This paper seeks to theorize a postnational conception of memory in light of Israeli-Palestinian narrative negotiations of the Holocaust and the Nakba. Narrative negotiations are public discussions between members of divided societies aimed at transforming their respective national narratives. In this case, they involve Israelis and Palestinians (and more generally Jews and Arabs) and focus on two historical injustices: the Holocaust and the Nakba. These two events are diametrically opposed in the collective memory of both people. The goal of negotiating their narratives is to find resources in history and memory to promote an alternative future. In this case, a future whose past is not bound by the logic of ethno-nationalism.

A postnational conception of memory must be contrasted with a national one. I compare the two by focusing on three dimensions of collective memory: the communicative, the territorial, and the universal/particular. A national conception of memory is communicatively bound to the members of a nation, tied to a national territory, and non-universal. Israeli-Palestinian conflicts over memory, as well as attempts to resolve these conflicts, I demonstrate, operate within this national conception of memory. Holocaust and Nakba negotiations, on the other hand, invite us to think of memory beyond its national mold. This means that (i) collective memory is not communicatively bound to its members, but must be negotiated with those who are affected by this national memory. Second (ii), that the relationship between national memory and national territory should be disrupted rather than reinforced. And finally (iii), the national memory should be critically revisited in light of a cosmopolitan memory.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I show how the commemoration of the Holocaust and the Nakba are pitted against one another. I then introduce attempts to think of these two historical events productively, rather than competitively. I draw largely on the works of Edward Said, Ilan Pappe, Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, amongst others. Second, I theorize these attempts as challenging the nationalist logic of commemoration and offering a postnational one. I contrast the two along the three lines mentioned above: communicative, territorial, and particular/universal. Finally, I conclude

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with some remarks about the limits of postnationalism when applied to issues of memory.

I. Negotiating the memory of the Holocaust and the Nakba

In West Jerusalem, the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and the ruins of Deir Yassin lay less than a mile from one another. Both are significant sites of memory, what Pierre Nora has famously called lieux de mémoire.\(^2\) The first commemorates the Shoah, the genocide of six million Jews at the hands of Nazi Germany. The second commemorates the massacre of a Palestinian village at the hands of Jewish militias and a turning point in the Nakba—the forced transfer of Palestinians in 1948. The first is an impressive memorial, a site of diplomatic pilgrimage where dignitaries from every nation and creed pay their respects to the dead. The second has no physical marker.\(^3\) An Israeli psychiatric hospital now towers above the ruins. It specializes in the delusions caused by religious fervor—a mental disease commonly known as “the Jerusalem syndrome.” It is the ghosts of biblical prophets, not massacred villagers that now haunt the area.

Despite their geographical proximity, the two sites exist in two separate symbolic spaces. In the collective psyches of Palestinians and Israelis, the Holocaust and the Nakba are locked into two competing and mutually exclusive narratives. In this competition, each party sees itself as the victim and the other as the victimizer. Recognizing the other’s tragedy is tantamount to undermining one’s political cause:

There is an underlying fear that the acknowledgment of the tragedy of the “other” will justify their moral superiority and imply acceptance of their collective rational. For the Palestinians, accepting the Jewish pain around the Holocaust means accepting the moral ground for the creation of the State of Israel. For the Israeli Jews, accepting the pain of the 1948 Palestinian refugees means sharing responsibility for their plight and their right of return.\(^4\)

Instead of mutual recognition, we are thrown into a war of narratives. On the Israeli side, the Holocaust is a foundational moment that is summoned as the ultimate justification of Zionism—the need for the Jewish people to have a Jewish homeland. While Zionist colonization of Palestine precedes the Holocaust, the number of Jewish immigrants as well as the Zionist cause grew immensely after World War 2. Within this narrative, there is no place for the Palestinian Nakba. Israel remains committed to an older narrative that blames Palestinians and Arabs for the forced migration, and what some have called the ethnic cleansing, of indigenous Palestinians from their land.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) The “Deir Yassin Remembered” Association—an NGO made of Arabs and Jews—hopes to build a truth and reconciliation center at the site. See http://www.deiryassinremembered.org


On the Palestinian side, the Nakba is a constitutive moment of their national story. While, in theory, recognizing the Holocaust does not affect this narrative, acknowledging the Zionist understanding of the Holocaust does. Amongst Palestinian politicians and intellectuals, there is a separation between the two—acknowledge the Holocaust and the Zionist narrative of the Holocaust—but for many, the separation does not exist. As a result, rejecting Zionism goes hand in hand with the minimizing, being indifferent to, and denying the Holocaust. 

