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INTERCULTURAL HISTORIES AND MASS-MEDIATED IDENTITIES: THE RE-IMAGINING OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

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As Carbaugh (1990) recently observed, cultural communication and intercultural contact is often created from "different social fabrics" (p. 15), and nowhere is this more evident than the volatile relationship that exists between Israeli and Arab cultures. The recent media coverage of archeological tunnels and national disputes reminds us of the need to find symbolic means of communication that will allow for peaceful resolution of conflicts. Issues of cultural and communication studies need to deal with discursive elements of social relations and ideological oppositions.

Although there are a plethora of constructive ways to try to understand some of these divergent social fabrics, I feel that one of the best ways of analyzing these situations is by explicating some of the symbolic constructions that are implicated in the creation of such conflicts. Geertz once argued that the notion of "culture" itself was a "historically transmitted pattern of meaning that" is embodied in an inherited structure of symbolic forms (quoted in Carbaugh, 1990, p. 20). If this is indeed the case, then we need to sensitize ourselves to the ways in which intercultural relations are not only represented but constituted (Charland, 1987). This means not only understanding the personal skills at the microlevel of analysis, but also the larger histories, cultural memories, and social facts that circulate as the taken-for-granted of communities that need to coexist. For example, the clash of belief systems can create situations where there is "cognitive discrepancy" (Bar-Tal, 1990) that helps to perpetuate polarization.

This obviously has important ramifications for many different cultural conflicts, including the Arab-Israeli situation. As Bar-Tal (1990) recently

noted, the "Middle Eastern conflict is one of the longest conflicts of our century" (p. 7). Culturally and politically, isn't this a situation where we have several oppressed people who stand on the margins of Western civilization? Do we not have at least two "Oriental" (Said, 1978/1979) cultures that are mirror images of each other? In place of reasoned deliberation we have

those bloated signifiers "Arab" and "Jew" [that] have accrued a set of vile and ugly characteristics—terrorists, child-killers, primitives on one side; bloodsuckers, occupiers, fascists on the other. Even more depressing is the fact that these images and stereotypes have become institutionalized through children's literature. This is true both in Israel and throughout the Arab world, as each side shapes and colors its own respective demons with facile, terrifying, and extremely effective propaganda. This demonization only diverts attention from common problems that get more urgent and pressing every day. (Alcalay, 1993, p. 280)

As long as these constructs are uncritically circulating in the public sphere, we will continually be asked to simply choose sides and perpetuate the existence of these deadly binaries.

I argue that improved intercultural relations in the Middle East depend on a re-imagining of the histories and identities of the region. Extending the work of Anderson (1983/1986), I believe that cultural sensitivities can be improved when we understand how communities have imagined themselves as distinct races or nations. For example, how have Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians constructed themselves or been represented

within complex symbolic systems? These discursively constructed individuals, places, and histories have created belief systems that are frozen (Bar-Tal, 1990) in time, and this is what prevents some cultures from seeing or hearing the "Other."

In order to unfreeze some of these stereotypes, we need approaches that look at the interrelationship among intercultural communication, history, and collective memory. How we remember the past alters the ways in which we think about our present and our future. For example, the recent controversy over the opening of an Israeli tunnel in Jerusalem sparked a new Intifada (uprising), which has exacerbated tensions in the region.

In this essay, I follow Foucault (1980) in claiming that scholars and students can perform critical genealogies that can augment traditional unilinear studies of the histories of cultures. Rather than assume the existence of one true or correct history, this stance asks readers to assume that there are always multiple histories that have been written by social agents who have clear agendas. For example, in the recent *Enola Gay* controversy, the curators at the Smithsonian Institution were interested in presenting a story of the dropping of the atomic bomb that was radically different from the story of air force veterans. From an intercultural perspective, we might want to look at the ways that motivated agents embedded in cultural contexts create histories about the bombing and circulate this information through elite and vernacular texts. Vernacular texts are documents that contain the commonsense ideas that ordinary citizens use in their daily lives, whereas elite texts involve professional modes of discourse that circulate within intellectual circles (Ono & Sloop, 1995).

