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EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF Cultural studies

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No such thing as peacetime: Notes on Gaza, Hannah Arendt and cultural studies

European Journal of Cultural Studies
1–10
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DOI: 10.1177/13675494241252942
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Abstract

This comment piece, prompted by the ongoing conflict in Gaza and the terrible toll of lives of Gazan people following the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, argues that the field of cultural studies has its origins in a notion of post-war peacetime and that this has created a vocabulary deficit in regard to war, genocide and state violence. Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have confronted patterns of violence in regard to the urban environment and the policing of Black youth as well as the escalation in day-to-day authoritarianism and the rise of the right. There is a strong case to be made however for the field of cultural studies to more fully draw on political philosophy including Middle East scholarship to engage more directly with the politics of occupation, settler colonialism, neo-nationalism and the far right.

Keywords

Cultural studies, Gaza, genocidal violence, Israel, neo-nationalism, settler colonialism

I am writing this short piece at a moment of exceptional crisis and emergency. The situation of starvation in the Gaza Strip and the loss of lives as a result of the bombing of civilian infrastructure by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) prompt comparisons with past colonial wars of atrocities and dispossession, and this in turn pushes us to look for fuller understanding in the works of post-colonial studies, Middle East scholarship and feminist thought (among others Hammami, 2016, 2019a, 2019b; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 2007). There has also been an outpouring of politically incisive articles in the last few weeks in response to the Gaza crisis (Elhalaby, 2024; Gordon and Haddad,

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2024; Mishra, 2024; Prochnik et al., 2023; Toscana, 2024). Here I want to reflect on the historical insularity in cultural studies, a vocabulary deficit when it comes to engaging with war, violence and genocide, this being revealed more starkly with the recent catastrophe. In the pages that follow I will explore some connections, and show how the writing of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall offer a bridge between these seemingly separate worlds.

Cultural studies, as it was developed in the mid-1960s by Richard Hoggart in Birmingham University to be more fully expanded by Stuart Hall in the early 1970s, was implicitly a peacetime field of study. The extent to which ‘Britishness’ marked out its disciplinary contours has of course been a subject of much discussion. We were perhaps lulled into the assumptions of post-war peacetime in a way that shaped the nature of our travails.[1] (I will return to this in the conclusion.) With the terrible violence waged against the people of Gaza, as a teacher and researcher, I feel myself ill-equipped to bring these events in all of their horror, into the lexicon of the field of cultural studies. For sure in recent years, there has been important work by our colleagues on activism, on the media and cultural politics of protest and assembly and on Islamophobia in the popular media. We face a formidable challenge when it comes to addressing the role of media including social media in this current conflict. A whole new frontier has opened up as state violence now able to make use of social media amplifies the idea of propaganda a hundredfold. This includes the strategic release of many real-time films luridly celebrating military successes from the Israeli government, offset by their refusal to allow foreign journalists into Gaza. But there is also the killing of so many Gazan reporters alongside energy blackouts and restrictions on all forms of communications. Most recent is the decision to shut down Al-Jazeera from broadcasting in the region. With all of these developments media studies scholars are monitoring the ways in which the various global news organisations set up different frames for reporting. Their work will prove vital now and in the future for confronting the power of political communications (Freedman, 2024).

Any kind of levity in the classroom or lecture theatre at the present moment feels wrong, the idea of pursuing everyday life as it was (bearing in mind our awareness historically of western privileges) is overshadowed, first by the murderous attack on 7 October by Hamas, and then by the subsequent unfolding of unrelenting bombing and subsequent carnage by the IDF against the people of Gaza. The many peaceful street protests are testimony to the determination of people across the world who are sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinians to hold the Israeli government to account, to push for a ceasefire, to bring an end to the catastrophic loss of lives on both sides and to secure a viable home for the Palestinians. The protesters oppose the injustice meted out on the basis of a neo-colonialist premise, on the Palestinian people who since 1948 have been forced into exile, forced to live long term in refugee camps or displaced into the narrow perimeters of the Gaza Strip or the West Bank, deprived of land, home and the ability to self-govern and organise their lives with dignity and to preserve their culture. The Israeli forces are buoyed up by the power of the far right in office and the forces of the religious right. The support from Biden in the United States, and by the UK government, by Germany and many other liberal democracies, is further bulwarked by the successes of the insurgent right and far right stretching to so many parts of the globe, from Russia to Hungary, from Argentina to the successes of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party

in Germany, to the prospect of another Trump regime in the United States. It is a long and frightening list and one that counts Benjamin Netanyahu among its most favoured leaders.

