Erasing the Signs of the Other: Zionism and the Palestinians

Fabio De Leonardis (Università di Bari)[1]

Abstract

Colonial discourse would provide the European imperialistic expansion with the ideological and moral legitimation through the myth of the civilizing mission. In order to allow the European conqueror to take possession of lands, it was first necessary to construe them as "blank spaces" and erase the signs inscribed on them by the peoples inhabiting them. What I intend to do here is precisely to analyze how the signs of the Other were erased in a quite peculiar form of colonialism: Zionism.

Keywods: Zionism; colonialism; discourse

Resumo

O discurso colonial daria à Europa legitimação ideológica e moral para a expansão imperialista através do mito de uma missão civilizatória. Para permitir que o conquistador tomasse posse das terras era necessário, antes, que elas fossem entendidas como "espaços em branco" e apagar os sinais inscritos nelas deixados pelos habitantes. O que pretendo fazer aqui é precisamente analisar como os sinais do Outro foram apagados numa forma particular de colonialismo: Sinosmo.

Palavras-chaves: Sionismo; colonialismo; discurso

L'oubli, et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation.
Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?"

In a famous passage of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the protagonist Charlie Marlow recalls his early childhood passion for maps, tracing back to it his vocation for travels:

At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all looked like that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there (Conrad, 1998: 142).

This image really proves to be paradigmatic, as not only does it account for the ambiguity of exploration enterprises which were inevitably due to end up in conquests, but it pictures iconically the way the colonial discourse forms. Colonial discourse would provide the European imperialistic expansion with the ideological and moral legitimation through the myth of the civilizing mission, a myth all the more necessary inasmuch as, in Marlow's words again, "the conquest of the earth [...] is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems is the idea only" (Conrad, 1998: 141-2). In the aforesaid passage it is clearly showed how, in order to allow the European conqueror to take possession of those lands and "make them exist" through an act of "baptism" (Calefato, 2006: 14), it was first necessary to construe them as "blank spaces" and erase the signs inscribed on them by the peoples inhabiting them. What I intend to do here is precisely to analyze how the signs of the Other were erased in a quite peculiar form of colonialism: Zionism.

That Zionism is a form of colonialism has always been maintained by its main victims, the Palestinians, by most of the Arabs and communists, and by isolated Western voices such as David Hirst and Maxime Rodinson. For the past twenty years, though, this assertion has been confirmed by a diverse and varied wave of young Israeli scholars, widely known as "new historians" (Shlaim, 1995). Despite that, even now the hegemonic discourse among Western intellectuals and the West's public opinion refuses – sometimes rabidly

– to equate Zionism with colonialism. An exemplary epitome of this hegemonic discourse and of the grand narrative which constitutes the Zionist mythology is Jacob Tsur's *L'épopée du sionisme* (indeed the title itself belies the author's mythopoetic intentions). Tsur states that not only Zionism is "the Jewish people's movement of national liberation" and that "it constitutes an integral part of the wider historic process of the emancipation of the nations" (Tsur, 1977: 9), but even that "theirs was one of the first rebellions staged against Western imperialism" while "the Arab countries […] had yet to shake off their colonial status" (Tsur, 1977: 14).

Unfortunately for the apologists of Israel, however, Zionism's colonialist character has stood out ever since its inception in world history. The "back to Zion" idea indeed was primarily conceived not in Eastern Europe's Jewish communities, but in the chancelleries and literary circles of Europe's Great Powers. Napoléon Bonaparte was the first to propose, during his Egyptian Campaign, to settle Jews in Palestine (Weinstock, 1970: 39), a project which would later be revived by the poet Alphonse Lamartine and by Ernest Laharanne, Napoleon III's personal assistant. In the mid-nineteenth century the "back to Zion" idea gained some following also in Britain, where its main proponents were George Eliot and some leading politicians such as Henry Palmerston, Benjamin Disraeli and most of all Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury (1801-85), who in 1854 invented the famous slogan "A people without a land for a land without a people".

In Eastern Europe's Jewish communities the foundations of Jewish nationalism were laid by two rabbis, Yehuda Alkalai from Bosnia (1798-1878) and Zvi Hirsch Kalischer from Lithuania (1795-1874). Inspired by the national revival of the Balkan peoples, Alkalai and Kalischer conceived the idea – which by then sounded quite weird to most of the Jews – that Jewry was a nation, and that in order to anticipate the Messiah's coming they had to buy land in Palestine and settle there *en masse*. However, an accomplished elaboration of Jewish nationalism had to wait until the 1860s, when the German journalist Moses Hess (1812-1875) wrote the pamphlets *Rome and Jerusalem: the last national question* and *A Colonization Project for the Holy Land*. In Hess's opinion, anti-Jewish hate would prevent the assimilation of Jews by European societies, thus the "Jewish question" had to be faced as an unsolved national

question, whose only solution would be the establishment of a Jewish State in the Middle East. Such a state – he argued – would prove useful to the European powers, favouring their interests and helping to spread "civilization" in the "barbarous" East. Thus, already in these first theorists' thinking, the Jewish "national revival" was considered viable only through a form of colonization overseas which was conceived as part and parcel of Europe's imperial expansion.

