

Benjamin in Ramallah

Benjamin in Palestine: Who Owns Walter Benjamin?

On the Place and Non-Place of Radical Thought, Ramallah, 5–11 December 2015

The aim of this international conference, which unfolded over five days in and around Ramallah, was to reflect on the critical productivity of Walter Benjamin's philosophy in present-day Palestine. Gathering over a hundred participants, including a strong Palestinian contingent of artists, scholars and students, 'Benjamin in Palestine' comprised two main events: a workshop structured around collective readings and art panels (7–9 December) and an international conference (10–11 December). Following Sami Khatib's initiative, a committee of five organizers from within and outside Palestine coordinated the two events, which included multiple talks and panels, an exhibition, a performance and a number of film screenings.

Aimed at 'breaking the de facto cultural and academic boycott of Palestine', the event constituted a direct response to the International Walter Benjamin Society's decision to locate its annual conference in Israel. At the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University (13–16 December), Scheduled one week ahead of the latter, the Ramallah-based workshop gathered some active figures in the Boycott Divestments Sanctions (BDS) movement, contesting Israeli institutions' claim of ownership over the Jewish philosopher. Attuning oneself to Benjamin's 'tradition of the oppressed', it was suggested, means counteracting his patrimonization by reinvigorating his radical critique of the law and violence of the state.

Legibility

But if 'talking about Benjamin in today's Palestine is a political act',¹ the question of *how* Benjamin's thought may speak to political struggles in Palestine proved to be a hard nut to crack. Introducing the conference, Khatib stressed that Benjamin's texts should not provide us with generic explanatory tools. Rather, he suggested, it is the specificity of Benjamin's times that may speak to us today. The pivotal question running through the workshop was therefore that of legibility:

how to render Benjamin's works readable in the Palestinian context. What kind of legibility did Palestine confer on Benjamin's writings? It quickly appeared that identifying specific points of passage between texts and situations was a difficult injunction. Some heated debates burst out about the necessity of close reading to achieve this objective. To a certain degree, the transdisciplinary composition of the workshop made it impossible to legislate over the nature of 'reading' itself. Interventions and interruptions often seemed more in touch with the surrounding reality than the conceptual exegesis.

Especially powerful were the papers in which Benjamin seemed to respond to a direct engagement with the historical and political situation in Palestine. The notions of 'state of emergency' and 'state of exception' along with the conceptualization of violence by Benjamin in his 1921 'Critique of Violence' have for some time been key references in the context of reflections on international law, settler colonialism, apartheid and occupation. But this is not to say that their use is unproblematic. Michiel Bot contended that Palestinians might be said to live under a double state of exception: that which Israel inherited from the British mandate in 1948, on the one hand, and that which the president Mahmoud Abbas set in place after Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip in 2007. At the same time, Bot indicated that the concept of 'exception' is problematic, for it defines itself over against a sphere of 'normality' that remains difficult (or perhaps impossible) to define. David Lloyd stressed that the 'exception' of settler colonial regimes was not so much the suspension of law as the multiplication of regulations and the use of 'hyperlegality' as a form of micro-control of populations.

Judith Butler's synthetic Skype intervention on the 'Critique of Violence' on the third afternoon was effective in conjuring up a sense of actuality from within Benjamin's text; that is, of breaking through in a close reading. She began by remarking that in

Benjamin's view, when the police use violence to disperse, kettle or injure people, they do not only enforce law for every application of the law; every iteration of the law is at the same time a way of making law. The police are endowed with a sovereign, law-making power; their actions are essentially performative and entail their own, complete justification. The question of justification constituted the real focal point of her paper. As she argued, Benjamin considers that violence is always already interpreted; it is always preceded by its own threat. 'At this point, we can see how *critique*, in Benjamin's point of view – critique which queries the production and self-validation of schemes of justification – can easily be called violent. Indeed, any inquiry that calls into question the framework of legal violence, within which the justificatory scheme is established, would itself be called violent.' Benjamin's transcendental move from the realm of means and ends to the problematic of legality does not only point to the difficulty of problematizing the existence of a state which, like Israel, keeps on fortifying itself through a hypertrophied nexus of laws and regulations; it also demonstrates the difficulty of sidestepping the opposition between violence and non-violence in a discursive regime in which 'institutional violence is always-already occulted'. This, one may add, is especially clear with the NGO-ization of Palestinian politics in the post-Oslo accords, in which references to 'peace' and 'non-violence' have become necessary to secure the flow of international funding into the occupied Palestinian territories.²