Already I have touched on key issues, the role of media, the spectre of the far right, and the politics of genocide and warfare. How then might we update the scholarship in the field of cultural studies that can widen our understanding and find a way out of the classroom paralysis we can feel at the present moment? We have to better understand why Israel now stands accused of being an apartheid state, and why its colonial settler status cannot bring equality and justice to all the peoples of the region. There is of course a huge bibliography on the topics of Zionism, expulsion and dispossession and cultural annihilation by countless post-colonial scholars and writers, most notably Edward Said (1994). But here I suggest we return to Paul Gilroy's writing on the camp and on neo-fascism for its attention to cultural life and to the American context, likewise Judith Butler's fine exegesis of Hannah Arendt's writing provides an account which opens the work out and extends its range to the present day. In the two chapters on Walter Benjamin Butler focuses on his thinking on state violence, history, and disobedience, while the recent biography of Arendt by UK human rights scholar Lyndsey Stonebridge makes the case for Arendt nowadays deserving a new wide readership in the context of current surges of nationalism, and the withholding of rights to refugees and asylum seekers (Butler, 2012; Gilroy, 2003; Stonebridge, 2024). These writers allow us to knit together three strands. The first is the neo-colonialist war in Gaza, predicated as it is on the much longer history of Zionism and nationalism, the occupation, the settlements and the forced displacement of people. The second is the point that right-wing views on the part of electoral majorities are so embedded that the wider political climate is hostile to the plight of refugees, and conducive to the whipping up of hatred and violence. The post-war achievements of human rights and international law have been on the wane for many years. Liberal and leftist values have been eroded when confronted with the loud noise of populism, neo-nationalism and racism amplified by the social media feeds to global populations. These changes mean that the flouting of international law and the disregard for human rights have had an easier passage than would be the case in more auspicious times. The third strand is that Hannah Arendt's (1958) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, shows the historical connections between colonialism, imperialism and fascism. The work also provides an account of the emergence of what Gilroy calls 'raciology' or race science as the epistemic underpinning for fascism and leading to the extermination of millions of people.

Nor are these recent events entirely disconnected from political violence at home. How we can account for the escalation of violence in political culture, remains a key question. It is a defining feature of the last decade, with death threats and rape threats sent to so many public figures alongside the actual murder of two British MPs, Jo Cox in 2016 and Sir David Amess in 2022. It is as if our immunity to everyday violence is being lowered by the day. The power of the Internet has unleashed the capacity to issue threats to prominent figures alongside the widespread phenomenon of 'trolling'. In the United States the term of office of Trump heralded a gladiatorial spectacle of politics, comprising mobs and roaring crowds all part of the Make America Great (MAGA) movement and culminating in the storming of Capitol Hill in 2020. What evolved during those years

was a volatile and capricious style of governing, overtly disdainful of how democratic politics has been conducted in the past, suggesting it was as a matter of elites who disregarded the forgotten masses. Even a rudimentary knowledge of the early days of Nazism would be enough to see the similarities. Arendt, as recounted by Stonebridge, speaks directly from that period to our own. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she excavates the historical terrain of aggressive nationalisms, of imperialism and of authoritarian regimes. She was a stubborn thinker who risked losing lifelong friends, especially after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* when she was ostracised by many figures such as Gershom Scholem (Arendt 1963). In fact the Eichmann book proved to be among her most ground-breaking of works, as a non-Zionist Jewish woman she turned away decisively from nationalism and sought to develop a theory of diaspora, of plurality and cohabitation.

Dispossession, illegal settler colonialism, the politics of the borders and the question of statelessness all play a key role in the catastrophic situation in Gaza today. This would prompt us back to Gilroy's (2003) landmark volume *Between Camps* which provided a dense intellectual history of the undertow of European modernity, the entanglement of imperialism with nation-building and with the genocidal atrocities to indigenous populations that ensued. Continuing into the post-war period, Gilroy addresses the rising tide of neo-fascism and militarisation globally integrated as this has been with the power of media and consumer culture. Arguably the fascism dimension was a feature of the book that many readers at the time did not want to acknowledge. *Between Camps* is in dialogue with Arendt especially for the connection she draws between the models of political administration devised for colonial rule and then at a later stage, enacted in the concentration camps of the Nazi regime. Both Gilroy and Arendt understand the power of the various nationalisms to engender processes of racial exclusions, and a camp mentality.