The ideas exposed by these early Zionists remained however without consequence, until the pressure of Russian antisemitism gave them new life: when in 1881 the czar Alexander II was killed by a group of conjurors, rumours spread that Russian Jews were responsible, fuelling a whole series of bloody pogroms that plagued many Jewish communities of the Czarist Empire and ended up in atrocious massacres. Not only did the czarist authorities abstain from preventing this bloodshed, they even encouraged the mob to turn on Jews, using them as scapegoats for the appalling living conditions of Russian masses. Subsequently Russian Jews, who already suffered from hard restrictions of movement, were stricken by another turn of the screw of repression. Deeply shaken by these tragic events, the Russian surgeon Leib Pinsker wrote in 1882 the pamphlet *Self-emancipation: a warning to his folk by a Russian Jew*, wherein he invited his coreligionists to colonize a "Promised Land" (Argentina or Palestine) and rebuild their nation there. If most of the Russian Jews preferred to emigrate to America or to the British dominions, that same year some hundreds of Ukrainian Jews (so-called "practical Zionists") took seriously Pinsker's warning and moved to Palestine, where they bought some land and established the first Zionist settlements.

Zionism would have probably remained a minority movement of no consequence had it not been for the Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl. Herzl wrote in 1896 the pamphlet *Der Judenstaat*, where he appropriated the idea that Jews were a nation and proposed as a solution to the problem of antisemitism that all Israelites moved to an overseas territory and established there a State of the Jews. From a theoretical point of view Herzl simply repeated Hess' ideas: the novelty of his contribution was rather that he elaborated a detailed political strategy to implement his project, a strategy based on the *realpolitik* of his time, the epoch of nationalisms and of Europe's

colonial expansion. Herzl saw his project as part and parcel of the latter, and he thought that the European powers would have all the best reasons to favour the establishment of such a State in the Middle East: "We should there form a portion of the rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism" (Herzl, 1936: 30).

Colonization would have been run by a "Jewish Company […] modelled on the lines of a great land-acquisition company" (Herzl, 1936: 33). The first settlers to be sent there would be members of the lower classes, as the "poorest strata alone form the strongest human material for acquiring a land" (Herzl, 1936: 57), and the masses would be mobilized by the myth of the "return to Zion": as Herzl wrote in his diary on June 2, 1895: "If my conception is not translated into reality, at least out of my activity can come a novel. Title: the promised land" (Herzl, 1960, vol. I: 3). In 1897 Herzl gathered in Basle the first Zionist Congress, which founded the World Zionist Organization (WZO) and took as its aim the establishment of a Jewish settlement in Palestine. In order to obtain from the Ottoman sultan the necessary concessions, Herzl began lobbying the European governments to get their support for his project.

In those years, Zionism appropriated Lord Shaftesbury's slogan "a people without a land for a land without a people". Reality, however, was quite different: Palestine at the time was inhabited by more than half a million Arabs (mostly Sunni Muslims, but there were also Christian, Jewish and Druze minorities), 4/5 of whom were peasants living in small villages. After 1858, when an Ottoman reform had introduced private property of land, capitalistic relations of production had gradually taken over the ancient semifeudal regime of production, turning many tenant *fellahin* into hired labourers. Towards the end of the XIX century the opening up to foreign markets had brought about an exponential growth of trade, so that in a short span of time subsistence agriculture gave way to export-oriented production, and the increase of demand in turn fuelled the agricultural production and the expansion of cultivated land.

Thus, besides developing as a major crossroads for the trade of raw materials coming from Asia, Palestine became a crop supplier for Europe (Britain being the main buyer). Far from being "a thinly populated province of the Ottoman Empire, sadly neglected and backward" (Tsur, 1977: 31) where "entire regions were under the virtual control of nomads and bandits" (Tsur,

1977: 44), as Tsur depicted it drawing on the traditional orientalist stereotypes, Palestine was a country in full economic flourishing, where a commercial and agrarian bourgeoisie was developing. In the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire those developments were at the origin of *nahdah*, the Arab cultural and political renaissance that gave birth also to the early rising of Arab nationalism (Pappé, 2004: 14-49; Hourani, 2005: 299-310; Avino, 2002).

