

ISRAEL AS THE ABYSS: ON ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN'S 'THE PALESTINE LABORATORY'

**NED CURTHOYS****11 APR 2024**

It can be hackneyed to describe a book as timely. However, reading *The Palestine Laboratory* in the wake of Israel's horrific, genocidal assault on the people of Gaza beginning in October 2023 was particularly enlightening in as much as the book's clear-sighted analysis roughly predicts the likelihood of a recently re-elected Netanyahu government seeking war as a pretext for escalating the Nakba—the displacement and immiseration of the Palestinians and their ongoing destruction as a people. It does so in the context of an analysis of Israel as being increasingly commercially invested in the perpetual domination of the Palestinians, as that domination generates monetisable exports in the form of counter-insurgent technologies. The predicament Loewenstein asks us to face in his discussion of 'Netanyahuism'—by which he means an intransigent, far-right Zionist nationalism—as the ruling ethos of Israel is that of an accelerating future in which Israel empowers and seeks alliances with other illiberal ethno-states that wish to subjugate and monitor minorities and Indigenous peoples, kill or repel would-be migrants, suppress dissent and jettison or bypass human rights conventions.

Loewenstein opens the book by explaining how he, the grandchild of German and Austrian Jews who fled Nazi Germany and Austria, became disenchanted with Israel. This is an important story, as again and again—as I myself have experienced—one has to explain this strange formative journey to curious onlookers and Zionist antagonists who are always ready to imply that one is deracinated or self-hating. Loewenstein's explanation, a continuation of some themes in his earlier book *My Israel! Question, is* fairly straightforward. He began when younger to reject the explicit racism against Palestinians, the casting-out of alternative voices and perspectives and the unjust but widely held conviction that Palestinians need to suffer to make Jews feel safe that he encountered within the Jewish community. In one of those observations that cuts through the noise, he correctly remarks that this 'felt like a perverted lesson from the Holocaust'. Sound moral instincts soon combined with actual experience to further Loewenstein's disillusionment; after 2005 he lost a residual leftist Zionist conviction in the need for a Jewish state when, while reporting from the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, he witnessed and documented the 'increasing Israeli stranglehold in Palestine', and when reporting in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem—a scene of aggressive ethnic cleansing and admirable protest action—he saw Israeli police harass and humiliate Palestinians. The final pillar of Loewenstein's evolution over the last twenty years regarding the state of Israel relates to the global awareness he has developed as a transnational journalist—a sense, long known to the Global South but only now filtering through to Western intelligentsia, that the reality of Israeli liberalism is impossible to deny. He offers an important narrative of the political education of a diasporic Jewish individual who has critically scrutinised the role the myth of Israel as liberal and democratic has played in their understanding. It's important to counter the myth of Israel, Loewenstein intimates, because we need to understand 'what it has always been and where it is headed'. It's also important to understand that, as he points out, that myth is far less potent in Israel itself, where the publisher of *Haaretz* noted ruefully in 2021 that it has become 'an apartheid state, plain and simple', no longer fulfilling older ideals of Zionism as both Jewish and democratic.

The portrait of Israel and its convergence with illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in our politics that Loewenstein presents is chilling. Now the darling of neo-fascists and the alt-Right thanks to its treatment of a largely Muslim Palestinian population, Israel's long-held place in the Western imaginary as a harbinger of a redemptive post-Holocaust future has always been unlikely. Its ideological tenets derive from nineteenth-century European nationalism and colonialism, and so in fact it represents a reprise of violent settler-colonialism, extreme nationalism and insular religiosity. What is actually being commercialised is techniques of surveillance and occupation that dispense with human rights and civil liberties, and that repeat the mantra that enemy populations can and should be judged by the colour of their skin. The Palestine laboratory in which weapons and surveillance technologies are tested on a brutalised population thus becomes an Israeli selling-point.

