

PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Teaching Palestine-Israel: A Pedagogy of Delay and Suspension

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Teaching about the ongoing crisis of Palestine and Israel poses distinctive challenges. In my case, these challenges, and the ways I address them, are specific to my being (i) a faculty member at a small liberal arts college and (ii) a teacher whose *scholarly* judgment is that the Israeli state is responsible for grievous oppression of Palestinians. The first of these conditions gives me a degree of flexibility and the opportunity to engage students in “serious play” not equally available to faculty teaching at institutions with larger class sizes and more intrusive top-down audit regimes.² The second condition poses the problem of how can I teach what I judge to be truthful about Israel and Palestine without imposing my views on students, that is, through genuine teaching rather than indoctrination.

The primary source of this problem is the conflict between my scholarly judgment about the crisis, on the one hand, and the ideas and knowledge about it that most students bring with them when they enter my course on Israel and Palestine, on the other. To start, a great many of my students, primarily many of my Jewish students, enter my course having been socialized from early in their lives to embrace pro-Israeli stances and various versions of a Zionist narrative of Jewish history and the conflict. The sources of this socialization include their parents and other relatives,

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² Donald Brenneis, Cris Shore, and Susan Wright, “Getting the Measure of Academia: Universities and the Politics of Accountability,” *Anthropology in Action* 12, no. 1 (2005): 1–10; Marilyn Strathern, ed., *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics, and the Academy* (London: Routledge, 2000).

religion classes at their synagogues, and Jewish summer camps and teen groups – and, in a few cases, trips to Israel of various sorts and durations. Perhaps not surprisingly, having grown up in a Jewish family in post-World War II America, I myself had some first-hand exposure to such socialization, and though that was some five decades ago, I have found there is substantial continuity between such socialization then and now. And in this regard, my own biographical experiences are helpful for teaching these students, in that I have considerable familiarity with their socialization. What has changed since my childhood, however, and what is of enormous importance, is that many of these same students also arrive at college with various degrees of discomfort, even distress, about Israel's conduct as an occupying power, despite their broadly pro-Israeli and Zionist views.³

Also consequential for my teaching is that almost all of my students – including many who hold some pro-Israeli and Zionist views – have absorbed a mainstream U.S. view of the crisis in Palestine-Israel as a symmetrical conflict, with both sides purportedly unable to compromise because of age-old enmities and hopelessly irresolvable claims about who did what to whom and when. On this view, the crisis is akin to the feud in *Romeo and Juliet* between the Montagues and Capulets, rather than an instance of systematic oppression of disempowered persons by a state possessed of overwhelming superiority in power, involving both arms and new technologies of surveillance.

Given these challenges, teaching this course is, for me, less about filling a void in student knowledge than it is a matter of teaching against the grain of what students already know and how they already think. This situation is, as I indicated at the outset, *distinctive* to teaching about Palestine-Israel, but it is certainly not *unique* to teaching this subject. It is, rather, an extreme case of a highly general condition of teaching, or at least *intentional* teaching, in the human sciences, broadly construed. Undergraduates taking, say, a maths course about knot theory will, very differently, only rarely enter the course with a rich body of received notions about knots, much less with strong attachments to any particular position in mathematical debates about knots.

Returning to the situation of teaching about Palestine-Israel; many if not most of my students enter my course with some version of the idea that Jews – or rather “the Jewish people” – need a state so that Jews have

³ On generational shifts among U.S. Jews in regard to Israel, see Beinart, Peter, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” *The New York Review of Books* (June 10, 2010).

a safe haven from the anti-Semitism they have faced for millennia; and/or with the view that a course supportive of the Palestinian struggle is “biased” rather than “balanced” or “objective.” It is, then, a confusing-because-confused, but deeply entrenched, epistemological and ideological morass, resting on a vast array of largely unexamined assumptions, that my students need to work through, given my teaching goals.