Herzl actually did not ignore at all that Palestine was inhabited by Arabs: quite simply, he considered them irrelevant, in the same way as European conquerors in Africa saw that continent as made up of "blank spaces"; thus, in order to write the epic of the Jews' return to the Promised Land, it was first necessary to erase the Palestinian Arabs, to ignore deliberately the material reality of their presence, so that that land which had been presented as empty could really become so. In his personal diaries Herzl explicitly wrote (on June 12, 1895) that Zionism could not succeed without the dispossession and the expulsion of the local population: they had to "expropriate gently […] spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit country, while denying it any employment in our country [...] discreetly and circumspectly" (Herzl, 1960, vol. I: 88).

Many among the early Zionist settlers did indeed arrive in Palestine with the conviction of it being an empty land (Morris, 2001: 42-3): for many of them, the discovery that the truth was rather different had a shocking effect. Soon some Zionist leaders from the so-called "culturalist" current sharply criticized this attitude, and it was not by chance that it was this current that took such a stance, as they were the only Zionists who aimed not at establishing a State but rather at the revival of a "cultural homeland" for Jews. The Russian writer Ascher Ginzburg (aka Ahad Ha'am) debunked the orientalist image of Palestine propagated by the likes of Herzl: "We abroad are used to believing that Erez Yisrael is now almost totally desolate, a desert that is not sowed [...] But in truth that is not the case. Throughout the country it is difficult to find fields that are not sowed. Only sandy dunes and stony mountains are not cultivated" (quoted in Morris, 2001: 42).

But Ginzburg's warnings to abandon the project of a Jewish State could not be accepted by the WZO: if Zionism had done so, it would have had to disclaim its own premises, as it rested – in Said's words – on the erasing of a concrete

reality in favour of a future aspiration (Said, 1992: 9). Such being the premises, ever since the beginning the relations between the early Zionist settlers and the local population took the form of a power relation between colonizers and colonized. The famous Martinican political writer and activist Frantz Fanon, one of the most distinguished critics of colonialism, explained in his *Les Damnés de la terre*, that the colonial world is "un monde manichéiste" in which "le colon fait du colonisé une quintessence du mal" (Fanon, 1976: 10), and indeed in the diaries and letters of the early settlers (and indeed also in those of British Mandate colonial officials, see Said, 1992: 79-82) Arabs are described as "a people in the process of degeneration" (quoted in Morris, 2001: 43), a "hypocritical and false race" (*ibidem*), a "semi-savage people, which has extremely primitive concepts" (*ibidem*). Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the "father" of modern Hebrew, wrote that after his first encounter with Palestinian Arabs he had been caught by "a depressing feeling of horror" (quoted in Morris, 2001: 44).

"Parfois – Fanon continued – ce manichéisme va jusqu'au bout de sa logique et déshumanise le colonisé. A proprement parler, il l'animalise. Et, de fait, le langage du colon quand il parle du colonisé, est un langage zoologique" (Fanon, 1976: 11): in the first Zionist settlements indeed the colons used to call Arab hired labourers "mules" (Morris, 2001: 48), and Ascher Ginzburg remarked how the settlers' attitude towards the tenants was "exactly the same as towards their animals" (quoted in Morris, 2001: 48). The orientalist prejudice was mirrored also by their representations of the country: Herzl described Jerusalem as a heap of "musty deposits of two thousand years of *inhumanity*, intolerance and uncleanliness" (Herzl, 1960, vol. II: 745, my emphasis), and Chaim Weizmann, who succeeded him as leader of the WZO, depicted the country as "one of the most neglected corners of the miserably neglected Turkish Empire" (quoted in Said, 1992: 85).

As Said remarked (2003: 307) in the Zionist version of Orientalism there takes place a bifurcation of the myth of a consistent, static «Orient»: European Jews, once considered as part of that same «Orient», now construed themselves as assimilated to the «West», assuming its position of dominant epistemological subject and leaving to the Arabs the role of «Orientals», incapable of development and passive object of knowledge and dominance.

