

Palestine: Preparing the Ground, Against Erasure

The ongoing Israeli genocide in Palestine reveals many things about the world we live in and have lived in for decades. It exposes the West's prevailing conviction in its global supremacy despite every indication of its waning hegemony. Today, the Western establishment's total disregard for Palestinian lives pits Western geopolitical interests against the very dictates of International Law. Indeed, International Law has never looked more illusory and ineffective. The ease with which Palestinian deaths are dismissed corresponds also to the ease with which neoliberal economies have wasted and impoverished millions of its own citizens: "if you can't do the job, then someone else will". Meanwhile, the core myths of liberalism – market centrist individualism and freedom of speech – have been dealt a rude blow. Liberalism looks more like fascism as peaceful student protesters are treated like an invading army by domestic paramilitary police called in by university corporate executives. Under pressure, art, coddled by traditional liberal narratives, becomes more vacuous, non-committal, and self-censoring. Changes in the art world mirror those in the global terrain as a tide of dissent breaks out across the world. Right now, establishment elites – in politics, business, academia, and art – furtively seek to protect their privileges by any means necessary. However, given the upsurge of this diverse global movement, it is unlikely if these groups, despite their power, will be able to curtail it just as the world's 'most moral army' has failed dismally in its attempts to destroy Palestinian resistance. The Palestinian cause prepares the ground for a greater revolt against its erasure.

It is practically impossible to do justice in words to the ongoing Israeli genocide of Palestinians. For many without knowledge of the significant history leading to this moment, the misleadingly described 'war' in Palestine might ultimately seem a regional matter. It is not. The past seven months have not only seen the concerted Israeli annihilation of a predominantly civilian population but have clearly exposed the limits, and lies, of International Law. The principles and institutions of International Law established after World War II to ensure the horrors it unleashed would not be repeated, have had practically zero impact on halting the atrocities and war crimes committed by Israel on the Palestinians. International Law in 2024 would appear to mean, one law for the West and its allies, and effectively no protection for anyone else. Palestine is a lever that has exposed just what globalisation means for the rest of the world as overseen by the decaying Empire of the United States. And that is the militarised reinforcement of the power of political and financial elites against all forms of recognisable justice and accountability.

'Western Democracy' has come to stand for the global domination of the oppressed domestically and across the world. In many ways, Israel could be regarded as the fifty-first state of America as its current president 'Genocide Joe' Biden has unceasingly proclaimed unfettered support for Israel regardless of endless accumulating evidence of human rights abuses and war crimes. The relationship between the United States and Israel, as political scientist John Mearsheimer has put it, is not 'normal'. It is not normal because of the political liability Israel's actions pose to United States domestic and regional interests. It is not normal because of the special arrangement that determines the relationship according to the massive congressional influence of Zionist lobby groups like AIPAC. These insulate Israel's settler colonial interests from within US territory.

A similar story holds sway in Australia, with the so-called 'labor' government in thrall to both US territorial interests – in contradiction of its own – and the leverage of domestic lobby groups whose power ultimately resides in the promise inherent to the words, 'political donation'. The US and Australia, and in fact the entire Anglo/European world, have shown that so-called post-colonialism, as a genuine practice as well as an academic discipline, is a dissimulation: we are living at the *heart* of a fundamentally global colonial project that is politically and economically weighted against everything that does not 'belong' to it. Despite those who might protest to the contrary, colonialism and its associated values and mentalities has never 'gone way'. The continuing decline of US global hegemony has only meant its responses have been more blatant, more transparently corrupt, more violent, and more desperate. No matter what mainstream media overdrive would have us believe, it is too clear to a majority what these powers stand for and support – their ongoing domination *at all costs*.

This scenario has also tested liberalism to the extreme. To a market affirming middle-class – from which most artists incidentally come – current brutality and extreme disregard for law, justice, and human life, has proven massively inconvenient to its core myths. These myths include (incredibly perhaps) lingering belief in the quasi-transcendent possibilities of technological progress, incremental enlightenment, and the civilising role of market capitalism projected as naturalised and neutral. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, if we wanted a parallel inroad into awareness of reasons for the barbarism we are witnessing today, we could also trace it to decades of the pervasive and pernicious impact of neoliberalism. As a fundamentally economic ideology historically mutated from liberal philosophies, neoliberalism

is closely tied on the one hand to militarism and on the other, to liberalist pacification. Its free market mantra, ringing more hollowly than ever before, is 'non-judgemental' enough to seek profits wherever.

The arms industry is one of the most lucrative of all contemporary markets and has arguably never been as lucrative with multiple conflict zones operating simultaneously across the globe from Ukraine, Sudan and Palestine. Beyond considerations of its global military spending, consider as well what effective gun control within the US would do to its domestic profits? It would eviscerate them and thus is unlikely to ever be enforced irrespective of mounting numbers of civilian deaths the result of random mass-shootings. Civilian deaths are excusable so long as profits are not impacted. Meanwhile, as an econometric ideology promoting the endemic 'necessity' of perpetual competition, neoliberalism has effectively transformed the world into a battle ground of 'haves' versus 'have-nots'. While the former have continued to diminish numerically as a class while raking-in ever higher capital rewards, the latter have multiplied exponentially. In fact, it has been remarked by numerous commentators that current global levels of inequality have surpassed even those evident at the birth of Industrialisation in the 19th Century. That is the same decade exposing the same circumstances that witnessed authors like Charles Dickens excoriate the social impacts of mass poverty and unemployment within the urban centres of supposed Western enlightenment. All of that is back in even more insidious guises.

