

# Right now, today, we must say that Palestine is the centre of the world

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As part of the publishing strand 'Towards Collective Study in Times of Emergency' decolonial feminist Françoise Vergès brings into sharp focus the west's investment, complicity and hypocrisy in its drive to maintain the status quo in Israel-Palestine. At the same time, reflecting on the City of Paris's recent cancellation of an event Vergès co-organised, the article underscores the role of censorship in sustaining violence within the project of modernity.

**...They said they were victims. They said you  
were**

**Arabs.**

**They called your apartments and gardens  
guerrilla**

**stongholds.**

**They called the screaming devastation  
that they created the rubble.**

**then they told you to leave, didn't they?**

–June Jordan, 1982

In 1982, June Jordan, African American poet, playwright, and essayist, wrote 'Apologies to All the People in Lebanon'<sup>1</sup> (from which the above excerpt is taken), after the Israeli-backed massacre of Palestinian refugees in the camps of Sabra and Shatila (Lebanon). The poem made Jordan the target of vicious charges of anti-

1. To read the poem in full, see [poetryfoundation.org](https://poetryfoundation.org), accessed 21 December, 2023.

Semitism. Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, she could not publish. Jordan taught us what it means to be *in* the world, rather than merely observing it, which acknowledges the messiness of the practical, of the not-perfect; in other words, when principles – love of life, demand for dignity and equality – must live within contradictions. The refusal to consider that we live within contradictions led to the silencing of debate, smearing, distortions, and censorship. Weaponizing anti-Semitism has long been used to silence the criticism of the politics of the State of Israel. This is what we are witnessing again since Hamas's 7 October attack in Israel, which led to 1,200 deaths and around 240 hostages taken to the Gaza Strip.

At the time of writing, on 7 December 2023, Israeli bombing of Gaza has led to the death of more than 17,400 Palestinians – babies, children, women, and men of all ages – and an estimated 7,600 missing under the rubble.<sup>2</sup> On 8 December 2023, a ceasefire resolution in Gaza backed by more than 90 member states at the United Nations was vetoed by US Ambassador Robert A. Wood.<sup>3</sup> After the vote, he declared that a ceasefire 'would only plant the seeds for the next war – because Hamas has no desire to see a durable peace, to see a two-state solution'.<sup>4</sup> Demands for a ceasefire have been systematically rejected by the state of Israel and its allies. A ceasefire is simply a *temporary* suspension of fighting, a truce. It is certainly not *peace*. For decades now, ceasefires have been replacing peace in military conflict, but even that moment of truce is presented as a threat to an order founded on systemic violence, censorship, and repression. Rosa Luxembourg called that moment 'armed peace', militarism by other means,<sup>5</sup> in a state of permanent war, imperialism, and settler colonialism. Gaza today brings to light the necessity of war for a settler colony masked as a war for civilization.

## Liberal Democracy and Settler Colonial Regime

When Isaac Herzog, president of Israel, declared on MSNBC – 'This war is not only a war between Israel and Hamas, it's a war that is intended, really, truly, to save western civilization. To save the values of western civilization'<sup>6</sup> – he could not have been clearer. Western wars have long been waged to impose, enforce, and save western 'values'. These values just *are*, immediately comprehensible and recognizable, evidently principled, moral, and noble. Herzog's understanding of the necessity of waging war to save western civilization against an essentialist threat belongs to the long history of the fiction that sustains settler nation-states. Settler colonialism seeks 'to obscure the persistence of colonialism as anything other than a historical trace, as well as to ostensibly naturalize settlers by habitation and descent'.<sup>7</sup>

2. See Virginia Pietromarchi and Usaid Siddiqui, 'Israel-Hamas war updates: Gaza death toll surpasses 17,700', *Al Jazeera*, 9 December 2023, [aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com); BBC Verify team, 'How the dead are counted in Gaza', *BBC News*, 16 November 2023, [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com); and Julian Borger, 'Civilians make up 61% of Gaza deaths from airstrikes, Israeli study finds', *The Guardian*, 9 December 2023, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com), all accessed 14 December 2023.

3. The vote took place on 12 December and was passed by a majority of 153 in favour and 10 against, with 23 abstentions. 'UN General Assembly votes by large majority for immediate humanitarian ceasefire during emergency session', UN News, United Nations, 12 December 2023, [news.un.org](https://news.un.org), accessed 15 December 2023.

4. Mallory Moench, 'U.S. Receives Backlash for Vetoing U.N. Resolution Calling for Gaza Ceasefire', *Time*, 9 December 2023, [time.com](https://www.time.com), accessed 14 December 2023.

5. 'Peace Utopias', 1911 (first published: *Leipziger Volkzeitung*, 6 and 8 May 1911, reprinted in shorter form in *Die Internationale*, January 1926), [marxists.org](https://www.marxists.org), accessed 14 December 2023.

