

## Language and the eternal present.

**Patrick Lawrence**

The House of Representatives, the lower chamber in the U.S. legislature, has one Palestinian–American among its 435 members. Rashida Tlaib, no surprise, has been, this past month, a passionate advocate of a ceasefire in Gaza, human rights and humanitarian law, and a long-term peace between the Israeli state and the Palestinian people. In the afternoon of Tuesday, 7 November, she spoke of these things on the House floor.

“Speaking up to save lives, Mr. Chair, no matter faith, no matter ethnicity, should not be controversial in this chamber,” Tlaib said in her speech. “The cries of the Palestinian and Israeli children sound no different to me. What I don’t understand is why the cries of Palestinians sound different to you all.” Later in her remarks she choked back tears as she said, “I can’t believe I have to say this, but Palestinian people are not disposable. We are human beings, just like anyone else.” Before this speech, a controversial phrase: Tlaib had earlier invoked the common Palestinian saying, “From the river to the sea”—which, as she later described it, is “an aspirational call for freedom, human rights, and peaceful coexistence, not death, destruction, or hate.”

On Tuesday evening, a few hours after she spoke, the House voted by a considerable margin to censure Tlaib for these remarks. She was accused of supporting acts of terrorism, the eradication of Israel, and—this is standard in American discourse now—anti–Semitism. As to “From the river to the sea,” a legislator named Brad Schneider, who is Jewish and a liberal supporter of the Jewish state, described it as “nothing else but the call for the destruction of Israel and murder of Jews.”

What did we witness as we watched these proceedings on C–Span last week? What did we hear? Setting aside the highly charged politics of the Israel–Gaza catastrophe and the pro–Israel propaganda operation that now overtakes us, Tlaib’s abuse at the hands of her colleagues reflects a crisis that is less violent than the Israeli Defense Forces’ military campaign but no less significant. This is the perversion of language that

the defense of Israel's violence requires. And to pervert language in this way is to corrupt our public discourse, our public space, and altogether our ability to think clearly and take new directions.

A week before Tlaib's much-noted speech, a group called Jews for Peace protested Israel's military operation and U.S. support for it in the halls of a Capitol Hill office building. A right-wing congresswoman called this "an insurrection." Hamas is a "terrorist organization"—this as a matter of official policy in the U.S., Israel, Britain, and the European Union—but Israel is not guilty of terror despite a 75 – year history of it. Support for the Palestinian cause is open-and-shut support for terrorism now. To oppose Israeli policy, as one might oppose Italian or French or Brazilian policy, is *prima facie* anti-Semitism, and there is no distinction between criticism of the Israeli state and hatred of Jews. A prominent analyst asserted on American television last Friday evening, "The destruction of Israel is all that matters to the Arab nations. The extermination of Jews is the only thing the Arabs care about." In the post-7 October climate, this racist incitement to violence passes as reasoned, credible comment. In [a comment published Saturday](#), the estimable Caitlin Johnstone took up the question of genocide and recent determinations at the United Nations and elsewhere that the Israeli campaign in Gaza must be so defined. Here we see an extreme case of the inflation of language to the point of senselessness – to the point language is so denuded of meaning it is no longer a medium for public discourse so much as a means to destroy discourse:

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Saying "from the river to the sea" is genocide, but actually committing genocide is not genocide. Genocide is more of a feeling that you feel inside. Like everything else in the universe, it's about you and how your personal feelings feel.

If ethnic cleansing and mass killing don't make your feelings feel uncomfortable, then it's not genocide. If someone saying they want all Palestinians to be free in their homeland makes your feelings feel uncomfortable, it's genocide. That's how the world works.

Or how the world now fails to work.

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The desecration of language and meaning in the way I describe is hardly new: There is a long tradition of this, especially as it concerns American foreign policy and the need to justify so much that cannot rationally be justified. But this problem has worsened since the emergence of social media and digital publishing, which deprive corporate media of their long monopoly, and so the national security state's ability to control information. Matters grew greatly worse once again during the Russiagate hoax – the Democratic Party's preposterous effort to blame its defeat in the 2016 elections on Russian interference.

