in undermining such academic moderates, who might contribute to compromise, than in confronting the real actors in the occupation. Be that as it may, let me offer an additional explanation: the real enemy of the anti-Israel campaign is scholarship, not only Israeli universities but the habits of scholarship in North America as well. At stake, in other words, is an endemic anti-intellectualism, which necessarily prefers to target universities rather than pursue a broader cultural or economic boycott. This is radicalism at its worst, with its animus against free thought and academic speech, thinking and talking. It is a matter of a bullying insistence that one must engage in action, even at the price of giving up academic freedom. In another context, Adorno described this phenomenon: “Anyone who does not take

immediate action and who is not willing to get his hands dirty is the subject of suspicion [...]. One should take part. Whoever restricts himself to thinking but does not get involved is weak, cowardly and virtually a traitor.”ⁱⁱ Traitors? In the last round of MLA debates on a proposed anti-Israel resolution, members who opposed the resolution were attacked as “outsiders.” The particular magnetism of the anti-Israel discourse feeds on the reactionary pleasures of anti-intellectualism, the temptation of the scholar to imagine having a direct impact on the affairs of the world, the false consciousness of relevance.

When we talk about the conflict, we should talk about how the conflict, in the form of mobilized anti-Zionism, is degrading the character of thinking here, in North American universities and in our professional association, compared with which the impact on Israeli academic institutions will be negligible. We should understand the assault we face, an effort to establish a broad conformism through the political regulation of thought, and not only with regard to the Middle East. The most important practical step we could take involves defending non-political norms of scholarship and the legitimate roles of professional associations.

ⁱ Consider data from *World Values Survey* or the *Arab Barometer*. For example, measuring anti-Semitism in terms of rejection of a Jewish neighbor by Muslim populations: Iraq: 90%, Egypt: 84%, Iran: 75% but Albania: 18%, South Africa: 14%, Russian Federation: 08%. Tausch, Arno, *Islamism and Antisemitism. Preliminary Evidence on Their Relationship from Cross-National Opinion Data* (August 14, 2015). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2600825> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2600825> p. 13. Cf same author's treatment of ADL date: Arno Tausch, "The New Global Antisemitism: Implications from the Recent ADL-100 Data" <http://www.rubincenter.org/2014/09/the-new-global-antisemitism-implications-from-the-recent-adl-100-data/> By region: anti-Semitism (as holding 6 of 11 stereotypes) is at 74% in Middle East and North Africa, 34% Eastern Europe, 24% Western Europe, 23% sub-Saharan African, 22% Asia, 19% Americas, 14% Oceania.

ⁱⁱ Theodor W. Adorno, "Resignation," trans. Wes Blomster.