Tension built up towards the end of the workshop as celebrities Slavoj Žižek and Udi Aloni took the stage. Aloni screened and discussed excerpts of his 2002 film *Local Angels. Theologico-Political Fragments*, as well as of his last film, *Art/Violence* (2013), co-directed with Mariam Abu-Khaled and Batoul Taleb. This documentary about the Freedom Theatre in Jenin was made after the murder of its charismatic director Juliano Mer-Khamis. However, a former student of the theatre, the actor Mo'min Swaitat, who happened to be in the audience, drew attention to unresolved issues around the making of the film and Aloni's appropriation of this legacy. Since, as the actor pointed out, there is no copyright in Palestine, the famed Israeli film-maker could freely use various footage while reinterpreting the theatre's complex history for his own ends. As laudable as these ends may seem from an Israeli or even an 'international' perspective, this constitutes a form of violence for some of the actors and film-makers involved, whose own story, they felt, they did not own anymore.



Places, non-places?

Moving back and forth between the confined space of the workshop and the hectic streets of Ramallah posed another puzzle to those who were in the occupied Palestinian territories for the first time. As days passed, the figure of Benjamin began to fade away in the presence of more pressing concerns such as making sense of where we were. For Ramallah, as we were often told, is not Palestine. The de facto administrative capital of the Palestinian authority has experienced an unparalleled economic boom since the end of the second Intifada. Located 20 kilometres north of Jerusalem, this traditionally Christian city now famous for its nightlife has become the main centre for NGO activities, concentrating cultural institutions, coffee shops, bars and even luxury hotels. In this real-estate bubble, 40 per cent of houses are kept unoccupied while dozens of unfinished constructions haphazardly cover the surrounding hills. Between gentrification and corruption the governmental city concentrates the contradictions of a 'development' under occupation. Collaborating with the Shin Bet, Abbas and Fayyad have created a police that represses popular unrest in the West Bank while camouflaging occupation under a veneer of prosperity. As Nasser Abourahme puts it, 'the self-styled capital of the state-to-come becomes a node in the consolidation of precisely the colonial structures that will indefinitely

delay such a realization.³ If Ramallah has become the symbol of the 'normalization' of occupation, which Palestine were we participating in creating during this conference? Was it the Palestine of NGOs and foreign funding, where cultural workers are shipped from Berlin and Paris to design critical cultural programmes? Funded by the Goethe Institute, hosted by two internationally funded Palestinian cultural NGOs, 'Benjamin in Palestine' was located right at the crossroads of the contradictions in which Ramallah residents live. Did we ship Benjamin with us, or did we find him already there, among layers of rubble and generations of resistance?

Fortunately, interventions by Palestinians pulverized the last of our remaining desires for authenticity. For Palestinians are now forced into the schizophrenia of a double critique: against Israel and against their own government. With this chess game within a chess game, and the kaleidoscopic distance generated by affective and political investments in the Palestinian struggle around the world, the Palestinian intellectual and artistic sphere exists in a back-and-forth movement between the inside and the outside of the occupation, between Palestine and the Middle East, the USA or Europe.