Construing the Arabs as uncivilized barbarians and Palestine as a desert waiting for redemption allowed Zionist settlers to perceive themselves as the redeemers of the Land of Israel and the representatives of a superior civilization fully engaged in a civilizing mission: as one of them put it, "we are the most civilized people in Palestine, no one can compete with us from the cultural point of view. Most of the natives are but *fellahin* who ignore everything of Western culture" (quoted in Gresh, 2004: 43, my translation), and it is revealing that Tsur proudly claims this assumption in his book, maintaining that the Zionist settlers "bringing with them experience and knowledge acquired during their long generations of exile in Europe, dreamed of making these benefits accessible to their neighbours" (Tsur, 1977: 86). In this perspective, as Rabbi David J. Goldberg remarks, "the white man's colonial burden and the Jewish mission coincide: they are joint bearers of enlightened progress for the less fortunate" (Goldberg, 1996: 78).

An analysis of the material bases of colonization also confirms the colonialist character of the Zionist settlement. Gershon Shafir, who has studied its evolution adapting the interpretive models worked out by D. K. Fieldhouse and G. Fredrickson (Shafir, 1996; Ram, 1993), has shown how the peculiar features of Zionism were simply the result of the particular conditions of its development, and that there were no qualitative differences in comparison with other forms of colonialism. This evolution developed in three different stages. In the early settlements of the 1882-1900 period the colonists were not supported by any Power and the Ottoman authorities were rather hostile towards them, therefore the only way for them to acquire land was by purchase (as did, after all, the early English settlers in North America in the XVII century).

The Zionists´ goal was to install huge Jewish masses in the country, i.e. to establish a "pure settlement colony" (Shafir, 1996: 86), a colonial pattern wherein the natives are excluded from the settlers' society and the labour market (Australia or the United States can be taken as typical representatives of this pattern). This pattern, however, had soon to be abandoned, as the early agricultural settlements proved economically unviable: on the same land there was a sedentary population whose agriculture was expanding, and the settlers' enterprises were simply unable to face competition with the Arabs, as the latter's salaries were quite lower than those of the Jewish immigrant labourers.

Initially funded by Rothschild, the first period's settlements evolved towards the "ethnic plantation colony" pattern (Shafir, 1996: 84), wherein a numerically limited settlers' population owns the land and employs a low-waged native workforce. The problem of this kind of settlements was that they would never attract huge masses of colons, and that they were not productive enough. After several experiments, a solution was found in circumventing the market through the creation of exclusively Jewish settlements run by a collective of colons (the *kibbutz* and, less innovatively, the *moshav*): these would create the conditions allowing masses of Jewish workers to immigrate to Palestine and gain access to a totally separate labour market which would be protected from the competition of Arab workers.

This state of affairs was legitimized by the ideology of the Jewish "conquest of labour" (*kibbush ha-'avodah*), that the newly-born current of Labour Zionism managed to surround with a mythic halo and sell as the realization of Socialism. However, such a pattern of colonization required huge funds that Rothschild was no longer willing to provide: since 1909 it was the WZO that supplied them, in a sort of national pact where Jewish proletarians took the burden of doing the job of colonization whereas bourgeois Zionists provided the funding and the diplomatic support. Such were the socio-economical bases of the intensive development of Zionist colonization, which after 1917 could take off thanks to the support of Britain, which meanwhile had laid its hands on the country.

Despite the separate development policy, however, the *pure settlement colony* pattern could not fully succeed, as only a part of the settlers were engaged in *kibbutzim*, and Jews remained a minority throughout the Mandate period: therefore Arab workforce continued at least partially to be employed by Jewish enterprises until 1948. The result was an *ethnic plantation colony* whose aspiration though was to evolve into a *pure settlement colony*.

As a consequence, the Zionist leadership policy towards Palestinians wavered between ignoring them, thus negating their existence as a people, and considering them "natives" that at most could be recognized as subaltern partners. Here again Fanon's words are illuminating: "Le colonialisme n'a pas fait que dépersonnaliser le colonisé. Cette dépersonnalisation est ressentie également sur le plan collectif au niveau des structures sociales. Le peuple

colonisé se trouve alors réduit à un ensemble d'individus qui ne tirent leur fondement que de la présence du colonisateur" (Fanon, 1976: 215).

The phrase "collective depersonalization" perfectly fits the Zionist policy towards Arab Palestinians. The 1917 Balfour Declaration, the document that rendered official the British support to the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine, fully endorsed these premises, for it did not recognize any political rights to Palestinian Arabs, guaranteeing only the respect of their civil and religious rights. It is worth highlighting that in the Declaration the political dispossession of Palestinian Arabs went along with their complete linguistic erasure, as they were denied even a mention: Palestinian Arabs, by then 93% of the local population, were indeed defined in it as "the non-Jewish communities in Palestine" (Balfour, 1928: 19). Several Zionist leaders' official declarations imply such a depersonalization/erasure of Palestinian Arabs: in 1918 Chaim Weizmann stated that "the present state of affairs would necessarily tend towards the creation of an Arab Palestine *if there were an Arab people in Palestine*" (quoted in Said, 1992: 27, my emphasis); Ber Borochov, one of the founders of the Labour Zionist current, wrote in 1906 that "Palestine's native inhabitants do not constitute an independent economic and cultural type […][they] are not one nation" (quoted in Goldberg, 1996: 132), and in his wake Ben-Gurion considered Palestinians an Arab community, not a nation (Goldberg, 1996: 220).