This conflict over narratives is well known and has been studied extensively. Less known and underexplored are the attempts to develop a dialogue around the two historical events. Key proponents of such a dialogue are intellectuals such as Edward Said, Ilan Pappe and Ilan Gur Ze’ev, Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, amongst others. The position of these intellectuals is interesting, because they are (or in Said’s case, were) vocal critics of the Oslo Accords and the peace process. This does not mean that they are opposed to peace, but to a certain kind of peace. One reason why they opposed it was because of its ahistorical nature. One way out of this deadlock, these intellectuals argue, requires a deeper engagement with the difficult past, and specifically to address the conflicting memory of the Holocaust and the Nakba. Edward Said, for example, wrote in 1997:

[T]he only way of rising beyond the endless back-and-forth violence and dehumanization is to admit the universality and integrity of the other’s experience and to begin to plan a common life together. I cannot see any way at all (a) of not imagining the Jews of Israel as in decisive measure really the permanent result of the Holocaust, and (b) not also requiring from them acknowledgment of what they did to the Palestinians during and after 1948.

There is a link to be made between what happened to Jews in World War Two and the catastrophe of the Palestinian people, but it cannot be made rhetorically, or as an argument to demolish or diminish the true content both of the Holocaust and of 1948.

Said insisted that this dialogue should be done on the ethical level and “not on debased questions of political strategy and tactics.” The point is not to instrumentally acknowledge the other’s history to score political points or as part of tit for tat negotiation. Taking the dialogue to the ethical level means a deeper engagement with these issues, one that does not dissociate memory from justice, our commitments to the

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8 Edward Said “Bases for Coexistence,” Al-Ahram Weekly (November 15, 1997)
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
past without those to the present and future. This is perhaps why Said saw the dialogue as one amongst intellectuals, rather than one amongst politicians. Put in the hands of the latter, the mutual recognition of the other’s suffering is bound to fall in the realm of the tactical and the competitive. One’s tragedy will be measured against the other, eventually leading to a competition over victimhood. This can only create more narrative antagonism.

This is not the first time that the events are connected to one another. Although the link is generally a taboo, it has been made before. In 1952, the Israeli poet Avot Yeshurun famously wrote in a poem entitled “Passover on Caves” where he linked the two events:

The Holocaust of European Jewry and the Holocaust of Palestinian Arabs, a single Holocaust of the Jewish People. The two gaze directly into one another’s face.11

In the Palestinian discourse, we also find the link, typically one that creates an equivalency between both events. The Palestinian poet Tahir Al-Matukal conveyed this idea in one of his poems:

Many years ago you were collapsing under the murderers of Dachau  
Your father was slaughtered in the Warsaw Ghetto  
You suffered the agony of your sister’s rape at Auschwitz  
Have you forgotten?  
How could you constitute a new Auschwitz in the center of the desert?  
How did you dare to transfer a people from its land? How did you dare to burn the children?  
Have you forgotten?12

Said’s position is different in that it categorically refuses equivalence between the two:

Who would morally want to equate mass extermination with mass deportation? It would be foolish to even try. But they are connected—a different thing altogether—in the struggle over Palestine which has been so intransigent, its elements so irreconcilable.13

The two historical tragedies are different in nature, kind, and degree. The Holocaust is a genocide of six million individuals and an attempt to destroy an entire people. The Nakba is an episode of ethnic cleansing that displaced 850,000 people in an attempt to replace one nation with another. The distribution of responsibility, finally, is different: Israelis are responsible for the Nakba, while Palestinians are not responsible for the Holocaust. Finally, the Holocaust is a historical injustice, while the Nakba is an enduring one.14

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13 Edward Said “Bases for Coexistence”
14 The point is made by Bashir Bashir and Amos Golderg “Deliberating the Holocaust and the Nakba.” p.80. I borrow the distinction between historical and enduring injustice from Jeff Spinner Halev. “[An]
Those who committed the Holocaust and their descendants have compensated the families of the victims with reparations and sought to honor the memory of the dead with museums, education, and monuments. Such measures cannot reverse genocide, but they are attempts to stop the same genocide from ever recurring. On the other hand, Palestinian refugees still live in refugee camps, Israel has never acknowledged forcing them out of their homeland, and it maintains its policy of colonizing Palestinian territories at the expense of the indigenous population. In brief, equivalency between the Holocaust and the Nakba is morally wrong, historically inaccurate, and politically useless. The challenge for Said and others who have followed his path is to think of another kind of connection. This connection, I argue, requires a transformation in the very logic of national commemoration, which makes a thorny task even harder.