6. Cited in Laleh Khalili, X, 6 December 2023, [twitter.com](https://twitter.com), accessed 14 December 2023.

7. Alyosha Goldstein, 'Where the Nation Takes Place: Proprietary Regimes, Antistatism, and U.S. Settler Colonialism', *South Atlantic*

States such as the US, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, which have been founded on genocides, ethnic cleansing, segregation, land theft, and structural racism present themselves as liberal republican democracies. The United States, Canada, and Australia have been able to claim to defend freedom and human rights while their cities were built on the corpses and villages of the peoples they exterminated, while they stole indigenous children from their families and took them to horrendous boarding schools where they were harassed, beaten, tortured, killed, and subjected to forced assimilation. While not the focus of this text, there are many who work to resist or bypass these regimes founded on genocide. The purpose of reiterating the ramifications of these regimes is to underscore how they are shaping the response to Palestine now. These nation-states possess internationally acclaimed museums with prestigious collections of stolen objects from colonized or exterminated peoples. They have a veto right at the United Nations Security Council. Their decisions about climate disaster and militarism affect the whole world. They launch devastating wars with total impunity. But their declared love of liberty, of women's rights, of children, of freedom of expression, they claim, is limitless. They love children more than any other people. Why would the state of Israel not feel entitled to follow their example? If these states had succeeded in hiding their crimes, if they had been able to protect each of their criminals from being tried, why not Israel? These countries are the embodiment of a benevolent and civilized order, while the crimes of other states have tainted their reputation. Colonial occupation inevitably contaminates liberal democracy, laws must be adopted to protect property rights over stolen land, to distinguish between citizens, to militarize society, and a feeling of being under constant threat must be nurtured. That sentiment is not wrong, settlers know that those whom they discriminate against, humiliate, criminalize, hold dreams of revenge as Frantz Fanon has shown, but they also entertain a sense of omnipotence that when it is shattered push them to terror and violence. Interests are economic, ideological and psychic. In a 1986 speech, then US Senator Joe Biden, now president, said it well: 'Whether or not [there was] an Israeli State, the United States would have to invent an Israel to protect our interest in the region.'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the US has largely contributed to making Israel into 'the only democracy in the Middle East', where gays and women enjoy full rights. Biden was not talking about a land for the Jews, but about a militarized front post of imperialism, with its homo-nationalism and femonationalism. Supporting Israel is for the West the proof that the European genocide against the Jews is forgiven while delegating them the task to get rid of Palestinians. The double move innocents the West.

What is urgent is total ceasefire, the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, and the end of brutal repression in the West Bank. Killing has to stop. People are dying, entire social infrastructures are being destroyed with the goal of forbidding social life. Around the world, immediate ceasefire has been a rallying cry, especially among the youth. Despite defamatory accusations, incredible social pressure, threats, and punishment, huge protests are taking place. This is why it is important to document in Europe and North America, acts of censorship and witch hunt, their vocabulary and representations for what they reveal in the current moment of the rise of far-right parties and libertarianism. Further, there is a Left that has not undertaken a process of decolonization, adhering to the old argument of a civilizing mission as justification for colonization. Little has changed since 1956, when Aimé Césaire resigned from the then very powerful French Communist Party, denouncing its

*Quarterly*, 107/4 (Fall 2008):  
834.

8. 'Joe Biden says if Israel didn't exist, the US would have to invent one to protect US interests', Senate Session, YouTube, 6 June 1986, [youtu.be](https://youtu.be/14December2023), accessed 14 December 2023.

deafness and blindness to the colonial question, and to racism, writing:

**This is not a desire to fight alone and a disdain for all alliances. It is a desire to distinguish between alliance and subordination, solidarity and resignation. It is exactly the latter of these pairs that threatens us in some of the glaring flaws we find in the members of the French Communist Party: their inveterate assimilationism; their unconscious chauvinism; their fairly simplistic faith, which they share with bourgeois Europeans, in the omnilateral superiority of the west; their belief that evolution as it took place in Europe is the only evolution possible, the only kind desirable, the kind the whole world must undergo; to sum up, their rarely avowed but real belief in civilization with a capital C and progress with a capital P (as evidenced by their hostility to what they disdainfully call 'cultural relativism').<sup>9</sup>**

For this reason the liberation of Palestine (and this has nothing to do with deciding for the Palestinians which political movements they chose to follow) strikes at the heart of a western modernity built on racialization and colonisation. What is at stake is the abolition of the colonial as an ideological, economic, and visual regime of oppression, extraction, dispossession, and exploitation.