The Mandate on Palestine that the League of the Nations assigned to Great Britain in July 1922 fully espoused the Zionist theoretical framework: it was founded on the racist assumption that some national communities were somehow "minor" ("an Oriental man was first an Oriental and only second a man" – explains Said, 2003: 231), and that therefore needed the tutelage of a power before it could be considered mature enough to gain independence: the text specified that the purpose of the Mandate administration would be "to ensure the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people" and to encourage "the intensive instalment of Jews on the country's land" (quoted in Baron, 2002: 26, my translation). In the earliest Mandate years the settlers' community was still far from being numerically relevant, though, therefore the political attitude that prevailed in the Zionist leadership (at the epoch hegemonized by the so-called "General Zionists" current) was that of

negotiating with the official Palestinian leadership, but recognizing them only a subaltern status: indeed, according to a witness, in the 1921 official meeting between Weizmann and Jerusalem's mayor, Musa Qasim al-Husayni, the president of the WZO spoke to the latter as "a conqueror handing to beaten foes the conditions of peace" (Morris, 2001: 105).

In the following years, however, there was a considerable demographic strengthening of the settlers' community and the struggle for the hegemony over the *yishuv* ended with the triumph of the Labour Zionists, who were the main advocates of Jewish exclusivism and who pursued instead a hard-line policy, rejecting direct negotiations with Palestinian Arabs in order not to recognize them as a national community. Alongside that policy, Labour Zionists developed very close relations with 'Abdallah, the Amir of Transjordan, in order to circumvent the Palestinian leadership and to discuss with him the future of the country. The very few (confidential) contacts between Labour Zionists and Palestinian notables took the form of sharply asymmetrical power relations, consisting mainly in the corruption of politicians and journalists so that the latter softened their hard stance towards Zionism. However slightly different, the Zionist Right's (the so-called "Revisionists") attitude towards Palestinians was based on the same premises: its founder and leader Zeev Žabotinskij too espoused the civilizing mission. "We must help the uneducated and those who are bound by archaic Oriental traditions and spiritual laws. We are going to Palestine first of all for our nation's sake, and secondly *to expunge systematically* any trace of the "Oriental soul" still existing there" (quoted in Gresh, 2004: 43, my translation and emphasis).

But he also acknowledged that in Palestine there existed another nationalist movement whose claims were legitimate. He therefore justified the "moral superiority" of Zionist claims on the basis of racial theories: Jews were "a «superior» race, ready for statehood, while Arabs were not" (Goldberg, 1996: 181); moreover, the Jews' return to the Promised Land was a way "to push the moral frontiers of Europe to the Euphrates" (Goldberg, 1996: 182): consequently it was "a moral movement with justice on its side […] [and] if the cause is just, then justice must triumph, without regard for the assent or dissent of anyone else" (Goldberg, 1996: 184). His conclusion was that Zionism would have to assert its claims with massive colonization and with the force of arms:

accordingly, the motto of Irgun Tzvai Le´umi, the Revisionists´ underground militia, was "in blood and fire Judea will arise".

The process of erasing the signs of the Other passed through a systematic process of emptying his/her signs of all meaning. Colonization, especially after the endorsement of the "conquest of labour" policy, implied the eviction of the Arab tenants living on the lands bought by the settlers, and consequently their transformation in hired labourers or their emigration to towns, where they would become unskilled low-waged workforce. Palestinian *fellahin* thus realised ever since the very beginning that the Zionist endeavour would lead them to dispossession, and they immediately showed deep hostility towards the newcomers. In the 1920s the pro-Zionist policy of the British administration and the arrival of tens of thousands of new settlers put landless *fellahin* (about 30% of the whole) in serious danger of no longer being able to survive.