A final challenge worth noting is student discomfort with “disagreement” and “controversy” in the classroom. A common view, and one I agree with, is that such discomfort has been greater in recent years than in decades past, though I would add that, in my experience, this has started to swing back in the other direction, as more students seem to recognize the need for political struggle in Trump’s America.

Given the context I have just sketched, my first step in teaching about Palestine-Israel is delay and suspension, rather than starting right in with the case for my scholarly judgment about the crisis.⁴ Put otherwise, precisely because I am committed to teaching a view that is both what I judge to be most truthful *and* that is highly partisan from the perspective of most of my students as and when they enter my classroom, I begin by setting that view aside. I begin by *not* teaching it, in short.

On day one of my course, I tell the students that before we can approach an issue as contested as the Israel-Palestine crisis, we need to step back and work through a number of general, or theoretical, issues. Only at the end of an initial, roughly four-week segment of the course, I tell them, will there be any readings on or any classroom discussion of Palestine-Israel.

The goal of this strategy of delay and suspension is that when the course does arrive at its very topic of Palestine-Israel, the students will engage with it with a greater capacity to recognize and rethink the knowledge, habits of thought, and commitments they brought with them into the course.

On day one of the semester, I ask students to think through the related concepts of bias, balance, neutrality, and objectivity. For this purpose, I

⁴ The use of “suspension” in this essay came about fortuitously, albeit with twists and turns. As I taught about Palestine-Israel in the fall of 2018, I also introduced a proposal for Faculty Meeting at Pitzer College, in regard to our one approved study-abroad program in Israel, at the University of Haifa. In the working draft of that proposal, I had written a call to “end” the program, but just before sending the proposal out to the Faculty, I thought better of that and adopted the term “suspend” until specific conditions had been met. Then, on February 6, 2019, Claremont SJP sponsored a panel of outside speakers at Pitzer in support of the motion. In that context, Mark Minch-de Leon gave an incisive short talk on the value of “suspension” as a political strategy – as a way to disrupt “business as normal” in regard to normalized evil. A few weeks later, when I sat down to draft this text, Mark’s comments, still fresh in my memory, led me to add “and suspension” to what I had previously thought of as a “pedagogy of delay.”

ask students to identify which issues and topics they think should be taught in college courses in a “balanced” manner and without “bias,” and which they do not. Do they want science courses to teach both sides of “the climate change debate” on an equal footing, for example, without science faculty conveying their judgment about where the truth lies and on what basis? And what about courses on the Holocaust? Should such courses be asked to present the Nazi point of view on an equal footing with that of the Nazi’s victims – as distinct from fostering critical thinking about Nazi ideologies? And what about courses on biological evolution? Is it “biased” if science faculty present creationism as less credible, less supported by evidence and reason, than Darwinian theories of natural selection? And to return to the first example, if teaching that climate change is a grave threat to humanity is a well-informed and well-reasoned intellectual judgment, rather than a “biased” one, then just what criteria can we use to identify “bias”?⁵

What I try to draw from this discussion is the idea that “bias” is certainly *not* identical with holding a strong or even a radical position on a given issue, but is better conceived of as a matter of “special pleading” – that is, reaching a conclusion about a question based on a principle or principles one does not use for other cases, or through the cherry-picking of evidence to shore up whatever position one starts with. A final point I make in the initial discussion of “bias” is that we often find the term deployed as a rhetorical strategy in attacks on non-mainstream views, without arguments to back up a charge of “bias.”

To support and build on this critical examination of “bias,” the first reading I assign students is Noam Chomsky’s 1967 essay “The Responsibility of the Intellectual.” This classic but still timely piece argues that the responsibility of the intellectual is not to be “neutral” about political issues, but to interrogate the powerful, particularly the state and its agents. Importantly, in developing this central thesis, Chomsky’s essay also calls attention to the pervasiveness of willful not-knowing in regard to evils that powerful actors commit, particularly among intellectuals, who, far more than others, have the skills, opportunity, and resources to be *knowing* about the normalized horrors of a given historic moment. Addressing my students, I tell them that my view as a faculty member is that each of them has the privilege – and the responsibility – to be an

⁵ A useful short text in this regard, which I have had my students read as an in-class assignment, is Paul Krugman, “The Centrist Cop-Out,” *The New York Times* (July 29, 2011).

intellectual, even if an apprentice intellectual, during their four years as an undergraduate at a residential liberal arts college.