Post-war Western society, where cultural studies germinated, was ostensibly a time of peace, with cultural activities and mass consumption seen as features of the leisure society. Cultural studies in the 1970s was concerned with struggle and conflict mostly understood through the prism of class. This in turn meant looking at the social institutions (education, media, family) and how they worked to reproduce the prevailing relations of domination and subordination. While a colonial war was indeed being pursued in Northern Ireland, back in Birmingham despite the Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombing campaign which saw 21 people killed and nearly 200 injured following explosions in city centre pubs, the cultural remit of our research remained directed to the world of football or TV viewing or magazines.[2] Paul Gilroy not only exposed the fallacy of this assumption of peacetime from the perspective of the Black experience but insisted on the trans-national basis of Black culture, and he put the violent politics of racial domination at the forefront of his thinking. Nor was this a distant reality because in Birmingham in the 1970s, the BNP (British National Party) and the racist skinheads made their presence felt in everyday violent attacks. Stuart Hall had from the start established the importance of internationalism in cultural studies, he looked to the writing of the Italian Marxist Gramsci, to Althusser, to CLR James and to Fanon, but the actual focus for study was on the contours of race, politics and popular culture in the United Kingdom. Hall developed an incisive analysis of the authoritarianism embedded within the popular repertoire of

the Tory politics of Mrs Thatcher, inaugurating as it did a resurgent far right inside and around the edges of the Conservative party. What Thatcher rolled out policy-wise was to become a key model for aggressive neoliberalism elsewhere. Back in 1979 Hall (1979, 2011) authored the widely referenced article 'The Great Moving Right Show', and then in the years before he died he reflected again on neo-nationalism, populism and the decades of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom. These developments are nowadays embodied in figures such as Liz Truss, Suella Braverman, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Nigel Farage. Had he lived longer the challenge for Hall would surely have been to analyse how the decades of neoliberal economics of privatisation that lined the pockets of global private equity companies tallied with the right and the far right in power. Right up until the last 2 or 3 years many have been wary of using the word fascism or neo-fascism in relation to many of the statements by and actions of far right figures now at the heart of political life, as if it detracted from scholarly debate, but now things have changed. With heavy hearts it feels we have no alternative but to confront this reality. Dark Time now rather than New Times. Since the 1980s Hall and Gilroy each played a key role in extending the frame of cultural studies to put the post-colonial agenda at the centre of discussion. From Fanon to Said, from Bhabha to Spivak, and the new writing from Black British and British Asian feminists including Gail Lewis and Avtar Bhar, this work shifted entirely the centre of gravity in British cultural studies. From the late 1980s and through the 1990s these strands of thought came together in a range of edited collections. Nevertheless the idea of incipient fascism or for that matter ongoing genocides tended not to play a lead role in these conversations with the exception of Gilroy.

The scale of the violence and the scenes of death and decimation of basic life which we are now witnessing in Gaza feels unprecedented and that it is being conducted by a nation whose previously stateless people were themselves subjected to the full violence of fascism, pushes our ethical frames to the limit. There is intense sadness as well as incredulity. We understand the horror of the Hamas attacks and how that ripped open the vulnerability of Israeli society, how it pierced the psyche of the population. But as a starting point for engaging with trauma on both sides of the divide, we must, in cultural studies, be more attentive to these histories, to the pre and post 1948 wars in the region, and the multiple deprivations of human rights of the people of Gaza and the West Bank by the Israeli government and its military regime (Gordon and Haddad, 2024; Hammami, 2016). The writing of Eyal Weizman (2002, 2012) provides a detailed political geography of military domination, surveillance, incarceration as well as extraction and appropriation of resources such as water as part of an unrelenting colonial conquest mentality. And now, in the aftermath of 7 October, as so many items of TV news show, vengeance and retribution are embedded within a vicious theatre of war.

Why then, in these worst of times, should we take the time to look back at the writing of Hannah Arendt who was born in 1906 and passed away in 1976 ? What can we learn from her expansive writing that might help to see some sort of end to the suffering that the Palestine people have been enduring for decades and who are now in the most desperate of circumstances, moved from one ostensibly 'safe zone' to the next, only to be bombed out in these locations, forced to live in tents, families being buried under the rubble of Israeli attacks, children with injuries and no living relatives, small children whose parents are already dead, being asked to identify

younger baby siblings, starvation on the horizon, mothers giving birth with no medical assistance and a scenario of carnage, death and mass burial?