This situation sparked a whole series of peasant uprisings (in 1920, 1921, 1929, 1933 and most of all in 1936-39) whose political and economic goals ended up being totally silenced by the Zionist leadership, that in public tended to minimize the scope of the revolts and to ascribe them to religious fanaticism, to the action of a handful of agitators or to a presumed innate irrationality of Palestinian peasantry. According to Weizmann these uprisings were "the old war of the desert against civilization" (quoted in Gresh, 2004: 25, my translation), and in Jacob Tsur's paradigmatic account their motive was "intractable hostility" (Tsur, 1977: 54) and a "virulent anti-Zionism" (*ibidem*), and they were not deemed determined by any political or economic causes. In short, as in the tritest Orientalist tradition, Arabs were shown as irrational and prey to ancestral impulses.

The culmination of this process of erasing the signs of the Other was the 1948 *Nakba*, the expulsion of 800.000 Palestinian Arabs by the Zionist militias during the civil war and the First Arab-Israeli War (see Morris, 2004 and Pappé, 2004: 123-41). In blood and fire, the slogan "a land without a people for a people without a land" had become a reality, turning into brute facts the original Zionist goal of a pure settlement colony.

In 1882, the same year in which the first Zionist settlements were established in Palestine, Ernest Renan read at the Sorbonne his famous lecture *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* To answer this question Renan had analyzed all the

factors that from Herder onwards had been proposed as the foundations of the nation – race, language, culture, religion, geography – concluding that none of these was by itself either necessary or sufficient. Having discarded idealist and racist explanations that defined the nation in terms of essence, Renan acknowledged on the contrary that nations were something historical and dynamic, that they were the output of the interaction between "la possession en commun d'un riche legs de souvenirs" (Renan, 1882: 11) and "le consentement, le désir clairement exprimé de continuer la vie commune" (Renan, 1882: 11).

Jews were not a nation in a cultural, linguistic or geographical sense, but the Zionist movement, elaborating the myth of the return of Jews from the Exile to the Promised Land, and turning it into a potential reality through colonization and British support, gave Eastern Europe's Jewish masses an idea able to mobilize them; the Diaspora vicissitudes and the biblical events were thus presented as the shared memory of a common past, turning them into the narration of a nation (a mighty example of this is the famous episode of the *Exodus 1947*, wherein such a myth was inscribed even in the name of the ship, that presented as an *Exodus* the flight from Europe of 4500 Jewish refugees). Anti-Jewish persecutions in Europe and the Shoah extorted to many Jews, who otherwise would have never considered emigrating to Palestine, the "consentement" to become Zionists, and the long war of 1947-49 provided a shared memory more heartfelt, supplying the newly-born nation "le capital social sur lequel on assied une idée nationale": "un passé héroïque, des grands hommes, de la gloire". Palestine, in the Zionist mythology now sanctioned by the State's ideological apparatuses, was a desert that Jews had made blossom and brought back to History, in perfect accordance to a classical colonialist tradition: as Fanon remarks, "Le colon fait l'histoire. Sa vie est une épopée, une odyssée. Il est le commencement absolu: «Cette terre, c'est nous qui l'avons faite»" (Fanon, 1976: 17). The founding myths of the State of Israel fit pretty well the definition of myth elaborated by Roland Barthes: "*Le mythe est une parole dépolitisée* […], [il] ne nie pas les choses simplement, il les purifie, les innocente, les fonde en nature et en éternité […] en passant de l'histoire à la nature, le mythe fait une économie: il abolit la complexité des actes humains, leur donne la simplicité des essences, il supprime toute dialectique […] il

organise un monde sans contradictions parce que sans profondeur" (Barthes, 1970: 217).

All narrations are necessarily based on ellipsis, and the narration of a nation makes no exception: as cleverly stated by Renan, "l'oubli [...] et même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation" (Renan, 1882: 4): Palestine became a palimpsest on which the previous narration had had to be erased so that the myth of the return of the Jews to the Promised Land could be written. On the other side of the coin (to quote Uri Avery's personal account), the expulsion of 800,000 Palestinian Arabs was even denied having ever taken place: their flight was attributed either to elusive orders from Arab leaders or to the population's "spontaneous" will; the numerous massacres committed by Zionist armed groups were not to be talked about – the Deir Yassin massacre being the sole exception, as it had been perpetrated by Revisionist militiamen and it could be used by Labour Zionists to discredit them.