We have to think, then, Loewenstein suggests, about how a fundamentally atavistic worldview is now poised to drive a global future riven by extreme nationalism. He makes the point that the philosophy of Netanyahuism is actually an assault on our cherished belief that the arc of history edges towards human equality and the protection of human rights. In seeking to permanently crush Palestinian aspirations, Benjamin Netanyahu openly disagreed with US president Barack Obama and sections of the EU that Palestinian territory could not be indefinitely occupied. The future as Obama defined it—a future defined by tolerance, the rule of law and equal rights—would belong not to liberalism but to authoritarian capitalism interlocked with racist nationalism, aided and abetted by economic and technological might. Israel will thus speak in the name of the West for the sake of gullible liberal elites, but Netanyahu, like Vladimir Putin, has remained determined to reject the versions of multiculturalism subscribed to in Western Europe and other parts of the West. Through the development of innovative technologies and a lucrative arms export industry, he is also determined to demonstrate that fruitful collaboration between states hostile to their troubling minority populations can kill off the EU notion that peace talks with the Palestinians are a condition of trading relationships with the EU—and he has been proven right, because as Loewenstein points out, the EU has never stopped collaborating with Israeli companies despite the country's occupation of Palestine. The much older question Netanyahu provocatively asks the continent of Europe, with its long history of Islamophobia, is whether it will prosper or disappear if it succumbs to Islamic hordes, since 'East of Israel there's no more Europe'. His objectives are truly Putinesque, as he continues to seek to undermine pockets of Israel scepticism in the EU and diminish its human rights protocols by forging alliances with countries and regions including India, the United States, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. Meanwhile, the EU remains Israel's biggest trading partner.

Israel's export of the occupation of Palestine as an attractive model, Loewenstein argues, has made it one of the most influential nations on the planet. Israeli hacking and surveillance devices are reducing democratic possibilities while the country continues a campaign to increase and influence similarly minded ethno-nationalist entities, at a time when despotism has never been so easily shareable thanks to compact technology and ethno-nationalist ideals appeal to millions of people as accountable democracy withers. However, Loewenstein also demonstrates that this is not a sudden anti-democratic turn under an extreme right-wing government. In the chapter 'Selling Weapons to Anyone Who Wants Them', he documents how US support for the Pinochet regime in Chile was aided and abetted by a sordid relationship between Israel and the Chilean junta; after the US arms embargo against Chile in 1976, Israel remained a major arms supplier to the regime. It also assisted the repressive strategies of Iran under the Shah and the arms industry of apartheid South Africa, and supported the repressive police forces of Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica during the Cold War when Congress blocked US agencies from officially doing so, and maintained close commercial relationships with Suharto's generals after Indonesia's genocidal anti-communist purge of 1965–66. As Loewenstein reminds us, the Global South has 'been controlled and pacified with principally Israeli and US weapons'. An historical reckoning with Israel's support for the most depraved regimes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is needed, and in this respect the book is an informed update on Chomsky's *The Iron Triangle*.

And while some of this amorality and rogue activity takes place in the name of garnering geopolitical support for its occupation of the West Bank, and of its spiritual affinity with regimes intent on violent counter-insurgency such as Guatemala's, Loewenstein demonstrates that Israel also finds a ready market in, and a symbiotic relationship with, anti-Indigenous and anti-immigrant politicians. For example, the hugely successful Israeli security technology company Elbit recently sought to sell its wares in Arizona, demonstrating that infra-red cameras and laser illuminators can provide solutions for a military-style state intent on harassing and racially profiling Hispanic migrants and Native Americans living in border territory. Israel has also consistently refrained from condemning other countries with genocidal policies or a propensity for invading other countries; it was initially reluctant, for example, to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and refused to call for the rightful return of Rohingya refugees to Bangladeshi refugee camps because that might hint at a Palestinian right of return.