Russiagate brought us what we call “the disinformation industry,” programs run by intelligence and political operatives, with the full cooperation of corporate media, to discredit all dissenting opinion and all accounts of events that contradict standing orthodoxies.

Incessant producers of disinformation, this is to say, now advance a sweeping regime of censorship in the name of protecting the public from disinformation.

Israel's savagery, which appears to reflect at least in part the deep psychological and emotional compulsions of a traumatized people – a wounded civilization, to borrow V.S. Naipaul's phrase – has forced this abuse and corrosion of language to an extreme with no equivalent in recent history. Genocide is not genocide, but to oppose genocide is genocide: This is the perversion of language Orwell famously described in a very pure form. As the English novelist well understood, we must not miss what is destroyed as such notions are articulated, elevated to truth, and effectively forced upon us.

To call someone a name or impose a label is to preclude all debate or further comment on the matter to hand. It is, in effect, to erase the person so labeled. This has been, as it were, the name of the game since the Russiagate years because the lies of the Russiagate orthodoxy could not be rationally defended. Now, when debate and public speech are urgent necessities, we have “anti-Semitism” as a label for advocacy of the Palestinian cause and “anti-Semite” if it is an individual person who is to be discredited.

There has been a campaign in the U.S. for some years, non-American readers should know, officially to define criticism of Israeli policy as anti-Semitic. The intent, of course, is to silence criticism of a state, not a people. By this definition, I must also advise readers, I have reluctantly accepted that I am officially an anti-Semite. I see no alternative, given silence is out of the question.

The Gaza crisis has pushed this particular perversion thoroughly into news coverage and public discourse altogether. I gather there are similar trends in parts of Europe, and perhaps elsewhere, but I question whether the extraordinary prevalence of the anti-Semitism theme in America is anywhere else matched. I learned during my years as a correspondent to use certain events and developments as mirrors. What do they reflect? To what do they respond? In this case, the wildly irrational pro-Israel propaganda now abroad, charges of anti-Semitism the centerpiece, can be taken as a measure of the force of popular rejection of the Israeli operation in Gaza and the West's support of it. This, too, should not be missed.

But it is what we call "cold comfort" to see so many millions of people protesting more or less daily in the streets of London, Washington, Paris, and many other cities. As we mark this revival of mass resistance and demonstrations, we must be mindful of all that is damaged or lost in the rampant misuse of language that besets us. We lose our capacity for critical thought as an extreme orthodoxy is enforced, viciously in many cases, and in some with severe punishments for transgressors. If, as organic societies, we cannot think openly and publicly, we can neither seek nor find new solutions to new or existing problems. Our imaginations are extinguished.

The Israel-Palestine question has been with us for 100 years in one or another form. Has there been genuinely new thinking about it even since Israel was declared a new nation in 1948? Have we heard any talk of a new Israeli policy since violence across the border with Gaza re-erupted on 7 October? This reflects another casualty of the perversion of language: Humanity loses its capacity to accept change—to say nothing of embracing it in the face of new circumstances.

What I rate the most consequential loss humanity sustains as language is corrupted has to do with history. Without an authentic, meaningful discourse we lose our connection to the past. We are rendered unable to understand ours as a passage in history and ourselves as actors in it. In the Israel–Palestine case, very clearly, in the mainstream narrative nothing happened before 7 October. This leaves us with no understanding of our present, no vision, no notion that we can make for ourselves a different future. We have cast ourselves adrift.

We maroon ourselves in an eternal present, this is to say. This is a condemnation, a self-condemnation resulting, at the horizon, from our profound disrespect for the instrument of language, that which distinguishes humanity. This is our fate, so often the awful fate of modern man, as we cease to speak authentically to one another. One might say quite naturally that all Israel is doing in Gaza is unspeakable. It is true enough. Rendering ourselves incapable of clear language is another matter. It creates a silence that enables the unspeakable.

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