

BOOK REVIEW

AFTER THE SURPRISING CONVERSIONS

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Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2005. ISBN: 0-522-85219-X

The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life. It is still more humiliating to discover how large a number of people living to-day, who cannot but see that this religion is not tenable, nevertheless try to defend it piece by piece in a series of pitiful rearguard actions.

— Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

Perhaps it's true that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, as Geoffrey Robertson says in his "Foreword" to the Australian edition of Jacqueline Rose's book, the "most important yet intractable" geopolitical question today. For her part, Rose claims merely that she wishes to understand the origins of Israel's "dominant vision of itself as a nation." A modest task, you'll agree. For Rose, what are the key features of Israel's vision of itself? First, that "Israel is innocent of the violence with which it is beset"(xix). Second, that "Israel still chooses to present itself as eternally on the defensive"(xxi). Third, that Israel's treatment of refuseniks and other dissenters seems extreme, disproportionate to their actions and at odds with its own public self-justifications (e.g, the five teenagers recently jailed in Jaffa, the prosecutor commenting that they were "ideological criminals"). Four, that Israel's citizens seem to take an untenably contradictory view of their personal situations. For example, they seem to thrive on extraordinary personal insecurity: witness the settler Mark Zell who tells interviewers that his village of barbed wire is "like a small town in Iowa," or the fact that the birth rate rockets upwards in times of

crisis. If Israel thinks of itself as at once innocent, assailed by enemies, and yet lashes out with disproportionate or contradictory responses, what are the causes of such a situation? For Rose, this is precisely the problem of Zionism.

Rose admits that “Zionism emerged out of the legitimate desire of a persecuted people for a homeland.”(xx) [One asks, in parentheses: why is the desire of a persecuted people for a homeland “legitimate”? Why not just humanitarian protection, stronger and better laws, and so on? What sort of “legitimacy” is this? Is it simply a quasi-natural legitimacy (i.e., that’s just what persecuted people want, no matter who they are)? Or is it an a priori moral legitimacy (i.e., victims deserve real recompense, no matter who they are)? Or is the alleged “naturalness” of this very model itself covertly sponsored by the *Pentateuch*? An uncertain, disavowed oscillation between a vague psycho-political naturalism and a vague liberal moralising runs throughout this book, and this ambivalence itself seems to be founded on her more primordial ambivalence towards Judaic monotheism.] Rose adds that critics of Israel like to reply they are anti-Zionist, not anti-Semitic. For her, this distinction is too easy, for a number of reasons. First of all, such a declaration silences further discussion, as if there were nothing more to be said. It may even justify hatred through such fake anti-racist rhetoric, e.g., if I don’t hate Jews, then I’m free to say whatever I like about Zionists. Second, it permits the equation of Zionism with the “worst activities of the state”(14), as if Zionism and the State of Israel were one and the same. Third, it functions to veil certain key features of Zionism, enabling their perpetuation, even extension, in the guise of their critique. Finally, it is incapable of explaining the *force* of Zionism, its abiding power to affect, bind and mobilise so many disparate peoples into an extraordinarily effective political orientation. So Rose says, “I am not happy, to put it at its most simple, to treat Zionism as an insult”(11). Rather, she wants not only to re-examine Zionism but show, in such a re-examination, that the case of Israel may provide the conceptual tools for understanding other, less overtly extreme forms of nationalism elsewhere.

As Rose herself presents her project:

Since I believe that Israel today is the inheritor of problems planted in its first, tentative moments, that the lines must be run both catastrophically but also more hopefully from then to now and back again, this book does not follow strict chronological time. And because I also believe that historical trauma, any trauma, takes time to surface in the minds and lives of nations and peoples, and that Jewish history has been dramatically determined by such cycles, the story, or stories, told here make their way sometimes in terrifyingly straight but also in erratic, irregular lines (xxiii-xxiv).

In fact, Rose’s project presumes: a) that it is the extreme (perhaps even pathological case) of Zionism that enables a contribution to nationalism *tout court*. In this, she is completely romantic: the anomalous, marginal, or extreme case is exemplary, and truth is given at the limit, not by the average, median, or norm (this enmeshes her in paradoxes of exemplarity, of which more below); b) that this extremity is legible in blockages, silences, contradictions, disconnections, repetitions (hence the fact that Zionism is hardly ever

discussed *as such* in public, only invoked in a telegraphic way, is allegedly evidence of a kind of social “repression,” as is the fact that 80 percent of Israelis claim they want peace, at the same time that 80 percent support attacks on Palestinians, etc.); c) that these are symptoms pointing to a founding trauma (in this case, a social-historical trauma external to the situation itself); d) that the aetiology of this trauma must be reconstructed in order to understand properly the case of Zionism; e) that this recovery must be undertaken at various levels, from the recollection of intimate, local personal experiences through expert interventions to vast geopolitical facts; f) that the recovery or reconstruction of such a genealogy is in itself a contribution to the transformation of the situation (in however modest a way). Anamnesis is a precondition for cure.