In order to illustrate the heuristic value of engaging in such criticism, I have divided this essay into five sections. The first segment highlights the ways in which genealogical criticism differs from more traditional historical approaches to intercultural conundrums. The second part begins to apply some of these theoretical arguments by looking at the prefigurations, characterizations, and other social constructions that have been historically crafted at one particularly important

time in Arab-Israeli relations—the public display in 1917 of the Balfour Declaration, which pledged British support for a Jewish national home in Palestine. The third section briefly outlines some of the conflicting narratives and myths that were circulated in the Anglo American press between 1917 and time of the 1987 Intifada. The fourth section illustrates how the Anglo American press is reporting the Arab-Israeli conflict today. Finally, I provide a brief assessment of the findings of the essay.

Intercultural Histories, Collective Memories, and Genealogical Criticism

In order for an individual, group, or nation to form any type of intercultural relationship, ways of creating bridges and new identities that reformulate existing stereotypes must be found. In most existing theories of historiography, this often translates into a battle over representations, where each side attempts to archive the past in order to disprove the "false" claims that are being promulgated by the other side. For example, imagine the feelings of the Israeli archeologist who is digging in some of the ancient sites of Israel, trying to show that Jews have been living in Sumeria and Judea for thousands of years. For such a researcher, finding pottery and other relics of the past serves as an operative way of legitimizing Israeli claims that the present state of Israel simply stands on ruins of a much older Israel. Theoretically, no amount of debate can alter the "fact" that an artifact can be carbon dated and linked to a particular period.

Yet at the same time, imagine the interpersonal conflict that must be involved in linking such archeological digs to the politics of the present. Palestinians could argue that they have never denied the presence of Jews or Israelis in the area, or that those individuals who have lived in this region in the past have had little relation to the Russian immigrants or other Europeans who helped "colonize" the region. What might initially appear to be a simple archeological dig can be interpreted as an attempt at an erasure of culture or revision of history. In such situations, vilification

and invective are some of the likely results when findings that valorize certain characterizations from the past are exhibited in museums. What one community might regard as the recovery of the past is simultaneously interpreted by the neighbors as fabricated history.

How one relates to a member of a different or similar culture clearly influences the intercultural communication that takes place between these communities. When groups do not have the opportunity to co-create history, or when one elite tale or vernacular narrative takes primacy over other interpretations, we may have a coherent and consistent history, but this clarity has come at the cost of altering the possibilities of improving communications. As Bar-Tal (1990) explains, debates within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are tied to the "salience and centrality of beliefs as well as the effects of the underlying needs" of the parties involved (p. 13). Within these tales, one's own culture's historical markers or memory is presented as discovered truth, and intercultural conflicts are treated as examples of dogmatic intransigence on the part of outsiders who simply do not understand. Disagreement is treated as a temporary problem that will disappear as soon as one's enemies are educated to the truth of one's own culture.

By extending Foucault's work, researchers can improve our intercultural dialogues by helping us become sensitive to the ways in which our own values and beliefs are inextricably related to our images of the "Other" (Ono & Sloop, 1992). I invite scholars to engage in genealogical investigations that problematize the taken-for-granted of orthodox interpretations of the Arab-Israeli conflict. My purpose in this essay therefore goes beyond simply claiming that the United States or other Western nations "misrepresent" a particular side in the conflict. Rather, I believe that intercultural relations are facilitated by negotiated readings (Liebes & Ribak, 1994) that look at the ways in which local knowledges become selectively incorporated into the evening news in both the Near East and the West. In the process of telling one culture's truths, we forget the rhetoricity of these claims.

The orthodox approaches to history teach us much because they are created by motivated

scholars who want to see behind the discourse in order to get to the reality underneath. Yet in the process of validating their findings, they often-times bracket out the influence of politics and cultural persuasion. In order to counter the raising of monolithic voices, critical theories have recently invited us to perform critical genealogical investigations in which researchers pay attention to the ways that power "flows, circulates, and defines" relationships of domination and freedom (Ono & Sloop, 1992, p. 50). From an intercultural perspective, such a stance invites individuals to go beyond simply expressing personal standards and beliefs in order to coproduce new values and standards of communication. This means renegotiating histories by understanding the uncertainties, complexities, and ambiguities that exist in prior histories that often marginalize the contributions of the "Other" in the effacements of the past.

For such critics, a culture's "history" is not something either discovered or recovered by privileged social actors who are interested in explaining present situations. Nor is it retrieval of dispassionate archival information that has escaped the ravages of the everyday world. Rather, genealogies are histories that are also created by ordinary individuals who have themselves created micro- and macrolanguages that influence our intercultural communicative practices. This type of approach asks that a scholar follow Foucault in appreciating the relationship that exists between "discourse and social functions" (Nakayama, 1988, p. 66).