## 'Palestine is the Centre of the World at this Moment'

If I am talking here about another example of censorship, it is to contribute to the documentation of a moment: the weaponization of anti-Semitism. At the beginning of 2023, I was in a group of friends who thought that we, decolonial, feminist, antiracist intellectuals, artists, and activists, had to intervene against the weaponization of anti-Semitism and feminism by the right, the far right, and some on the institutional Left.<sup>10</sup>

9. Aimé Césaire, 'Letter to Maurice Thorez', *Social Text* 103, 28/2 (Summer 2010): 149, [abahlali.org](http://abahlali.org), accessed 14 December 2023.

10. See Michele Wieviorka, 'Anti-Semitism, an old demon of the French left', *La Tribune*, 13 October 2023, [latribune.fr](http://latribune.fr); Arthur Chevalier, 'The origins of left-wing anti-Semitism', *Le Point*, 14 November 2023, [lepoint.fr](http://lepoint.fr); Pascal Meynadier, 'Left-wing anti-Semitism: "The social-ism of fools"', *Le Journal de*

We decided it was essential that this analytical work should be done in public with the voices of intellectuals and activists. We thought of inviting Judith Butler for her writing and her membership in the important organization Jewish Voice for Peace; Jeremy Corbyn, for his persistent solidarity with the people of Palestine that led to his expulsion by the Labour leadership and anti-Zionist French Jewish organizations.

Following the attack by Hamas on 7 October, organizing a public meeting along what we had imagined at the beginning of 2023, became more urgent than ever. Despite divergent opinions of Hamas, we were critical of the total adhesion, without any restrictions, by European and Northern American states to Israel's punitive, brutal, and murderous military offensive. We witnessed the ban or repression of pro-Palestine protests, state-funded institutions disinviting artists and writers, the interdiction of wearing keffiyehs, of using the phrase: 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.' The outsourcing of European responsibility and guilt in historic and murderous anti-Semitism to Arabs, Muslims, migrants, refugees, leftists, to anyone critical of colonial occupation manifested itself in maintaining a colonial State. We had to resist these Thanatocratic times, this loss of ethics when the French institutional Left accepts in its march against anti-Semitism the presence of the National Front, a far-right party funded by former Waffen SS, or men nostalgic for colonial Algeria, or members of fascist groups.<sup>11</sup>

We secured a place for a public meeting.<sup>12</sup> The first part of the evening would have included Judith Butler. I had reread her books and interviews on the topic of anti-Semitism and its instrumentalization and chosen excerpts that would serve as prompts for the conversation that we sent her. We wanted the French public to reject the tit for tat imposed by media and governments and reflect, think critically, and be disturbed, questioned, and reassured about opposing colonial occupation as right and having nothing to do with anti-Semitism. We needed that public conversation with Butler who had declared on 31 October that what was being done in Gaza was 'genocide', that 'Zionism has from the start engaged in a racist project', adding: 'This is not a "conflict" between two parties, but a form of violent dispossession that dates back to 1948, if not before, and constitutes not a new Nakba, but the continuation of one that has never stopped for millions of people.'<sup>13</sup> In the second part of the programme, French Jewish organizations for peace and revolutionary organizations would have spoken. As soon as the meeting was announced, we received tens of thousands of messages of support, and many people expressed their desire to attend the meeting.

On Friday 1 December, the city of Paris called the venue, ordering that the meeting be cancelled, threatening to cut subventions and adding that it was non-negotiable. The city invoked potential threats to public order and polemics that would, as well, threaten public peace. Aurélie Filippetti, a feminist, and former minister of culture under a socialist government, now director of cultural affairs at the city of Paris, first claimed that we had 'manipulated' Butler whom she 'loved' and admired. Confronted with a large protest, the arguments shifted – it was the presence of some organizations, then finally the physical presence of decolonial activist Houria Bouteldja in the audience and the fact that 'extremist organizations' were among the organizers. It was no longer about what would be discussed but who had the right to attend a public meeting. Culture 'contributes to the construction of a

*Dimanche, 12 November 2023, lejdd.fr; and Camilla Brenni, Memphis Krickeberg, Léa Nicolas-Teboul, and Zacharias Zoubir, 'The non-subject of anti-Semitism on the left', Revue Vacarme 1/86 (2019), cairn.info, all accessed 19 December 2023.*

11. Among the women and men who founded the National Front (now the Rassemblement national) in 1972, stood side by side with former collaborators (Emmanuel Allot and Jean Marie Demarquet), Waffen SS (Léon Gaultier), members of the OAS (Organisation action civique, which opposed Algerian independence and assassinated Algerian nationalists and their allies, such as Roger Holeindre), former resisters of Nazism (Rolande Birgy and Serge Jeanneret), and members of post-WWII fascist groups.

