

The Concept of Racism & the Palestine-Israel Conflict

A Personal View
by
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It is often asserted on both sides in the Palestine-Israel conflict that their adversaries are motivated by racism. This has long struck me as an unsatisfactory analysis because whatever racial lines there might be in this dispute clearly cut across the political divide. A majority of Israeli Jews are Arab in origin, that is to say they, or their parents or their grandparents, came from Arabic backgrounds. Moreover Arabs and Jews (not at all mutually exclusive categories) are both mixtures of many races. Is there any other satisfactory way of defining a Jew than to say that s/he practices or that her/his ancestors practised the religion of Judaism? Or do you know of another satisfactory way to define an Arab than to say that s/he speaks or that her/his ancestors spoke Arabic? If on reflection your answer to both of these questions is 'no' then read on.

Thinking about these matters has led me to wonder about the concept of racism itself. I have come to the conclusion that this word is used to cover two quite different ideas. The first is the obvious one: prejudice against another person or people by virtue of identifiable racial differences. The second is more complex; here a racial category is attributed to a person or people without any objective criterion, and s/he is, or they are, then discriminated against on this basis. The Nazi persecution of Jews fell more into this second category than into the first. So, I would maintain, does the prejudice which exists on both sides in the Palestine-Israel conflict. One might call this second idea 'racialism', i.e. a (flawed) theory of race.

The problem is that these two different phenomena are not clearly distinguished, thus perpetuating the idea that there *are* Jewish and Arabic races. If it is maintained that one of the factors in the Israel-Palestine conflict is racism, then it seems reasonable to assume that real racial differences exist between the two parties. It is not a giant step from there to all that nationalist rubbish (der Judenstaat, al-Watan al-Arabi, pan-Islamism) which still plagues the world, and especially the imperially named 'Middle East'. Would it not be better, therefore, to drop the term 'racism' and refer simply to 'prejudice'?

Prejudice, pre-judging, is a necessary self-correcting part of our survival equipment. It becomes problematical when it arises out of a group ideology which bears little relation to reality. Groups define themselves by drawing lines, often arbitrarily, between those included and those excluded. The purpose is to create the illusion of security; to keep these lines firm groups exaggerate the difference of the 'other' and even invent differences which do not exist. Members of the group (religion, school, company, nation etc.) come to see themselves as superior, those outside as inferior. The eighteenth/nineteenth century concept of the nation-state was based on a quite false idea of racial homogeneity, so that the chauvinism of such states was essentially 'racialist'. I don't think this idea is dead, though the issue has been muddied by substituting the concept of 'ethnicity' for race. I would argue that many Americans and British see themselves as an ethnic group the survival of whose members warrants any kind of atrocity against 'others'. I have no doubt that this is a dominant, though not universal, Israeli attitude.

I see such views as dangerous nonsense, leading us to the very opposite of the multi-cultural non-national world I think we should aspire to. To arrive at this ideal we will need the courage to bear a degree of insecurity, that is to give up our defensive prejudices, whatever their basis. It will help to recognise that we, ourselves, are multi-cultural, that is that we have concentric and eccentric identities which often exist together in a quite contradictory way. But by calling international prejudice 'racism' we are, however unwittingly, playing the 'racialists'' own game.

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