In order to apply this framework to debates over Israeli and Palestinian cultures, I begin my re-imaginative tale by reviewing some of the essentialist assumptions that have been built into influential histories since 1917. In retelling this tale, I highlight the different stereotypes and assumptions that will become parts of recurring narratives that have helped alter the intercultural habits of diverse cultures and communities.

The Signification of the Balfour Declaration in the Anglo American Press, 1917

If you ask most Arabs or Israelis about the significance of the Balfour Declaration (November 2,

1917), their answers will provide you with a wealth of information on the origins of an ancient intercultural conflict. At the same time, most Anglo-American accounts of the conflict punctuate time by chronicling the ways that the Balfour treaty managed to promise the same piece of land to different communities. Prior to 1917, most of the information about Levantine culture (i.e., culture of the region of Palestine) that circulated in the English and American popular presses came from travelogues and books published by missionaries who had been sent to the area. Most came back with stories of deserts and barren lands occupied by roving Bedouins who did not seem to have any interest in agriculture. For many of these sojourners, Palestine was an area that was occupied by Jews, Gentiles, and Moslems, and the holy city of Jerusalem was considered to be the center of civilization in the Near East.

Living during a time in which people worshipped the power of science, technology, and efficiency, many elites around the world hoped that after World War I progress would come to a region that had been marked by intercultural fighting since the time of the Crusades. In 1917 England found itself in the midst of war. British leaders publicized the signing of an ambiguous document known as the Balfour Declaration that promised support for a Jewish state in Palestine and at the same time recommended that the rights of the Arabs in the region be respected. For many modern-day critics trying to understand the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, this is considered to be a crucial stage in the formation of "nations" in the region. Davidson (1994), for example, has argued that the Balfour Declaration was a document that reflected the Western image of English and American leaders who constructed a vision of the Holy Land that was based on Christian fundamentalist ideology and Western imperialism (p. 125).

Yet an analysis of the press reports during that period reveals a complex picture of intercultural relations. The Balfour Declaration created a great deal of tension for the Arabs and Jews living in Palestine at the time, but in the West, the passage of this document seemed to signal to many contemporaries a hopeful end of many forms of anti-Semitism. Many Jews who had ambivalent

feelings about assimilation hoped that the rediscovery of a "Jewish homeland" meant that at long last the European powers were providing shelters from the pogroms on the Continent.

For months before the Balfour Declaration, the Allied forces had been discussing the benefits that would come from the creation of a Jewish nation. The *New York Times* reported on April 15, 1917, that a British report claimed:

Our invasion of Palestine is dictated by imperial strategic necessity . . . the Syrian plateau has been rightly regarded as the strategic portal into Egypt . . . What should we do with Palestine thus liberated from the century old Turkish grip? . . . We should revive the Jewish Palestine of old, and allow the Jews to realize their dreams of Zion in their homeland. ("Objects," p. 14)

On the surface, the Balfour Declaration seemed to be a simple military decision, but it became a contested site for both Palestinians and Israelis, who argued for the correct interpretation of its edicts.

Anti-Semitism in Europe and other places has a long history, and during World War I, the debates over the Balfour treaty transformed Jews from being members of a clannish, separate race into potential allies. At the same time, politicians like England's prime minister, Lloyd George, and his foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, saw the importance of building on the image of Palestine as a land that had been an important part of the Christian religion. By encouraging the emigration of Jews to Palestine, British leaders hoped to allow the recovery of both lands and identities that had biblical origins.

Yet in the process of creating this new Jewish homeland, many Arabs who lived on the land disappeared as social agents. Although some voices raised in Europe worried about the "Muslim inhabitants" (Curzon, 1917, quoted in Davidson, 1994, p. 126), the majority of decision makers hoped that Arabs and Jews would live in peace under the benevolent guidance of the British Mandate system, which grew out of the Treaty of Versailles following the end of World War I. At other times, the Arabs of the region were simply

configured as temporary denizens who could have made the desert bloom. Other characterizations of the time included the belief that this was a complacent race ruled by Arab landlords who were willing to sell the land to the highest bidders. Within such Orientalist accounts of Palestine (Said, 1978/1979), the Arab "Other" was someone who resembled the Philistines that Anglo-Americans recognized from their Sunday sermons (Grabill, 1971).