Part and parcel of this process of erasing the signs (and the bodies) of the Other was the razing of about 370 Arab villages and of some towns' entire neighbourhoods, so that on their ruins the settlements destined to lodge new Jewish immigrants could be built up. The destruction of villages went along with a renaming of all Israeli-controlled Palestine's toponyms: under Ben-Gurion's direct supervision, the country's place names were "Judaized" either by resorting to ancient biblical names or by "Hebraizing" Arab names. This process of erasing took place also in the legal system, especially in the Law of Return (1950) and the Law on Nationality (1952), two of the main juridical pillars of the State of Israel: the Law of Return granted citizenship to all Jews (and their consorts) who "returned" to Israel; it is worth recalling that at the same time the State prevented the return home to 800.000 Palestinians it had expelled. The Law on Nationality, which established the procedure to gain citizenship, defined the Palestinians still living within the country's borders *a negativo*, as "those who are not included among the beneficiaries of the Law of Return". In order to expropriate "legally" the land owned by Palestinians, a complex juridical system was set up, wherein stood out the Law on Absentees' Property (1950): this law stated that whoever had not registered in the course of the October-November 1948 census (i.e. almost all the refugees) was to be considered legally an

"absentee", whose land could be confiscated and rented or sold to Jewish settlers.

If an "absentee" happened to return, he/she was to be considered a "clandestine", and as such he/she was liable of immediate expulsion from the country. There were though some refugees who were still within Israel's frontiers: to prevent their return home a special oxymoronic definition was coined: they were labelled "*present* absentees", thus allowing the army to prevent by force their return home and judicial authorities to confiscate their lands (Kimmerling-Migdal, 2003: 172-3). They were put under military rule until 1966, and their freedom of movement was strictly limited: they were confined in reserved areas, in practice becoming "invisible". Even today, although they number more than a million, the Arab citizens of Israel are not recognized as a national minority. In short, Palestinians became the disturbing element whose foreclosing allowed the Jewish State to present itself as legitimate, innocent and pure, the result of the long struggle of a national liberation movement that – after the extermination of 6 million Jews in Europe – had all the moral reasons on its side.

In his re-reading/actualization of Renan's essay through the prism of psychoanalysis and deconstructionism, Homi Bhabha (1990a) has shown how those who have been marginalized or foreclosed by the narration of the nation can reappear to disrupt its apparent solidity, creeping into the interstices which inevitably open on its surface: "The 'people' come to be constructed within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement. *The people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification* […]. The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. *In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation*" (Bhabha, 1990a: 297, my emphasis).

The illusion of having ultimately cancelled Palestinians from history fell apart in the mid-1960s, when the emergence of guerrilla organizations and the founding of the PLO marked their unexpected reappearance: like Banquo's ghost, they had come back to disturb the sleep of the State that had dispossessed them.

This became even more evident after the 1967 War, when the conquest of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank put under Israeli control more than a million Palestinians: once again the Zionist leadership had to face the old dilemma on what kind of colonial pattern to develop. The answer was a mixed one. In order to prevent the 1948 refugees from returning home (the dread of an influx of hordes of colonized has always been a traditional nightmare of colonizers: "cette démographie galopante, ces masses hystériques, ces visages d'où tout humanité a fui", wrote Fanon (1976: 11))[2], the Occupied Territories, apart from East Jerusalem, were not annexed, but transformed into a protected market to draw on low-waged workforce. The juridical regimes were differentiated: Israel remained a *pure settlement colony*; the Occupied Territories became an *ethnic plantation colony*. New colonizers, no longer committed to a collectivist ideology but prompted by religious messianism, began to settle down in the newly-conquered lands.

Going on ignoring Palestinians was no longer possible: however blatantly PM Golda Meir could maintain that Palestinians "did not exist" (quoted in Hirst, 2003: 392), her statements were disproved in those same years by the attacks and hijackings of the *fida'iyyun*, whose faces masked with balaclava helmets or *kefiah* embodied "the *unheimlich* terror […] of the Other" (Bhabha, 1990b: 2), and opposed the materiality of their bodies to any renewed effort of foreclosing. Moreover, that same period saw the State of Israel put into question by its own citizens, namely by the Sepharadic Black Panthers, a movement of Israeli youngsters from Oriental families that the traditional European and Ashkenazi Zionist elite had relegated to the margins of society: in the Israeli narration of the nation, the marginals from within and from without the frontier had reappeared "to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis" (Bhabha, 1990b: 6).

This time they could note be foreclosed, and the traditional Zionist policy of erasing the Other took the form of moral delegitimation (the rhetoric on "terror")

and of the effort to eliminate physically the PLO, first in the Gaza Strip, in the West Bank and in Jordan in the 1967-70 period, and then in Lebanon in 1982. In the mid-1970s, having restored the colonial order in Gaza and in the West Bank, for a brief moment Israel could even try again the strategy of coopting a subaltern local leadership, but the project failed, and the Likud, in power from 1977 onwards, used the settlers as an instrument to control the Occupied Territories, planning to set up new settlements all around the areas most densely inhabited by Palestinians.