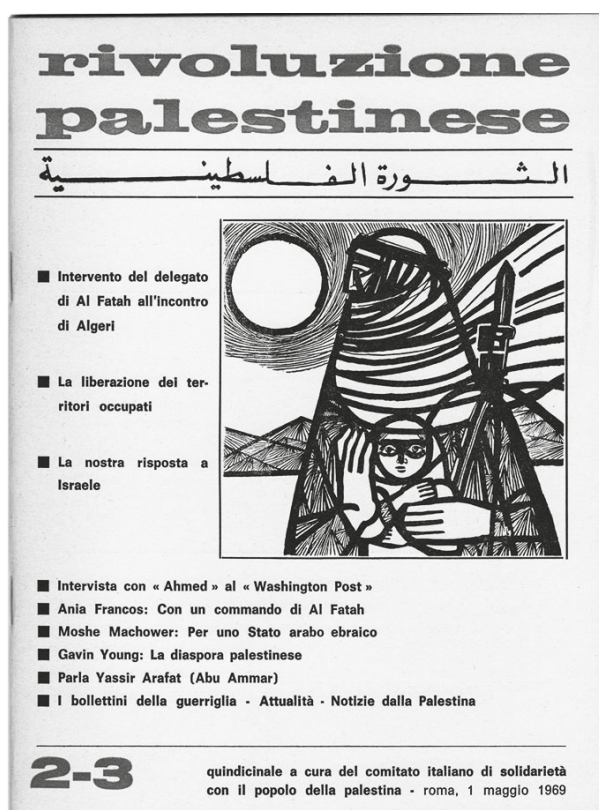
The presentation by artists Benji Boyadgian from Jerusalem and Behzad Khosravi from Tehran tackled some of these questions by elaborating upon the peculiar non-places of certain historical monuments. 'Conversation around a roundabout' is centred on a monument that was built in 1986 on a roundabout in the centre of Tehran in dedication to the Palestinian struggle. Their work seeks to elaborate upon the relationality between two hyper-politicized social environments – Palestine and Iran – and to bring micro-levels of historical narration into conjunction. Studying the making, designing and history of the monument through the lens of Alois Riegl, alongside Benjamin, they ask what happens with such monumentalization of a historical event.⁴ In becoming an official cause for the regime, the Palestinian struggle, they remarked, lost its force of attraction for leftist Iranians. From the other perspective, this opens up a broader reflection around what they propose to define as the phantasmagoria of the Palestinian struggle. How, as a Palestinian, does one relate to these projections, between utopia and fetish? How can Palestinian artists deal with this third term, which permanently mediates between their own art practices and their terrain of artistic exploration?

Testament without heritage

Whilst the workshop took place in the International Art Academy Palestine, in Al-Bireh, directly outside Ramallah, the two-day conference was held in part at Birzeit University, the campus of which is located a dozen kilometres north of Ramallah. The site is itself regularly raided by the Israeli army, which conducts arrests, confiscations and damage of material on campus.⁵ No wonder, then, that the information boards at the entrance were covered with pictures of students who died as martyrs. The welcome speeches illustrated the contradictory injunctions of doing philosophy under occupation. Mudar Kassis, from the Philosophy and Cultural Studies Department, reflected on the luxury that addressing 'universal topics' represents for Palestinian intellectuals who are permanently attached to sets of 'imposed questions', at home and abroad, when they become above all witnesses or informants. Speaking in Arabic, the director of the Institute of Women's Studies (one of the earliest programmes on gender in the Arab world), Eileen Kuttub, took the opposite route from



Installation of Monument in Palestine Square, Tehran, March 1986



the first intervention, reminding the motley audience of the urgency of political engagement in the occupied Palestinian territories and beyond. The entire day was broadcast live, we were told, by the American Universities of Beirut and Cairo.

Three keynote addresses took place in the afternoon. Rebecca Comay and Susan Buck-Morss both chose to focus their interventions on Benjamin's rethinking of memory, inheritance and history, tackling Palestinian politics in an oblique rather than a direct way. With her habitual brio, Comay started off from René Char's poetic aphorism: 'Our inheritance was left to us without a testament.'⁶ Reflecting on the notion of a revolutionary inheritance through Benjamin's works, Comay proposed to invert Char's proposition: *our testament comes to us without any heritage*.

In prose that was certainly perplexing for the simultaneous translation into Arabic, she exhorted us to contemplate a situation in which there is 'no treasure of which to lament the loss or disappearance. Only a thicket of imperatives, injunctions, promises, exhortations ... anonymous and undated, but nonetheless time-stamped, and addressed to us uniquely.' For her, the enigmatic 'weak messianic power' with which every generation is endowed in the second 'Thesis' names above all a testamentary pressure that is structurally impossible to honour: 'The only legacy we can assume is the one we create.'

For her part, Susan Buck-Morss addressed collective memory, image and transitoriness in a fragmentary presentation inspired by her encounter with the Palestinian-American artist Emily Jacir, with whom she had previously collaborated, and who was also present. She showed that Benjamin's imagistic conception of history constituted a model of unownable history. By contrast to 'historical evidence', she claimed, images are fundamentally ambiguous, one cannot settle their meaning otherwise than by 'recognizing' them at a specific moment. Her entire talk was composed as an oblique yet insistent critique of Israel's selective historical excavations and self-narrativization. To conclude, she articulated the tension between historical truth and collective memory in these terms: 'There is nothing in human history that is foreign to us. But what if you cannot read what is written in the image? Whom will you trust to tell you what it says?'