In the context of discussing Chomsky's essay, I also encourage students to be willing to disagree openly with each other, rather than avoid conflict. Conflict avoidance, I point out, protects the status quo, the received order, and thus power. Engaging in intellectual debate involving conflict is difficult, I acknowledge, and thus something that needs to be practiced and worked at – and the course they are enrolled in is meant to provide the opportunity to do that.

The period of delay and suspension in the course then continues with several readings on the historical construction of races, nations, and peoples. These readings call attention not only to the historical construction of particular named identity groupings, but to the historicalness of these very phenomena, that is, of social units – whether designated as a race, nation, ethnicity or anything else – that are defined by a common denominator “identity.” Here, in this phase of the delay and suspension, I assign works by W.E.B. DuBois, Edmund Morgan, Barbara Fields, and Richard Handler.⁶

Quite importantly, these readings prepare students to be able to read, and to be open to hearing, Shlomo Sand's arguments about the historicalness and constructedness of “the Jewish people.”⁷ And with this, these readings also give students a foundation to recognize that the Zionist trope that “the Palestinians” are an “invented people” is a *selective* truth that misleads precisely by looking at the Palestinian case of a “people” apart or abstracted from the general phenomenon of “peoples.” And this – I remind students when we get to this point, following the period of delay – is precisely an instance of bias: the singling out of one case of a phenomenon for selective treatment.

As a transition from the initial period of delay and suspension to focusing on Palestine-Israel, the course then offers students a conjoined examination of the two cases of partition – in South Asia and in Palestine – that occurred

⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, “The Concept of Race,” chapter 5 in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940); Edmund Morgan, “Slavery and Freedom: the American Paradox,” *Journal of American History*, 59, no. 1 (1972): 5–29; Barbara Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, eds. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143–77; Barbara Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review*, 181 (May–June 1990); Richard Handler and Daniel Segal, “Cultural Approaches to Nationalism,” in *The Sage Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, eds. Gerard Delanty and Krishnan Kumar (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 57–65.

⁷ Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (New York: Verso Books, 2009).

with the collapse of the British Empire, in 1947 and 1948, respectively. For this purpose, I screen Deepa Mehta's film *Earth: 1947* and assign a reading by Kenneth Pomeranz and myself called "Troubled Partitions," which foregrounds the many parallels between the two cases.⁸ The point of these assignments is to push aside the powerful tendency to account for the subsequent crises, in both cases, in terms of the particulars of the two parties and their histories. So rather than one being a story of Hindu-Muslim conflict, and the second a story of Jewish-Arab (or Jewish-Palestinian) conflict, each is recognized as a conflict that emerged under European colonialism and with the attempted resolution, in the wake of World War II, based on the (dubious) principles of political nationalism, i.e., the doctrine that there should be one-to-one correspondences between a "people" (or "nation") and a state.⁹ This conjoined examination of the two partitions at once builds on the critique of transhistorical peoples and enmities, and offers a cautionary lesson against treating any one case apart from the broader phenomena it is a part of – which is to say, against *bias*.

It is at this juncture – after both delay and, if things have gone right in the course, an effective suspension of received ideas and commitments – that I say to my students: *now we may perhaps begin*.¹⁰

⁸ Kenneth Pomeranz and Daniel Segal, "Troubled Partitions," in *A World History, A Human History* (in preparation).

⁹ Relevant here is that along with Arabs and Jews, we also find Arab Jews; see, for example Lital Levy, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Mashreq," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (2008): 452–69.

¹⁰ My thinking about "beginnings" has been jump-started, in a sense, by both Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intentions and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) and Phillip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1967), particularly 274.