Not only is Hannah Arendt's work important in itself but it has also laid some of the groundwork for Judith Butler's (2006, 2010) last two decades of publishing on war, on grievability, on dependency, responsibility and on what might constitute an ethics of non-violence. Butler (2012) interrogates texts of both Walter Benjamin (from the 1920s) and Hannah Arendt (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*) for their thinking on Zionism, state violence and human rights. They explicate the last sequences of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* where Arendt casts her net more widely beyond the courtroom to reflect on processes of judgement for mass murder, for responsibility, and where she outlines what international law might look like. Arendt argues that the fascist mentality which Eichmann unhesitatingly endorses throughout the trial rests on the idea that it is possible for one group of people to decide upon those with whom they want to share the planet, and those who are undesirable and so disposable. Racial supremacy leads inexorably to genocide. The ethical position of Arendt that Butler expands upon rests on the idea of responsibility across difference. Indeed within the Jewish ethics that plays a role in the writing of Arendt and to an extent for Butler too, there is a pan-territorial tenet for the dispersed or scattered population of Jews that they must care for their non-Jewish neighbours. There is also the idea of social life organised around co-existence and diaspora for all. Drawing on the 'notoriously difficult' passages from Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, Butler shows how both he and Arendt provide a plausible philosophy for resistance and disobedience that would break the grip of authoritarian and violent regimes. This theory of political responsibility, envisages new ideas of citizenship and of justice untethered to the nation state. For Benjamin and despite his point that sorrows are an unceasing feature of our humanity, such actions can lead to 'happiness'. (The sections in Butler's book on Benjamin and happiness are compelling.) For Arendt political action and the 'exercise of collective freedom' can be (exhilarating) ways of changing the world (Stonebridge, 2024).

Cohabitation will be difficult; it requires recognition of hard-edged, non-transposable, un-translatable elements, as a precondition for radical heterogeneity. This serves as a useful rejoinder to the integrationist policies of national governments. In times of crisis, the notion of neighbourliness takes on more authoritarian and hierarchical dimensions. In the much lauded speech by the German Vice-Chancellor and Federal Minister Robert Habeck (from the Greens) delivered on 1 November 2023, 3 weeks after the Hamas attack, he referred to the specifically German 'reason of state' and its moral and historical duties to Israel, at the same time saying that anti-Israel demonstrators who did not have full residency in Germany would risk being deported.

Judith Butler has for many years supported the actions of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, and has been at the forefront of those opposing the instrumentalisation of the slur of anti-semitism against those who voice their criticisms of the Israeli occupation, the settler movements, and now the bombardment of the civilian population in the name of eradicating Hamas. Butler is also positioning themselves as a Jewish philosopher, and like Arendt argues for a 'non identitarian' idea of Jewishness one that refutes the claims of ethnic absolutism, of seemingly authentic and wholly configured identity which Gilroy also showed to be a dangerous fiction, an imagined unity leading

only to racialised hierarchy. His points echo Stuart Hall's (2022) writing on identity as necessarily fluid, fissured and fragmented. When it congeals it becomes a force for inequality and for social division, for hostility and violence. What unites all four of these thinkers is a commitment to plurality and diaspora. When Arendt countered the notion of a nation state as a place of belonging for a population sharing a single identity Gershom Sholem upbraided her for betraying the ideals of the Zionist project, 'do you not love your own people' he asked? Arendt brushed this accusatory question aside, unsentimentally in favour of, as Butler puts it 'abstraction'.

For Arendt nationalism inevitably creates peoples who will be excluded, who will become refugees and be deprived of rights. The Jewish people were historically dispersed and they were subjected to violent and sustained anti-semitism over the centuries, and so there should be a lesson here about finding new ways of living together for everyone, new models of citizenship. Ideas of co-existence, cohabitation and plurality led Arendt to consider federalism, and for a binational Palestinian authority. She argued for the right to have rights, and she opposed the thinking that underpinned the right to return for Jewish people, as if to suggest there is some original place on earth that would be an eternal home for the Jewish diaspora and for them alone. This argument is reflected in Gilroy's critique of the back to Africa movement and the dangers of Black nationalism.