In 1987, when the Intifada began (and while the Israeli army was bogged down in Lebanon), the efforts to erase the Palestinians were once again frustrated: the young boys whose sole weapons were a sling and a stone, were a sign that Israeli soldiers were able to interpret only through the "terrorist" stereotype, and the consequence was an incredibly violent repression wherein the self-evident asymmetry in the power relations shocked the entire world and put seriously into crisis the traditional Zionist discourse: "Once the liminality of the nation-space is established, and its 'difference' is turned from the boundary 'outside' to its finitude 'within', the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of 'other' people. It becomes a question of the otherness of the people-as-one. The national subject splits […] and provides both a theoretical position and a narrative authority for marginal voices or minority discourse" (Bhabha, 1990a: 301).

Many soldiers from the reserve refused to serve in the Occupied Territories, and gradually the State's founding myths (and, in part, Zionism itself) ended up being put into question: it was in this new climate that emerged the current of the "new historians". Within the ruling class, however, the rethinking of Zionism was limited to a revision of strategy in which only Labourites were involved. The Right, on the contrary, clung to the refusal of any concession or negotiation, since it could think of the Other only as absent or non-human: in 1988 the Likud PM Yitzhak Shamir declared that Palestinians had to be "crushed as grasshoppers […] [and] smashed against the boulders and walls" (quoted in Hirst, 2003: 78), and at the 1991 Madrid and Washington talks he prevented any step further towards negotiation.

The 1992 Labour Party's victory and the subsequent Oslo "peace process" seemed to mark the emergence of a new attitude, apparently based on dialogue

and on the assumption of a point of view closer to the Palestinians'. This new attitude, though, was not based on a rethinking of Zionism and of its colonialist premises, but simply on a strategic revision. Rabin and Peres, and later Barak (and also Netanyahu in his brief interlude) recognized Palestinians as partners in negotiations, but only on a subaltern status: their claims and rights were subordinated to the military, economic and political needs of Israel. Technically, there occurred only a shift from a direct control of the Territories to an indirect control (see Kimmerling-Migdal, 2003: 355-97; Pappé, 2004: 243 and following). The limits of such an attitude brutally came to light in 2000, when the Camp David Summit failed and a second Intifada, much bloodier than the previous one, burst out. Since then, the PMs that have succeeded each other, Barak, Sharon and Olmert, have turned again to the old strategy of erasing and dehumanizing the Other: in 2002 the IDF Chief of Staff General Moshe Ya'alon compared Palestinians to a cancer, and added that although "some will say it is necessary to amputate organs" at the moment he was just "applying chemotherapy" (quoted in Kimmerling, 2006: 165).

That same year, General Rafael Eitan publicly defined Palestinians "cockroaches" (quoted in Hirst, 2003: 71). One year before, the former Israeli president Moshe Katsav had been so bold as to declare that "There exists an immense distance between us and our enemies […] One has the impression that at a few hundred meters there are people who are not from our continent, from our world, and one may even think that they come from another galaxy" (quoted in Gresh, 2004: 43, my translation).

Once again, Palestinians either are not human or they do not exist: "there is no one to talk to", has been the catchphrase for the last years, and the several "peace initiatives" which have been proposed have all been based on an asymmetrical definition of reciprocal relations which was even sharper than in the Oslo process. This policy of erasing the Other has meant also a repression more and more ruthless, whose climax was reached in the bloody military operations "Defensive Shield" (2003) and "Summer Rain" (2006). All along, the Israeli governments have gone on with a policy of intensive colonization of the Occupied Territories, and have added to that the construction of a wall that will enclose the Palestinian population in tiny *Bantustans* planned to stop any aspiration to self-determination and to neutralize the "demographic threat"

posed by their high birth-rate. But even these extreme forms of erasing cannot but surrender before the materiality of the Other; an effective solution of the conflict will be possible only by rethinking the premises of Zionism, thus making possible to think of the Other not in terms of absence but in the terms of his/her irreducible material presence.

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[1] Fabio de Leonardis majored in Modern Languages and Literatures (English, French, Russian) in 2002 at the University of Bari (Università di Bari). Since 2005 he has been a Ph.D. student at the Dipartimento di Pratiche Linguistiche e Analisi di Testi, at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Literatures of the same university. The Ph.D. thesis he is currently working on deals with African Literature in English; he has recently published a monography entitled *Palestina 1881-2006. Storia di una lunga contesa* (Napoli, La Città del Sole).

[2] One cannot help recalling here Golda Meir´s confession that she couldn't sleep at the thought of how many Arab babies had been born in the night (Hirst 2003: 369).