After Comay, and before Buck-Morss's paper, the hall filled up for Žižek's intervention. Arriving like a rock star right before his own session and leaving immediately afterwards, Žižek only dealt with Benjamin in passing. After a relatively pleasant analogy between Benjamin's 'incompleteness of history' and videogames, Žižek went on to rehash an entire section of one of his recent articles.⁷ Defending himself against accusations of Islamophobia, he proceeded with a detailed list of ritualized sexual violences taking place *outside* of the Islamic world, thus showing his willingness to accompany 'honour killings' with matching atrocities. He was each time rhetorically apologetic about his descriptions ('it is really hard to talk about this but I must tell you') and each time came back with more obscene, bloody and graphic details. This suffices to grasp the pointlessness (and ambivalence) of his intervention: displaying concerns about sexual violence *by subjecting* the watchful audience to the violence of crude images of heinous sexual practices. Now that his ghostly 'liberal-leftist-multiculturalist' enemy concretizes itself as a proliferating mass of web critics, Žižek's *critique* boils down to justifying his past statements and worn-out jokes in a self-generating, megalomaniacal cycle.

The sound of stun grenades, shots, shouts and sirens filled the city for a few long hours early on Friday morning, as a contingent of IDF soldiers raided the city centre and ransacked a science supply centre and arrested an individual, provoking a hundred Palestinians into clashes. Five Palestinians were injured by rubber-coated steel bullets and live fire,⁸

but normal activity resumed in the morning after the Palestinian Authority had swiftly cleaned up the scattered remains of the confrontations. Such incursions, which happen every day in the rest of the West Bank, are rare in Ramallah's city centre.⁹ At night, philosophy seemed, like Jerusalem, a distant promise.

More, perhaps, could have been said about the politics of reference or language in the context of occupation, which constitutes a crucial topic in itself. For the central axis of the conference was not so much colonial, postcolonial and decolonial approaches to power and knowledge, as the more classical intersection of philosophy and politics. This is directly tied up with the figure of Benjamin himself, whose intellectual lineage and legacy have so far remained principally Euro-American. It is interesting to note that Fanon, whose works hold a crucial importance for Palestinian scholars, was recurrently called upon, during both the workshop and the conference. As a first step in this direction, a long-term project of translation of Benjamin's writings into Arabic, which was launched in parallel with the conference, deserves publicity and support.

Although, formally, it looked like one, 'Benjamin in Palestine' was not quite an academic conference. The point of reflecting upon the works of a Jewish Marxist philosopher of the early twentieth century in today's occupied Palestinian territories was certainly not to promote cultural or religious dialogue. As much as

finding points of passage between Benjamin's philosophy and that socio-political entity called 'Palestine', the dense nexus of relations formed throughout the conference, between people, between people and places, strived to create its own unconventional mode of readability. The task that remains is to keep its energy going, beyond the singularity of this event.

Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier

Notes

1. <http://benjamininpalestine.org/benjamin-in-palestine>.
2. Julien Salingue's recent *La Palestine des ONG, Entre résistance et collaboration* (La Fabrique, Paris, 2015) provides a remarkable account of this process, tracing the successive transformations of the discourse and strategies of Palestinian NGOs between 1967 and the present.
3. Nasser Abourahme, 'The Bantustan Sublime: Reframing the Colonial in Ramallah', *City*, vol. 13, no. 4, p. 500.
4. In addition to this statue, Tehran possesses a street and a square named after Palestine. It has even hosted a 'Palestine Museum of Contemporary Art', one of the few in the world, since 2006.
5. www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=769754.
6. The aphorism taken from *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (1946) was famously commented upon by Hannah Arendt in the Prologue of *Between Past and Future* (1961).
7. Slavoj Žižek, 'In the Wake of Paris Attacks the Left Must Embrace its Radical Western Roots', *In These Times*, 16 November 2015, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/18605/breaking-the-taboos-in-the-wake-of-paris-attacks-the-left-must-embrace-its>.
8. www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=769294.
9. The UN recorded 347 such raids in the last two weeks of December alone. www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=769734.