Can I stop here for a moment to make a case for these 'abstractions'? For what is at stake is a political philosophy of equality, justice and freedom. We turn again to Benjamin who finds moments or 'flashes' when past dispossessions and injustices waged against oppressed peoples become a compelling force galvanising us to act collectively, to strike and to confront authority and to make a bid for freedom against domination. Butler discusses at length what might be meant by the violence of non- violence. These acts of disobedience, carved out of our 'sorrows', configure a different temporality, they are contrarian, they refute normative ideas of development or progress which is to say that they articulate the voices of the dispossessed by instigating a series of counter-moves and counter-narratives. As Benjamin suggests, the debris of their destroyed lives will move those oppressed peoples in the opposite direction from that which is prescribed for them. A revolutionary current would entail social organisation and forms of living that oppose the allure of modernity and the nation-state with all of its legal accomplishments. So where conventional thought might lead us to look for a home or nation state for a stateless population Benjamin disputes this comfort, this Heimat. This is an anti–common sense position, in some ways infuriatingly so. There is much that is mysterious in Benjamin's sentences, they are brimming with opacity. And Butler rises to this challenge recognising the 'dangers of over precision', as she also reflects on the 'now times'. We must abandon that western conceit of progress and of 'peacetime', and we are pushed by history to find ways of coming together in a solidaristic manner and to take action to end the violence.

Butler also illuminates Arendt's thought so that it more clearly registers for the current moment. The widespread criticism she received for her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* reports and then the book, that she was cold and heartless, a self-hating Jew and that her style was too ironic, and that she objected to what she saw as some show trial elements, fails to recognise the density of thought in this analysis and that it extended key aspects of the theoretical world which she had established in her earlier work. She was criticised for her

phrase 'the banality of evil' which nevertheless has endured and entered into popular currency. This was seen as diminishing the exceptional crimes of the Holocaust, where Arendt marked it more as a compliant, if egotistical, mindless obedience. Arendt advocates for the idea of diaspora against the call by her colleague Scholem to join the new community of the Jewish state. In the 1930s, as Stonebridge describes, she had herself worked with Zionist organisations to help Jewish orphans escape the Holocaust and she travelled with them by boat to Palestine, but this did not hinder her from remaining staunchly anti-Zionist. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* the tone is conjectural as she examines the intricacies of the judges' manoeuvres at the trial, and then she in effect steps forward herself, taking over their spaces but now addressing directly her own readership. What are the grounds upon which one can cast judgement on someone who is responsible for genocide? Far from being reportage *Eichmann* is a major work of moral philosophy.

Gilroy reminds us that ideas of peacetime have been something enjoyed only at the cost of closing our eyes to neo-colonialism, racism and dispossession. He has been constantly reflecting on state violence while Stuart Hall directed our attention early on to the 'law and order society', to the excessive policing of, and the incarceration effect on, Black youths. But apart from these path-breaking works by Hall and Gilroy, in cultural studies through late 1970s and onwards it was the ideological state apparatuses that were for investigation and understanding. Many of us turned our attention to the causes of quiescence, to the powers of the escapist fantasies of popular culture, to the limits of resistance. And these topics came to occupy a quite dominant position in the growing field, such that as Jacqueline Rose (2022) has recently pointed out, violence, in particular violence against women was relegated to a different and less significant space.

We are left then with a number of challenges for cultural studies. More attention needs to be paid to writing by Middle East authors and commentators including artists, poets, film-makers. More space needs to be allocated to Palestinian scholars, and this in turn would also mean making more visible our support for programmes that provide resources for scholars at risk, especially since every university in Gaza has been totally razed to the ground along with the books and the archives. This solidarity will be important in years to come. The assumptions of Western peacetime have shaped our field and one of our privileges as scholars is not to have been faced with the sounds of machine guns outside our seminar rooms. Many feminists especially from the global south, and in or near to our fields in recent years have broken this illusion and have reflected on the daily realities of confronting violence. Let me end however by invoking Hall, for the reason that he always had a kind of ear to the ground as to why 'ordinary people' might find the lure of identity so appealing, and why our investments in certain desires including for a 'home' and for a sense of national belonging are so difficult to dislodge. And he urged us to pay attention to this realm of common-sense beliefs. Hall was always tuned into the popular vernacular that might prize the kind of fixed identity that is so problematic, indeed he noted exactly this as something that had to be acknowledged and understood and not just brushed aside. This feature of Hall's work remains a vital element in cultural studies, he was also very much a sociologist and an ethnographer of everyday life and he was someone who was constantly talking to the working-class (Black and white) people around him, neighbours, taxi drivers, hospital workers, shopkeepers, and many others. In many

ways his life's work was about the need for new imaginaries that would be inclusive and that would allow both for diasporic identities and for people to be able to feel 'at home'.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The Vietnam War raged until 1975, and the Troubles in Northern Ireland carried on right through until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, in each case there were student-led anti-war campaigns and other forms of activism, but these do not fully impinge on the writing and scholarship at the time.
2. Several Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) students were involved in the Troops Out campaign and others active in Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League.

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