Unfortunately, anti-Semitic feelings against many Jews did not disappear following the passage of the Balfour treaty. Conspiracy tales that circulated on several continents claimed that banking interests had influenced British leaders in their decision to support the creation of a Jewish homeland. At the same time, if there was any improvement in relations between Jews and Christians in the West, it came at the price of redefining Palestine as a geographic area that might become a part of civilization. The *Washington Post* reported on November 20, 1917, that

millions of ardent Christians are fervently hoping that the near future will witness the Holy Land reclaimed from the control of the Moslem who for centuries has held uninterrupted sway over the birthplace of the Christian religion. . . . (Quoted in Davidson, 1994)

Needless to say, such characterizations made the establishment of intercultural relations in the region difficult because of the conflicting histories that were involved in describing the inhabitants of Palestine before and after the Balfour Declaration.

Arab-Israeli Narratives and Myths and the Configuration of the "Other": 1917-1987

For the next 60 years following the signing of the Balfour treaty, Moslems, Jews, and Christians constantly carried on discursive and material battles over the right to represent a land that some have called Palestine. Battles were fought in 1948, 1967, and 1973 that enlarged the scope of Israel after every confrontation. This was a period of time when a large Arab population in the region

witnessed the arrival of millions of Zionist Jews who were intent on returning to the land that had been promised them by right and might. Tragically, both Arab nationalists and Israeli Zionists encouraged the separation and segregation of their peoples because of supposed racial, religious, and cultural differences. In the process, they created myriads of new histories that would later become sound bites on television news. As a result, several different reconfigurations of time and place are used to explain how one land rightfully belongs to "us" and not to "them."

In the Arab and Palestinian histories that recounted events between 1917 and 1987, this region had supposedly been more than 90% Arab prior to the signing of the Balfour treaty. Following this event, Jews immigrated to the region because they were under the protection of the British Mandate forces. Arab nationalists in 1936 tried to reclaim the land for their own people in the 1930s (one of the first Intifadas), but British and Jewish settlement forces crushed the rebellion. In many of these tales, 1948 was a key year in this chronicle of Arab woes because it was the year of the uprooting and dispossession of an entire nation that had to make room for what Israelis called an ingathering of Jews in Palestine from all parts of the world (Bar-Tal, 1990, p. 8). In such renditions, Israelis are not portrayed as pioneers, but rather as strangers who flee a Nazi Europe at the expense of an indigenous people. In the Palestinian versions of these events, the rising population of the Jews in the region looks like a large conspiracy, where an endless flotilla of boats keeps bringing in a Jewish population to Palestine in order to fulfill the Zionist dream of returning Jewish communities to their Middle Eastern homeland—a major movement that would later be called Zionism. The wars that followed can be explained by the ways in which American military might has been allied with Israeli power in a systematic attempt to extend Western imperialism.

In Israeli tales of the same events, the Balfour Declaration is believed to be simply the *ratification* of preexisting rights that date back to biblical times. In such narratives, Palestine is renamed Judea and Sumeria because these are the ancient names for lands that have always belonged to Israel. The Zionist characters that appear in the

histories between 1917 and 1987 describe a community of pioneer settlers who remember the tales of Masada and the importance of being steadfast in a hostile land (Zerubavel, 1995). In 1973, for example, one Israeli information center document entitled *History from 1880* included this material from the *Encyclopedia Judaica*:

The merging of two trends—the rationally intellectual and the emotionally traditional—gave birth not only to Zionism as an organized political effort, but also to the beginnings of the pioneering movement of the late 19th century, which laid the foundations, on the soil of Erez Israel, for the economic, social and cultural rebirth of the Jewish nation. The land itself seemed eminently suitable for the purpose; a marginal province of the weak Ottoman Empire, sparsely inhabited by a population consisting of various religious groups and seemingly lacking any national consciousness of ambitions of its own; a motherland waiting to be redeemed from centuries of neglect and decay by its legitimate sons. (Quoted in Bar-Tal, 1990, p. 9)

Many Israelis thus saw immigration to the region as an activity that could be defended on political, religious, social, and economic grounds.