Today's capitalist climate is distinguished by the widespread diminishing of production, wage stagnation and ever increasing financialisation. The latter, now dominating the functioning of the 'real economy' and its impact on everyday life, is pinned to abstract speculation and the gaming of the financial system via culturally valorised mechanisms like stock markets. Accessible to a wealthy minority only, viewed from the perspective of genuine needs, these mechanisms simply facilitate rorts. The culture of financialisation is evident also in transformations of contemporary labour practices. The massive explosion of the inherently precarious gig economy and 'just in time' production has transformed entire populations into an ever-increasing standing reserve of desperate workers with little or no recourse to labour protections. With everything to lose, such workers awaiting scraps of time in which they are granted enough work to barely survive, are simultaneously politically neutralised. These workers, even if at times they may be described as 'essential', are largely prefigured as disposable. The disposable worker is a figure whose life, even within Western metropolises, is barely valued. Extending this mentality – via militarisation

disguised under multiplying layers of consumerist distraction within an overall spectacle culture – it is little surprise that those like the Palestinians who are granted no space within the global order, are rendered thoroughly expendable. Our culture wants to waste us if we don't submit to its dominant values, why would it care about those who fully resist it from without?

Against this broader backdrop, art and the 'art world' can appear a pathetic distraction. And if it does, it is usually because the values it encourages foremost are key to liberalism (and neoliberalism): individualism, competition, faux-celebrity, market primacy, visibility, and dissimulation. For example, what does it mean when art institutions and their funders claim to speak to diversity – which generally means making representational space for those historically excluded – and yet are incapable of defending a marginalised group being massacred in real time? This failure puts lie to claims of the inclusiveness of the artistic ec(h)osystem. Diversity and inclusion are only validated if they do not politicise difference in an attempt to move beyond mere representation. Likewise, the carrot of visibility, inclusion, and influence, is a means of seducing those who might resist or otherwise genuinely get in the way. Inclusion extends the status quo as far as possible in the face of attempts to structurally alter it. In every case, the case is the same, amplification of the mythical primacy of individual achievement over collective efforts to change the system.

Censorship in this case is not even necessarily imposed from outside – although under present circumstances and as this exhibition makes abundantly clear, this is disturbingly widespread – but self-censorship. The gig worker who has no protection against the whims of his boss dare not speak up for fear losing a liveable wage; the artist pitched to promises of institutionalised proof of their exceptionalism, will not risk speaking truth to power for fear of marginalisation. These are two sides of the same coin except for artists it is rarely the case that livelihoods are in danger given that most artists do not subsist from what they produce. If anything, it is symbolic value, or ego damage, the artist dares not risk. This situation is particularly telling when the system compromised is revealed to be compromised to an extent that will not admit, or even mention, that its cultural privileges are dependent on ignoring and/or silencing, the excessively evident abuses that uphold them.

Palestine is not a symbol. Genocide and trauma are realities that are particular to those facing them firsthand. Reactions to what is happening in Palestine by those who support Palestinian liberation, connect however to an even greater struggle that is fully global. Consider additionally

the spread of pro-Palestinian student encampments across the world. The significance of these cannot be overstated. A younger generation with full access to higher education, have learnt the history and implications of the ongoing brutalisation and dehumanisation of the Palestinian people and have sided with justice. They are siding with Palestine precisely *because* they are educated not 'ignorant', as self-serving reactionaries would disingenuously have it.

Consider too the full militarised brutality of police incursions into these student encampments, violent incursions instigated explicitly by corporatised university administrators *against their own students*. This relationship perfectly illustrates the interconnectedness of corporate interests, state, and military power. Police forces are not protectors of the peace, but paramilitary units, an *army* deployed to crush those who would challenge the 'business of education'. That many of these police have been trained by members of the IDF is not incidental. The same tactics used by Israelis to attack Palestinians are used by US troopers to repress student solidarity. This is censorship as well of the basest most unambiguous and physical kind. In the West, unlike in Israel, police as servants of the corporate state cannot kill those who oppose it *en masse*. Not yet anyway. The liberal fetish of free speech enshrined in the first amendment of the US constitution, appears from this perspective nothing but a sweetener for those who claim the natural right to rule.

Finally, consider the current German state's total repression of the Palestinian cause. Look at recent footage of the Berlin police using excessive force against peaceful protestors irrespective of their age, gender, or beliefs. As the perpetrator of the Twentieth Century's best-known genocide, Germany is arguably aiming to deflect its unique guilt by extending to Israel the right to do 'whatever it pleases'. This is Germany's 'special gift' to the exceptionalism of the 'Jewish State' it inadvertently helped create. (That Germany has witnessed a one thousand percent increase in its arms sales to Israel during its genocide is *surely* just a side-bonus?) Tellingly, Berlin has also been long coveted as a, if not *the*, contemporary art capital of the world. It is famous for its liberal tolerance of eccentrics and alternative life-stylers, institutional and financial support for artists and creatives. And yet Berlin's voluminous art scene has expressed relatively little solidarity with Palestine as a whole. Shows have been cancelled and artworkers fired, but anger and dissent over these incidences have been comparatively few. Some curators have resigned, perhaps most publicly those attached to Kassel's *documenta*, while certain artists have withdrawn from high-profile exhibitions in solidarity. But not that many. As an indicator of the values of global contemporary culture, standing for Palestine in the art world's

mythical European capital is to be cancelled. It doesn't even matter if you're Jewish as numerous examples have shown, you're still labelled 'antisemitic'. In the end, what does it mean to 'lose' your reputation for speaking against what is comprehensively, unignorably appalling whose wider ramifications are totalising? What kind of reputation do you want?

Alex Gawronski, May 2024