**Cycle of violence**

Michael Schwalbe

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The bias against seeing the world through the eyes of others has been amplified in the weeks following the Hamas attacks of October 7. It is not a “both sides” argument to say that people on both sides of the conflict have exhibited empathic blindness vis-a-vis the other. But it is not simply that a natural in-group/out-group bias has been amplified.

What we have seen are strategic efforts to selectively undermine empathy by erasing relevant context, most clearly by claiming that the conflict began on October 7, 2023. These efforts have led not only to a dehumanizing of the Palestinians now under siege in Gaza, but to a systematic obscuring of the roots of the violence being suffered by both Palestinians and Israelis.

The context that matters, the context that has been strategically put off limits for consideration, is the 75-year history of Palestinian dispossession at the hands of a US-backed settler-colonial state; the illegal occupation and settlement of the West Bank; the Israeli chokehold on Gaza and the deprivations imposed on its residents; the imprisonment of thousands of Palestinian dissidents; the repeated refusals to abide by international law; and the use of violence to put down non-violent Palestinian resistance.

Denying the relevance of this context makes desperate — and, yes, deplorable — acts of violent Palestinian resistance seem irrational, springing from unfathomable “evil” rather than from a human desire for freedom and justice and, sadly, an equally human desire for revenge. The further implication is that negotiation is impossible; one cannot, as the neofascist Netanyahu government would have it, negotiate with evil. It can only be eradicated along with its carriers — a view that provides an ideological warrant for the slow-motion genocide we are now witnessing in Palestine.

We have seen this strategy before. As journalist Patrick Lawrence reminds us in his recent book Journalists and Their Shadows, Richard Perle, a member of the Pentagon’s Defense Policy Board and an architect of the US war on Iraq, said in 2001, “We must decontextualize terrorism. Any attempt to discuss the roots of terrorism is an attempt to justify it.”

Lawrence then goes on to comment: “I have to count this among the stupider contentions I have ever been invited to consider. Perle’s intent was to counter those admirable many who tried to open the 11 September tragedies to thoughtful questioning as to history, causality, and responsibility. … It is when acts of terrorism are made to stand alone that they are most effectively deployed to manipulate public opinion.”

The most obvious effect of decontextualization is that those labeled “terrorists” are dehumanized, transformed into the irrational others with whom no compromise or negotiation is possible. Less obviously, those who wield the label “terrorist” as an ideological weapon, using it to describe all desperate acts of resistance to oppression, dehumanize themselves. They do this by abandoning the capacity that makes us human — the capacity to see the world through the eyes of others, to feel others’ suffering, and thereby to find common humanity and a way forward out of tragedy.

Another consequence is that the political and economic roots of violence go unexamined. Decontextualizing violence implies that it is rooted in human nature or the defective character of the other, thus deflecting attention from the historically manufactured conditions that are its true cause.

It can thus seem that there is no solution to the problem other than a final, triumphant act of violence. When the conditions fueling violence remain unchanged behind a delusion of final victory, we can be sure of more violence, more atrocities, and more suffering.

We should be on guard, then, against attempts to decontextualize a conflict and make antagonists appear irrational and evil, and a conflict irresolvable through negotiation. We should suspect that what we are facing, when being told that a decades-long conflict began a few weeks ago, is an attempt not just to dehumanize others but to preserve the conditions that engendered the conflict, almost always because those conditions benefit dominant groups. All this might seem obvious to those who know that governments routinely lie to serve ruling-class interests. Yet this critical insight is often overridden by powerful emotions.

Excerpted: ‘Decontextualization and the Cycle of Violence’. Courtesy:

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