II. Postnational memory

My purpose is to develop a theoretical framework to think through Said’s call for a dialogue on the Nakba and the Holocaust. I follow the lead of Ilan Pappe and Ilan Gur Ze’ev, K.M Fierke,15 Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, who have attempted similar enterprises by drawing on psychoanalytic and feministic theory—namely from Dominic LaCapra’s notion of empathetic unsettlement and the ethics of care. In the following, I want to work through theoretical discussions on postnationalism. What makes Said’s suggestion so difficult, I want to show, is not only that these two historical events are interlocked in a conflict over narratives, but that they disrupt the very nationalist framework through which we think of the past. I characterize this call to remember beyond the nation as postnational.

The notion of postnationalism might seem inappropriate for such discussions. In political and social theory, the concept is mainly future oriented16 and concerned with the erosion of the nation-state that is caused by the globalization of capital, labor markets, and the means of communication. These transformations are said to render the nation obsolete, thus leading us a more interconnected and cosmopolitan world. I do not use the prefix post in the chronological sense—what comes after the nation after its erosion—but in a logical one—mainly, how to think beyond the national logic of remembrance.17 Attempts to bring together the memory of the Palestinian Nakba and the Jewish Holocaust invites us to do so at three levels: communicative, territorial, and universal. I will examine these in more detail below.

II.1. Extending the bounds of communicative memory

enduring injustice has an historical and a contemporary component,” writes Jeff Spinner-Halev, “all enduring injustices are historical injustices, but the reverse is not true, since some historical injustices no longer persist today” Jeff Spinner-Halev, “From Historic to Enduring Injustice,” Political Theory, Vol. 35, No. 5 (2007): 9.


17 [Mention people who use postnationalism in reference to memory and identity]
I will begin with the communicative dimension. National memory, like other activities pertaining to identity and culture, is a communicative process. Human beings co-create and co-decide the objects, means, and ends of their commemorative practices. What national figure to celebrate, what calendar to adopt, and what statue to erect or tear down are questions fraught with political and normative questions that are temporarily solved through complex processes of decision making, compromise, tradition, and power. As Avishai Margalit rightly notes, a shared memory is not a simple aggregate of individual memories, rather it “calibrates the different perspectives of those who remember…into one version.” This calibration requires communication and a division of mnemonic labor amongst members of a community.¹⁸

Like all processes that require communication, a crucial question must be answered: who is part of this communicative process and who is not? Obviously, not everybody has a say in these matters. As Margalit claims, memory is an issue of ethics, not morality. Questions about what, how, and why we should remember, are questions raised within communities that share thick relations, not thin ones. Ordinary language also suggests the existence of bounded community. When we claim that event X is part of our history, the possessive pronoun denotes a commemorative community that is limited. National borders typically delimit the communicative bounds of commemorative community. To a large degree, these bounds derive from a nation’s right to self-determination. A crucial aspect of self-determination is to secure a space for the production and reproduction of a national memory. This takes place, for example, through a state’s control over its national curriculum. Some would go even further and argue that a state’s security depends on it being in control of a historical narrative, which leads to the securitization of memory.¹⁹ The degree of delimitation and securitization of a commemorative community pertains especially to historical event that are important sources of national pride/grief and situations of conflict.

The commemoration of the Holocaust and the Nakba in Israel/Palestine perfectly illustrates this conception. Both are foundational historical tragedies that constitute two mutually exclusive national narratives. Who has a say in how and what we remember are limited to a national group. Palestinians have no say in how Israelis ought to commemorate the Holocaust, since this is “their” historical tragedy, just as Jews have no say in how Palestinians should commemorate their tragedy. In 1953, the Israeli Parliament set up Mosad Yad Vashem, a special governmental agency mandated to represent and police the official memory of the Holocaust as a defining event in which the dreadful life in the diaspora (galut) inexorably leads to redemption in the state of Israel (geula).²⁰ The same parliament has passed a “Nakba law” that grants the finance minister the right to penalize government-funded organizations that budget

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²⁰ Pappe and Gur Ze’ev, Destroying the Other’s collective memory, 94.
expenses for the commemoration of the Nakba.21