12. Information about the meeting, communiqués, questions for Judith Butler, and clip of Angela Davis, see the blog we created, *Guerre permanente ou paix révolutionnaire, il faut choisir!*, 6 December 2023, [guerrepermanente-paixrevolutionnaire.blog](https://guerrepermanente-paixrevolutionnaire.blog), accessed 19 December 2023.

13. Judith Butler in Georges Yancy, 'Judith Butler: Palestinians Are Not Being "Regarded as People" by Israel and Us', *Truthout*, 31 October 2023, [truthout.org](https://truthout.org), accessed 14 December 2023.

common future, not to the exacerbation of antagonisms', <sup>14</sup> a Paris communiqué said. They had nothing against the meeting, only against Bouteldja, and even if she was not speaking, the fact that she would have been there as well as her collective was enough.

We looked for other venues, but either they were unavailable due to prior programming, or they feared the cutting of subventions. We reluctantly cancelled the meeting, posted online the filmed message of support that Angela Davis had given us when she went through Paris on 19 October and the questions we would have asked Butler. In her message, which is worth quoting in full here, Davis reaffirmed the centrality of the Palestinian struggle for justice and freedom:

**All of us are called together to stand with Palestine, to express our solidarity with Palestine during this moment. People who had fought for justice for so many decades are under attack in Gaza. Palestine is the centre of the world at this moment. It is incumbent all of us to understand that whatever we are doing, we should stand in solidarity with Palestine. As my friend June Jordan, the phenomenal Black feminist poet always used to say: 'Palestine serves as a measure of what we are capable of doing with respect to changing the entire world.' Stand together with the people of Gaza, of Palestine and if we come together, stand together, we will one day be free. There is a reason Palestine is under such attack at this particular moment. Palestinians have been involved in the struggle that goes back to the end of the 1920s. There are more Palestinian refugees than any other people. Their land was taken from them. Israel is a settler colonial government and not only does it espouse settler colonialism, it is the only settler colonial government that tries to continue to expand in the twenty-first century. It is our duty, wherever we are, whatever we are doing, whether we are involved in antiracist struggle, whether we are involved in feminist movements, in trade unions, we must prevent the settler colonial government from continuing its project of expansion, we**

14. Juliette Cerf, 'Annulation du débat sur l'antisémitisme avec Judith Butler: les raisons de la polémique', *Télérama*, 6 December 2023.

## must stand with the Palestinian people for freedom and peace for all humanity.<sup>15</sup>

15. Recorded by Françoise Vergès, 19 October 2023 © copyright Françoise Vergès.

This was the message that the socialist majority in Paris censored. On the rare occasion of Judith Butler taking part in a public meeting in France, we would have asked her explicitly about her qualification about what happened in Gaza as 'genocide' and her remarks that 'Zionism has from the start engaged in a racist project. Theodor Herzl said there were no inhabitants on that land so that the Jews, a people without a land, could seize it without compunction. What that meant was that the Palestinians there were not regarded as people – they literally could not be seen as human forms.'<sup>16</sup> We also wanted Butler to expand on the following opinion:

**I am not sure that a humanistic appeal to Israeli Jews will do the trick, for the roots of the problem are in a state formation that depended on expulsions and land theft to establish its own 'legitimacy'. There is no resolution to the violence we see until the right of return for Palestinians is honored, and very few Israelis have been able to grasp the legitimacy of that claim, and to be part of imagining how that might come about.**<sup>17</sup>

16. G. Yancy, 'Judith Butler'. We also took excerpts from Judith Butler's *On Anti-Semitism: Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice* (2017), *Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2013), and *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006).

17. G. Yancy, 'Judith Butler'.

This act of censorship is far from exceptional or from being the most punitive. Nobody lost a job. Among the daily instances of censorship against Palestinians, it does not stand either as the most brutal. What matters in the decision of the city of Paris, qualified as 'a farce' by Butler,<sup>18</sup> is that it shows not who has the right to speak, but who is in the public.

18. Mathieu Magnaudeix, 'Conférence sur l'antisémitisme annulée par la Mairie de Paris: "regrettable, voire une farce", selon Judith Butler', *Médiapart*, 5 December 2023.

As Angela Davis has remarked, Palestine is a defining moment. It shows the urgency of abolishing settler nation-states that inevitably wage war against human and non-human lives. Settler regimes require militarization, repression, and censorship. Decolonization in the twenty-first century is the abolition of racial patriarchal capitalism and its intimacy with colonial expansion. There cannot be peace with occupation. A decolonial future in Palestine means the justice and peace for all, hence the end of colonial occupation. The settler disappears, a human being stays. It is the abolition of settler politics because the settler wants the land of the other and the erasure of its presence, and that means permanent war. Our future is linked to the liberation of Palestine.

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