These conflicting narratives are not only recorded in history books and in political tracts—they are fragments that circulate within the broader rhetorical culture. They provide the structural elements that are used to create stereotypes that influence the ways in which we memorialize the past and configure the future. In Palestinian tales, the narrativized histories that signify the Israeli as colonizer allow for a form of self-identification where wearers of the *kufiyya* (the checkered headdress worn by Palestinian Arabs) are freedom fighters rather than terrorists. At the same time, Israeli settlers on the West Bank are viewed as interlopers or pawns of international Zionism, simply the latest wave of infidels who have tried to rule Jerusalem since the time of Saladin.

In Israeli folk tales and media stories, greater Israel is depicted as a lonely nation surrounded by hundreds of millions of Arabs. Angered that the Western media focuses attention on the victimiza-

tion tales of Palestinians, many Israelis try to remind viewers that at different times in their nation's history, Israelis have been at war with Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Israel's major problems often are presented as security issues in which many Palestinians are portrayed as common criminals and terrorists who are bent on driving Israel back into the ocean.

The Past Is the Prologue: Deciphering the Anglo American Press Representations of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Arab and Israeli histories are complex structures in and of themselves, but when we add on the layers of Anglo American press representations, we multiply the number of distortions and stereotypes that circulate within the public sphere. Although some critics contend that American-Israeli relations have often created an apologetic rhetoric for Israeli policies (Chomsky, 1983), this tells only a part of the story. In both the attacks and defenses of Israeli policy, we can see the ways that historical claims influence the trajectory of intercultural relations.

Recent press reactions to the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City illustrate the ways that many Americans have stereotyped Arabs in the wake of the Iraqi conflict. Yet these are simply the latest manifestations of a much older intercultural phenomenon. As Shaheen (1985) once explained:

Today's most obvious stereotype is that of the Arab. It is magnified and given credence around the clock through television programs, motion pictures, novels, news reports, and even comic books. The image of the Arab is so pervasive that it threatens to engulf public opinion and ultimately influence American foreign policy in the Middle East. The greater the distance we are from any group, including the Arabs, the greater the reliance upon preconceived images about that group. . . . Arabs are portrayed as extremely wealthy, as sex maniacs and white slaves. They are described as terrorists, their society as

violent, and their religion, Islam as radical. (pp. 161–162)

The advent of the Intifada (1987–1993) simply reinforced the view that Israelis were dealing with tribal nations of emotional human beings that had difficulty listening to reason and argument. Palestinian supporters of Saddam Hussein became guilty by association. For many Americans who have observed the Arab-Israeli conflicts through the mediated texts of television, the battle for Palestine seemed to be an eternal battle that has been prophesied since biblical times. The Palestinian revolt thus became a mass-mediated spectacle, and viewers shook their heads as they saw the “violent demonstrations, blocking roads, burning tires, and attacking Israeli soldiers and civilians with stones and Molotov cocktails” (Liebes & Ribak, 1994, p. 110). In such renditions of the tale, complex social, economic, and political issues were often reduced to stories of the need to contain violence and terrorism in order to maintain order. In a traumatic transvaluation of time and space, Americans anxiously worried that terrorism could spread to this country if international problems were not quickly settled on a White House lawn.

Assessment

This exploratory essay has argued that intercultural scholars need to appreciate the ways that historical prefigurations influence the ways that particular communities create their own self-identities and images of the “Other.” Using a case study of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I have argued that unilinear histories are always distortions because they achieve their clarity by bracketing out the politics of the past. Events dating from the Balfour treaty to the coverage of the Intifada have been influenced both by prior prefigurations and by our present needs. Intercultural communication occurs at both micro and macro levels, and it is imperative that we understand some of the histories that are involved in our key international conflicts. I believe that it is imperative that we try to understand the ways that our notions of nationalism are tied to issues of power, knowledge, and

discourse. We need new imaginations that take into account our differences while at the same time remembering the humanities of the “Other.”

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KEY TERMS

Balfour	Intifada
British Mandate system	Israel
Levantine	Orientalism
Zionism	Palestine
	vernacular

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is vernacular discourse and how can this be traced in cultural studies?
2. If different cultures create various histories, then how do we know when media representations have accurately represented those cultures?
3. Can you think of key documents other than the Balfour Declaration that have been a part of intercultural conflicts?
4. What are the political meanings of the terms *Israel* and *Palestine*?
5. What does it mean for discourse to be “constitutive”?