The reality of Israel as a continual disrupter of a peaceful political order predicated on the recognition of Indigenous cultural and political rights is depicted in the chapter 'Preventing an Outbreak of Peace'. It suggests that what appeals to a growing number of illiberal regimes globally is just how comfortably Israel gets away with 'politicide', a term used by Israeli scholar Baruch Kimmerling, who argued in 2003 that Israel's domestic and foreign policy is largely oriented towards the dissolution of the Palestinian people's existence as a social, political and economic entity—a process that may or may not include their partial ethnic cleansing from the territory known as the Land of Israel. One facet of Israel's success in this regard is a relentless social media campaign which uses 'woke posturing' to dilute any recognition of the actual situation of occupation, with a flood of Tweets and posts distracting from any attempt to grapple with any real injustice that is pointed out. Another is how it continues to demonstrate that its murderous opposition to any form of Palestinian resistance, such as its suppression of the 2018–19 Great March of Return using 'Sea of Tears' drones, is great for business. The Palestine laboratory continues apace as a space for weapons and technology testing, while Western elites can, when needed, be fed laughable notions that the latest Israeli massacre was ethically motivated and focused on precise 'targets'.

Meanwhile, Israel's co-option of social media is discussed in the chapter 'Social Media Companies Don't Like Palestinians', which portrays cosy relationships between major tech firms and the Israeli state, such as Google offering machine learning capabilities and advanced artificial intelligence to Israel and social media platforms from Facebook to YouTube, TikTok and Twitter supporting Israeli and Western imperatives by routinely blocking content that is critical of Israel or that shows the Palestinian point of view. In one such example, Israel's 'Cyber Unit' worked with social media companies to ensure that the genocide prevention hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah was, in April 2021, routinely disappeared from Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Interestingly, the Washington Post took note of this tendency, remarking that 'Facebook's AI treats Palestinian Activists Like It Treats American Black Activists. It Blocks Them'.

Israel never was a light unto the nations in the sense we've been told it was, but what is revealed here by Loewenstein is a country that is actually 'leading the global pacification industry', and is an important niche in both the US and global military-industrial complex and the border surveillance industrial complex, offering an intensification of a world in which the impoverished and needy will be met with higher walls and tighter borders, refugees will be met with greater surveillance, and remote decisions will be made about whether their ships should be left to sink. This world of drones, smart fences and biometric databases will rise as war, enmity and tension all become sources of increased profit.

Chillingly prophetic in some respects, Loewenstein notes that in Israel itself, the intensification of separatist desires may bring about the worst-case scenario, in which ethnic cleansing against occupied Palestinians or population transfer and forcible expulsion may take place under the guise of national security. Writing well before October 2023, Loewenstein reads this trajectory with chilling accuracy when he writes that 'Israeli military operation might then be undertaken to ensure a mass exodus, with the prospect of Palestinians returning to their homes a remote possibility', and that this will be supported by the majority of the Israeli Jewish population. The re-election of the most extreme right-wing coalition in the country's history poses a grave threat to the Palestinians, as Loewenstein notes. Surely now is the moment to take note of the 'frightening world that could be born if Israeli-style ethnonationalism continues its ascent in a century already dominated by unaccountable state power from Russia and Israel to China and the United States'.

If we track back to the introduction of the book, Loewenstein models a journey of self-educating discovery and of the virtues needed to face the truth of Israel's toxic combination of retrograde nationalism, genocidal obsession and authoritarian capitalism that seeks to monetise anti-democratic, anti-Indigenous and anti-migrant politics to willing clients. Loewenstein's curiosity, interest in dissenting voices, willingness to undertake independent research and interest in global solidarities and the future of civil society are exemplary. His book reminds us of the power of real investigative journalism that asks searching questions in an age of social media distractions and rhetorical whataboutism—techniques of distraction used by a corrupted and cowardly mainstream media that continually naturalises the hegemonic power of the Israeli state.