Rose identifies some of the difficulties in intervening in such a situation: that the (entirely comprehensible) Jewish belief in an eternal anti-Semitism of non-Jews necessarily precludes any *political* solution to Israel’s problems (she leans on Hannah Arendt here); that this belief further entails a sense of exceptionality (Jewish suffering as a special case, ultimately legitimated by theological dogmas); that, however, this belief is clearly already a precarious limit-belief, precisely because it at once assumes that it is absolutely justified, and yet wants to protect itself from any dissension whatsoever. Yet this self-protective ambivalence is doubled by a real enjoyment of catastrophe, of the sense of an ending. In Rose’s words, “today in Israel, catastrophe has become an identity”(8). For Rose, how else to explain the disproportionate violences daily wreaked upon the Palestinian people by the Israeli state? How else to explain the fact that “Zionism seems to require either unconditional rejection or belief”(12)? And how else to explain this love of catastrophe, other than by locating its roots in a messianic vision of existence?

To this extent, Israel’s foundation in messianic Zionism becomes clearer. But this isn’t a sufficient explanation. On the contrary, for Rose (following the great Kabbala scholar Gershom Scholem), part of the problem is that Zionism is a messianism-that-has-repressed-its-messianism, i.e., the Shabtai Zvi lineage of messianic disruption was suppressed, but thereafter returned in an unrecognisable, apparently secularised form. And so Rose’s aim is to show just this, through accumulating testimonies and events which evince such a covert messianism. At the same time, she admits that Zionism is, paradoxically, a delusion that knows itself as such, that accepts and affirms its own fantastic qualities (see 16).

An Australian cannot but think here of *terra nullius* when Rose writes that “the classic and famous Zionist claim—Palestine was a land without a people—was not just a blatant lie but a cover”(44). Yet in her fulminations against Israel, Rose becomes something of a prophet herself. Her moral point seems to be reducible to the following: if modern Israel only exists because of the Holocaust, created out of the guilt of collaborators and bystanders, it also only exists as a state because of pre-existing Zionist discourses; as such, Israel cannot face its own foundations in messianism, but retreats into (self) persecutory symptoms; to the extent that these symptoms persist, Israel will continue to harm the Palestinians and itself, forever teetering on the verge of moral and political apocalypse.... Although Rose admits that the “ethnic transfer” (of

Palestinian Arabs) is by no means the same as “industrial genocide” (the Holocaust), for her contemporary Israel is still repeating what it has repressed. As she says in “Nation as trauma, Zionism as question,” an interview with Rosemary Bechler for *openDemocracy* (www.openDemocracy.net): “That is one of the effects of trauma: you can’t then see what you are capable of doing. You are always repeating a situation in which you are threatened and potentially destroyed.”

Despite all the jargon and invocations of psychoanalytic concepts, *The Question of Zion* is, as Tamas Pataki has pointed out, hardly a psychoanalytic study at all (see *Australian Book Review*, October 2005, pp. 5-6). Sure, Rose tries to “respect the symptom,” tries to trace back such symptoms to repressed founding traumas, insists that telling the truth is insufficient to inspire right action, and that groups can be understood as having pathologies like individuals. Indeed, following Wilfred Bion, Rose almost seems to reverse the standard equation: it’s not that one moves from individual psychopathology to group dynamics, but that group dynamics may be more purely and directly psychopathological than individuals themselves. This is suggestive, but the problem here is that Rose doesn’t have any adequate theoretical apparatus for mediating between “individuals,” “groups,” and “the state,” and so they all get lumped in together in a kind of universal psychopathology.

So, although it’s undeniably a psychoanalytic insight to consider that groups are pathological in their essence, the book remains more pop-psychology than psychoanalysis:

Like an individual in thrall to his passion, his perversity, and his symptom, a nation can be both self-defeating and unerring in its aim. But if it is relatively easy to acknowledge this of individuals, it is far more shocking to consider that a nation, apparently inspired, believing fervently in its own goodness in the world, might be devoted not only to the destruction of others but to sabotaging itself (21).

