

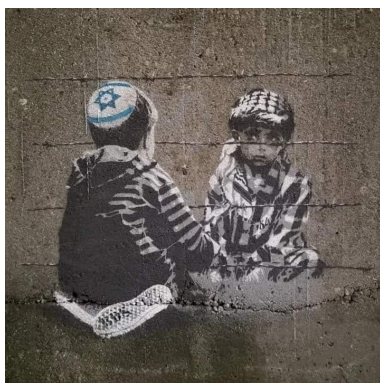
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# Zionism and the United States. The Cultural Connection

- Aujourd'hui - Israël/Palestine ou l'inverse - Israël-Palestine -



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Not long ago, I met Eyal Naveh, an Israeli historian, who explains that the United States has been the "model" for the Israeli state and society. He claims that the US was first a model for the Zionist pioneers, then for the founders of the state of Israel. Like the US, Israel was to be an entirely new country created in a savage, untamed land peopled only by savages. Like the US, Israel would be unique in its democratic institutions, its multicultural society and its modernity. Israel would also, like the US, apply the most advanced technology in the resolution of existential problems and towards the achievement of a high standard of living.

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I agree with Naveh that the US influence over the Zionist enterprise is important. What is less understood is how Israel has become a model for the US. Recently the work of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt has raised the question of how Israel, through the Zionist lobby in the US, has perhaps come to exercise a virtually direct control over US policy in the Middle East. This is an important debate in which others, such as Noam Chomsky and Bill and Kathleen Christison have made important contributions. In this debate, in my opinion, the cultural connections between Zionism and the United States should not be minimized.

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Because the state of Israel was created in part under the inspiration of the US the frontier society forged in North America images of the US have come to constitute an essential element of the vision that many Americans have of Israel and Palestine. In great part, the US understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict involves an image of the US itself, an image first projected onto the Zionist settlements, and then onto the state of Israel. This is a process of "image transfer" which began long before the recognition of the state of Israel in 1948 and the substitution of US authority in the region for that of Great Britain.

The US presence, or involvement, in Israeli and Palestinian affairs was prepared long in advance of any concern for the "peace process". This US involvement has been not only the initiative of individual presidents-whatever their motivations-but an emotional commitment generated by a sense of identification. Identification between the American experience and the Zionist-Israeli experience was prepared by the refraction of a certain image of the United States through the prism of Zionist propaganda and colonization in Palestine. In the history of the United States in relation to Israel, this refracted image is both the means and the end (the objective) in the process of ideological formation.

How did the historical experience of the United States help shape the image of Palestine? How did the "New Jerusalem" contribute to a change in the vision of the "old Jerusalem"?

A first connection is between an understanding of the Jewish Diaspora and the Protestant-puritan Diaspora of the seventeenth century. Despite deep currents of anti-Semitism, the parallel between John Winthrop leading the brave Puritans to the Promised Land and Moses leading the children of Israel back to the Holy Land has been regularly exploited in (what is today) the United States. For example, Thomas Jefferson suggested that the official seal of the United States could depict the "Children of Israel" following a pillar light sent by God.

The associations envisioned by Jefferson are eloquent: the notion of a chosen people-the Elect-to whom providence has assigned a spiritual mission linked to the conquest of a particular land. All this provides the basis for an affinity that is, in fact, more than elective-it is divine. More specifically, both chosen peoples were, ultimately, "people without a land" called upon to colonize "a land without a people".

When we speak of the colonizers, of America and Palestine, it is logical to forget the indigenous inhabitants of both places, for it was the land that was colonized—not the people living on it. The importance of the American Indians and the Palestinians comes from the fact that they have figured as obstacles to the fulfillment of the missions in

question. Both groups have, in different ways, been characterized as lower forms of civilization slowing the march of progress. Both peoples have been described as savage and cruel.

This image, at its worst racist and genocidal, at its best paternalistic, is well documented as it concerns Native Americans. As regards non-Jewish Palestinians, there is less documentation and more controversy. The rise of cultural prejudice and even racism concerning the non-Christian and Jewish populations of the Middle and Near East is not a popular subject in the West. The ideas presented in, for example, Edward Saïd's *Orientalism*, or in Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, are in no way flattering to Western culture or to Western people in general.

The history of this negative form of "Orientalism" is being written today. I, for one, have attempted to elucidate how an already prejudiced perception of Palestinians was sharpened in the 1920s by Zionist spokespersons. Over a period of several years, religious designations, or territorial designations, ceased to be used in reference to non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. By the mid-1920s, only two parties in conflict were referred to-the "Jews" and the "Arabs". A concurrent tendency existed to refer to both groups as "races". I call this the "racializing of ethnicity". Although the vogue of racializing social terminology was abandoned (in most informed circles) after the outbreak of World War II, the cultural prejudices have persisted.

The development of a more exclusionary terminology used to designate the undesirable populations is certainly one characteristic of colonization. In order to preserve their own dignity, the colonizers are morally constrained to denigrate the human obstacles to the accomplishment of their project. Comparison of the two colonial experiences reveals how one borrowed from another, and vice-versa.

