



THE POLITICS OF DEATH

The task of protest and solidarity is now clear

COMMENT
BY ALISON PHIPPS

FRAGMENTS of words come at me in snatched conversations with friends, colleagues, family, students. You will recognise them; you are probably experiencing this yourself. “I mean, what can you say ... ?” “Greenland, Venezuela, Iran, Sudan, Gaza ... Palestine.” “I just keep ending up in conversations where people go silent.” “The world’s a bin fire right now.” “Words fail me.”

These days, I recognise this language patterning and understand that it is one way of expressing the paralysis, helplessness, incredulity and visceral fear that arrives in language through the body when everything that had been familiar crumbles into dust. Each time it happens, the pattern is more or less the same, the conversations equally staccato, the eyes behind the words wider than is healthy.

Mark Carney, premier of Canada, has said in Davos what the global majority have experienced for decades: that the rules-based order benefitted the few, not the many; that deals were done by richer countries time and again that jettisoned the hard-won treaties and conventions that had kept a peace-of-a-kind, a “liberal peace”, even if they had not been especially good at delivering justice. Gaza, and the ongoing erasure by Israel and Israel’s allies of Palestinian life, has revealed this for many to see.

In universities, where we study the way societies and orders collapse – for instance, in history, international politics, education, through law and anthropology – there is a term used for the way whole groups of people are rendered “subhuman” by the powerful. It is used to refer, for example, to what we are now seeing under way in the United States, among many other contexts.

It is the political process of rendering human beings of certain kinds – poor, disabled, Black, queer, female – detainable, deportable and expendable. These are precisely the groups international law, treaties, conventions and domestic law have formed to protect. The term is “Palestinianisation”. It indexes the ongoing deprivation of rights, statehood, humanitarian protection, international protection and the

right to life. It is a process of degradation and destitution.

In the UK, policies of “Palestinianisation” are especially focused on people seeking asylum, and on people granted refugee status, with some political parties now actively targeting people who look or sound “different”. This is instituted in government policies and is manifest in the consultations on the new Restoring Order and Control asylum policy.

Since becoming Unesco Chair for Refugee Integration at the University of Glasgow eight years ago, I’ve experienced eight home secretaries, each one more brutal, it seems, and misguided than the last. Anyone working with the Home Office in the past 20 years will know that our borders are in no way under threat from anything other than an avalanche of operationally impossible bureaucratic initiatives and changes. The title is ridiculous and suggests that there is no order or control because of the people exercising their rights, as opposed to the decision, for instance, to pause asylum application processing taken under the last Conservative government.

Meanwhile, in America, the president is ignoring legal mechanisms and enjoying the failure of checks and balances, and the same impunity as the State of Israel. Consequently, Palestinianisation of civil society in the US is now accelerating. It has been under way for decades. What many have either not believed or not seen is now in plain sight. The mask has not just slipped but been tossed aside in favour of lies, even as large portions of the media continue to accommodate this headlong rush into authoritarianism and fascism. This is a wholesale abandonment of a politics of life in favour of what, in academic language, Achille Mbembe has called “necropolitics”: the politics of death.

Jericho Brown, the American poet, put this very well in the On Being podcast interview: “If you are really good at hurting Black people, you will indeed hurt the environment, I promise you. If you are really good at hurting women, you are probably really interested in war.”

Mark Carney’s speech was refreshingly honest for a leader, but it was always going to miss the point about Palestinianisation. Canada has not overtly stood up to Israel any more than the UK has done. This additional clarity matters. Without

justice for Palestine and an end to apartheid, there is no hope for an end to the imprisonment without trial of five-year-olds snatched off the streets by ICE in the US.

The apparatus is the same – tested in Gaza and the illegally occupied West Bank. Necropolitics have replaced politics; the state of exception is now the state; bare life replaces life; the camp is now the repository for bare existence; violence is imposed with impunity on a whim.

AND this is also home-grown – we developed, bought and sold the equipment, hosted the arms fairs, set up the infrastructures of coloniality, developed concentration camps and models of enslavement with trade tariffs as incentives. We do not need to have recourse to other genocidal regimes, such as National Socialism or Rwanda, which are the responsibilities of “other countries” than our own, to see how this has grown and is our responsibility. We need truth and reconciliation processes and to cease dealing in necropolitics, returning to politics as a source and protection of life.

A large enough part of the English electorate in the constituencies that will “count” under the criminally broken first-past-the-post system, and the Government in Westminster, are clamouring for necropolitics for themselves, as well as for children to be detained and deported; they are endorsing systems whereby shareholders in transnational private security firms will make even further profits from camps and (in)security apparatus; for human rights to be erased in the UK.

Destituting the systems of violence of their constituent power and restoring life in its messy yet glorious fullness is now the task of protest, solidarity and resistance.

We can stop it, refuse its power, not participate – it’s still possible – or we can shrug and let the violence rip even further.

This other world of resistant, restorative love is one many are living in, creating possibilities right now, vocally or quietly.

If we are feeling lost or paralysed, then those are our classrooms.

Alison Phipps is Unesco Chair for Refugee Integration through Education, Languages and Arts at the University of Glasgow

we’re going to see exactly the same divisions that we’re already seeing between Trump and the Europeans begin to come between the Europeans. Perhaps not with the language or the sheer chutzpah of Trump.

“But what I fear is that we’re in a situation – you don’t want to exaggerate – but I do feel that we’re in a situation which is increasingly leading towards a kind of 1914 situation.”

As for the place of an independent Scotland in this maelstrom, Barrow urged for cooler heads to prevail.

“Among the questions for Scotland are what independence means in terms of navigating new relationships in an unstable world; how a modest economy based on renewables, science, finance and education can move towards a green, social democratic future within a crumbling neoliberal order, and what security now is for a small northern European nation,” he said.

“A renewed case for Scottish independence requires an alternative prospectus based on fresh alliances and socially, environmentally and economically embedded security.

“Defence needs should be based on modest responses to realistic assessments of risk and threat, not pressure from arms companies to profit from turning the world into a tinder box.”