But in what way, exactly, is Israel sabotaging *itself*? This is a key claim, because otherwise it is difficult to see what Rose’s allegedly psychoanalytically-inflected account adds to existing analyses. Beyond their constitutively self-idealising rhetoric, how else do modern states act, but as murderous parasites upon their own and other citizens, only-too-capable *de facto* and *de jure* of genocidal destructiveness? This is a particularly crucial issue here because Rose never adequately confronts the paradoxes of exemplarity she has made for herself. That is, she cannot quite decide if Israel is a *special* case of a modern state (therefore exhibiting phenomena unique to it, and therefore not offering directly generalisable lessons for others), or a *paradigm* case of a modern state (in which case the very specificities she is concerned to adduce here would be evident in the formation of every state, and therefore Zionism would have its equivalents in those states too). Once again, one recognises a romantic problematic covertly scripting Rose’s narrative choices. In other terms, Rose cannot make this decision for admirably moral and polemical reasons—although, as Douglas Kirsner pointed out during a panel discussion of the book at the Melbourne Writers’ Festival 2005, such moralising is precisely what psychoanalysts are enjoined to eschew when listening to their patients.

In lieu of such indecisions, one could return to the astonishing final pages of Michel

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* for a chilling evocation of modern state tendencies, which, at least in Foucault's own opinion, radically exceed any possible psychologization of politics. Or one could turn to Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* for a different, but equally chilling account of post-Auschwitz politics today. In neither case does the question of the political in contemporary states seem to be one to which psychoanalysis can give a decisive response. I mention these two thinkers in particular, precisely because of their determined interest in precisely the same sorts of *political* questions that Rose is exploring here.

Even if one sticks to psychoanalysis, Rose seems a little too idealising. As Freud put it in *Civilization and its Discontents*:

men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him.

Rose seems to have nothing like this in her book. Her own liberal prophecies are too vague to give much of an idea of what must be done in Israel to effect a Zionistic detox. And to the extent that she seems to be (quite understandably) warding off the fear that human beings are nothing more than self-deluding sex-and-murder machines, she herself succumbs to a kind of naivety: that a kind of communicational cure of states is possible, necessary and desirable. Rose writes as if a state could somehow get itself into a mature liberal democratic position if it only paid more attention to the traumas of its prehistory. What she suggests we need to do is to help it to recognise that it was continuing to bear these traumas in the present as unfinished-but-unacknowledged business.

Rose explicitly considers her task as supplementing ongoing political struggles with an analysis that relies on the Freudian theory of the overdetermination of the symptom, e.g., a perfectly good realist interpretation can appear to explain everything without being exhaustive. And she suggests some ways in which Zionism has its own theory of overdetermination, insofar as its messianism purports to redeem *both* cosmic and historical time (24). Having exposed this messianic essence, Rose then wants to show how its roots are in fact more complicated than may now appear, to show that Zionism was never simple at all, that it contains resources that could enable "Zionists" to accept a less virulent dream than the dominant vision they now promulgate. Perhaps this is true, but I'm not sure that a reading of Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* is really going to make a *political* contribution.

But who, exactly, should she speak to in order to accomplish this? Sharon? The refuseniks? Citizens of Israel? The Palestinians? Zionists worldwide? To everybody and nobody, *à la* Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*? Actually, the book is inspired by and dedicated to

Edward Said; or, more precisely, to his *memory*. Rose is writing to a dead friend, one whose intellectual legacy continues to have real claims and effects in Palestine itself. One can note such a work of mourning, and hope that it has some restitutive power, without agreeing with its methods or conclusions. Indeed, this fact may help to explain some of the less grounded idealisations that play throughout the book.

As David Cesarani has pointed out in his review, what Rose finally (and paradoxically) misses is the thoroughly *rational* kernel of Zionism. In his words, “[u]ltimately, modern Zionism proved capable of mass mobilization not because it ‘taps the unconscious’ of Jews, but because it finds validation by events and appears sublimely reasonable.” One might extend this in the following way: whatever messianism one can discern in Zionism may be just an alibi for the most expedient and brutal *Realpolitik*, just as if Walter Benjamin’s chess-playing theology was to harbour the ugly dwarf of political rationality.

So Rose’s argument remains at once too simple and too obscure. In the end, it isn’t clear what she has to add to “the debate,” other than the fact that secular Zionism has mystical Jewish roots, and that it’s still active in Israel today. That may be interesting, even partially true—but it seems to falsify or overlook many of the crucial elements of the situation. Among other things, a plausible relationship between psychoanalysis and the political has once again been missed.

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