The Palestine Laboratory eloquently presents with one of most potent 'political myths' of the twentieth century, as described by the great German Jewish philosopher Ernst Cassirer in his book *The Myth of the State*: the bafflingly resilient one of Israel as a light unto the nations, a democratic, 'complex' liberal democracy struggling for survival in a hostile environment, that continues to appeal to liberal progressives and dilute their capacity to understand and resist its settler-colonial violence. Magisterial by 'very skilful and cunning artisans' who sought to overthrow the semantic—that is, the logical and descriptive—functions of language with an instrumental and emotive language designed to 'produce effects' and rouse political emotions. We see the debasement of the analytical functions of language pertaining to Israel/Palestine clearly in the weaponising of anti-Semitism, which is rapidly being consistently redefined so as to suppress both criticism of Israeli policies and pro-Palestinian arguments, and which is quickly diminishing, as Loewenstein recognises, democratic possibility and spaces for dissent. Ritualised, Pavlovian support for Israel by Western political and media elites, evident in the vacuous dismissal of South Africa's ICJ genocide claim by the US, Germany and France among other Western nations, jettisons the need for conscious reflection, curiosity and the desire for truth-telling. As Cassirer noted, 'Nothing is more likely to lull asleep all our active forces, our power of judgment and critical discernment, and to take away our feeling of personality and individual responsibility than the steady, uniform, and monotonous performance of the same rites'. Loewenstein's book, focused on the actual geopolitical history of the state of Israel rather than the promulgation of its 'idea', seeks to dispel the recycling of mythical shibboleths about Israel that is still prominent among many Western academics. While his book tries to educate readers who tend to be systematically deceived on this issue, however, the Israeli war on Palestinian education continues as I write. In recent days Israel has killed ninety-four university professors, hundreds of teachers and thousands of students in the Gaza strip; as the Euro-Med Human rights monitor reports, 'Israel has targeted academic, scientific, and intellectual figures in the Strip in deliberate and specific air raids on their homes without notice', with 343 schools damaged in the Gaza Strip and 38 in the West Bank. I mention Israel's long-standing war on the Palestinian intelligentsia and on Palestine's future political leaders because Israel's exported anti-Palestinianism—its war against a viable Palestinian future as imagined and created by Palestinian intellectuals—is rapidly extending to a Zionist proxy war against freedom and dissent in our universities and our places of free speech and assembly. There is no longer any point in hiding the fact that Western-supported Israeli anti-Palestinianism is accelerating an assault on what remains of democratic values and norms. Only the solidarity of a counter-public sphere that will no longer tolerate the corrosion of humane values that political Zionism represents can meaningfully challenge the dreadful future that awaits us if Israeli settler-colonialism continues its rampant trajectory.

[Like](#) [Share](#) [Post](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NED CURTHOYS

Ned Curthoys is a senior lecturer in English and Literary Studies at the University of Western Australia. His work ranges across literary studies, philosophy, Jewish studies and political theory. He is the author of *The Legacy of Liberal Judaism: Ernst Cassirer and Hannah Arendt's Hidden Conversation* (Berghahn, 2013) and *--the Bildungsroman in a Geocidal Age--* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

[More articles by Ned Curthoys](#)**CATEGORISED: ARENA QUARTERLY #17****TAGGED: ISRAEL/PALESTINE, REVIEW****ADD COMMENT**

SUPPORT ARENA

Independent publications and activities largely through the voluntary work ever. Arena has never relied on or received government funding. It has sustained its activities through the voluntary work and funding provided by editors and supporters. If Arena is to continue and to expand its readership, we need your support to do it.

[DONATE](#) [SUBSCRIBE](#) [ABOUT ARENA](#)


LEAVE A REPLY

COMMENT *

NAME *

EMAIL *

WEBSITE

I'm not a robot 

[POST COMMENT](#)

ABOUT

People
Contact
Contribute to Arena
Donate to Arena
Arena Prospectus

ONLINE

About
Campaigns
Contribute
Join Mailing List

QUARTERLY

Quarterly Issues
Articles Archive
Informit Archive
About
Contribute
Subscribe / Purchase

ARCHIVE

Arena Foundation Articles
Arena Magazine 1992-2019
Articles Archive
Informit Archive
Purchase
Arena Journal 1993-2020
Articles Archive
Informit Archive
Purchase

SHOP

Subscriptions
Quarterly
Latest Issue
Back Issues: PDFs \$7
Books
Donations
Cart
My Account

SOCIAL MEDIA

[Facebook](#)
[Twitter](#)
[Instagram](#)