The history of the British colonies in North America, and then the history of the United States throughout the nineteenth century is that of continuous colonization. The religious and economic motives typical of the seventeenth century continued to inspire settlers until the "closing" of the Frontier in the 1890s. What appear as the real novelty of the nineteenth century were the various utopian experiments in communal living. Hundreds of socialistic communities were established throughout the United States during the nineteenth century. To our day, such initiatives continue as part of the social and cultural landscape.

The Zionist settlements in Palestine combined all these same motivations. Not only were the Zionist colonies of different types, they sometimes-as in the case of the Kibbutzim-united in themselves religious Puritanism and secular socialistic modernity. This was a phenomenon appealing to United-Statesians reared on frontier myths, such as the idea of cultural-spiritual regeneration through a confrontation with adversity and violence.

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The "closing" of the US frontier in the early 1890s, accompanied by the rapid development of a mythologized literature and cinema concerning the Western hero, certainly facilitated support for the Zionist project. The idea of pioneers struggling to establish themselves in a hostile environment was romantic, and familiar.

Related to the settlement of frontiers by hardy pioneers, another affinity between Americans is the development and application of new agricultural techniques. "Making the desert bloom" was a powerful slogan and image for both emergent national cultures. US botanical technology, such as new plant varieties, insecticides, and chemical fertilizers, contributed to the success of Jewish settlements in Palestine. Going from the Great American Desert to Palestine was more than a symbolic transfer of images. In addition, in both cases, it involved a denial of the agricultural achievements of the indigenous inhabitants.

Another affinity between the creations of the American and Israeli "nations" is the demographic importance of immigration. Both populations are considered the product of disparate "waves" of new immigrants and their

assimilation into a "New World" culture including a new language seen as deriving from those existing (although "American" cannot be said to be as innovative as modern "Hebrew"). The interconnection of American and Zionist immigration has meant the projection of an image of the United States onto the Zionist project. This projection has been assisted by 1) the idea of immigration as the means of recomposing or regenerating a population and, 2) the fact that so many Jews from Russia, Poland and elsewhere immigrated to the United States. Jewish immigrants in the US were prone to support emigration to Palestine. (In the latter half of the twentieth century, a significant number of their descendants immigrated to Israel.)

Other factors in the development of support for Zionism in the United States include a Christian education tending to reinforce revulsion for the "loss" of the Holy Land to Islam. The Christian Crusades of the Middle Ages tended to be particularly celebrated in the US towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Anti-Semitism also encouraged acceptance of the Zionist project in Palestine. Those who resented their presence viewed favorably the transfer of Jews to a relatively desolate part of the world. This factor intensified after World War II when the Jewish refugees became an embarrassment to Western governments, even though anti-Semitism was declining.

Such are some of the cultural affinities and conditions that have contributed to the orientation of US policies relative to the Israel-Palestine conflict. In some significant ways, US nationalism is linked to, or seen as having affinities with Jewish nationalism as represented first by the Zionist movement and then by the Israeli state. It is why Israel is not seen in the United States as an alien culture in the Middle East, but rather as an extension of American historical experience. It is perhaps in this cultural-ontological sense that Israel is the "51st state" (and not primarily because of the extensive economic, financial and military ties).

For all of these reasons, the rhetoric of nationalism in the Israel-Palestine conflict tends to reinforce established cultural values, values stemming from American historical experience. It is also why, in the United States, many people find it difficult to take seriously Palestinian claims, just as they could not take seriously the claims of the "Indian Nations". The similarities, in any case, are striking. One century later, the Palestinian resistance to colonization and ethnic cleansing is being dealt with in much the same ways as that of the Indians: forced evacuation, concentration in "reservations" (which could be called "Bantustans" or "autonomous territories"), periodic massacre and racist humiliations.

Consider, in the above light, how differently Israeli and Palestinian leadership must be perceived. On the one hand, there have been Israeli leaders like Golda Meir and Benjamin Netanyahu, Americans or American-educated, speaking faultless "American". On the other hand, the Palestinian leaders most often have an alien aspect; not to speak of the late Yassir Arafat, with his colorful headdress and his strange uniform of dubious origin. The cultivated descendants of brave Western-like pioneers make a singular contrast with the Palestinians.

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The analogies and metaphors are there, underlying a US policy conceiving of "peace" mostly in terms of acquiescence or accommodation to the image and interests of the United States projected onto the Israeli state, an Israeli state considered by US policy makers to be a model for the Middle East in general.

For these US policymakers, it is not only a question of propagandistic manipulation, of the conscious deception of the public. The metaphors and analogies founded upon the special affinities between the US and the state of Israel are rather rooted in the social and cultural histories of both their societies and politics. If hypocrisy and bad faith are integral to political behavior, in the service of collective interests as much as in the service of individual designs, it is to be expected that such self-deception should be pronounced in, on the one hand, the critical, early phases of nation-state-making and, on the other hand, during the construction of an imperial presence in the Middle East.

*Post-scriptum :*

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