A post-national conception of memory, I want to suggest, is characterized by a broadening of this communicative process. Who should be part of the communicative process is not limited to a national group, but should be opened to those affected by these memories. I use the term affected in reference to the all-affected principle that is widely discussed amongst political theorists in discussions about globalization. The principle posits that a rule of action or choice is justified only if all those affected by the rule or choice partake in the decision making process.22 Say a decision in country A affects the environment in country B, then the principle posits that country B should have a say in this decision because it is affected by it. National borders cannot delimit the decision process to country A. The principle is useful for discussions on memory, because it is used to problematize and expand the boundaries of a people.23 In fact, the way a nation remembers certain events has implications inside and outside its boundaries. This applies clearly in cases where minorities and indigenous people live within a national territory,24 but also to neighboring nations and groups. One nation’s textbooks depicting a neighboring nation as ancestral enemies that need to be wiped out has direct implications on the other nation, and vice versa. As a result, discussions about what to remember and how, should be opened to those affected by them. This is suggested by Herbert Kelman who argues that:

The implementation of a political identity through the establishment of a collective narrative cannot be left to the group alone. It must be “negotiated”, i.e., explored and discussed, with those who are affected by the group’s self-definition.25

We witness these negotiations with non-nationals in the phenomenon of bilateral historical commissions. These commissions gather historians from nations previously at war to revise and rewrite their respective national narratives. In an article on the French and German historical commission that recently resulted in the publication of a joint history textbook for French and German entitled Histoire/Geschichte, Durant and Kaempf qualify these initiatives as post-national because each country has abandoned its monopoly to legitimate education, detached its history from its exclusive national mold, and fostered an embryonic form of “transnational memory.”26

22 The all affected principle is also at the core idea of Habermas’s discursive model of deliberation. See Habermas, Jürgen Habermas, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 65.
24 The dynamic is very close to the one discussed by recognition theorists who argue that misrecognition or non-recognition can inflict harm and can be form of oppression.
Holocaust and Nakba negotiations fit within this larger attempt to create dialogue about memory and extend the boundaries of who can be part of this dialogue. The all affected principle provides a justification to open up the commemoration of the Holocaust to communicative process with Palestinians, because Palestinians are affected by commemorations of the Holocaust. In fact, Israel has mobilized the memory of the Holocaust to gain exclusive control over the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given that this form of commemoration affects Palestinians, it opens a channel for negotiation and discussion with them. The principle also opens the negotiation process to other parties based on the degree of affectedness. The negotiation process brings together Israelis and Palestinians because there are the most affected by this conflict over narratives, but it also brings others into the conversation, namely European and Arab states that have been and still involved in the conflict.

Joseph Massad, a Palestinian colleague and friend of Said at Columbia, has opposed Said’s call for a dialogue on the Holocaust and the Nakba for many reasons. His main reason is that this dialogue will eventually lead to a submission to the Zionist narrative that used the memory of the Holocaust to justify the Nakba. But he also offers another argument that is relevant for the all affected principle. He argues that there is no basis for such dialogue because both historical events are disconnected, and since they have not affected on another historical, then there is not basis for this dialogue. Massad rightly claims that Zionism and Zionist settlement precede the Holocaust by half a century, that only one-third of the Holocaust survivors have actually settled in Palestine, and finally that there is no indication that the Holocaust had significantly influenced the UN’s support for the 1947 partition of Palestine. This, however, misses a crucial aspect of Said’s argument. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Massad’s factual and historical claims, it does not undermine Said’s argument about linking the two events, because the latter is concerned with the way the two events affect one another in the collective memory of Palestinians and Israelis. “Said’s insightful vision of the relationship ‘to be made’ between the two people’s narrative of loss,” Gil Hochberg argues, is a relationship “based primarily on [Said’s] understanding of the living force of memory.” Although memory is related integrally to history, there is a difference between the past and the way the past is remembered. The all affected principle is mainly concerned with the later, not the former.

So, in response to Massad, the link is to be made because one’s collective memory of the

28 See Bashir on Levantine education.
30 Ibid.
31 Historians such a Gilbert Achcar have argued against Massad’s claim, see Gilbert Achcar, The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives (New York: Picador, 2011).
The commemoration of the Holocaust in Israel has served to block the memory of the Palestinian Nakba and justify the occupation. This provides some grounds for the participation of the Palestinians in the constitution of the memory of the Holocaust. It does not give them the right to determine this memory, which would be absurd, but it opens up the communicative process to them. By the same token, since the commemoration of the Nakba affects Israelis, then the memory of this tragedy ought to be opened to Israelis.

The principle is useful to open up the communicative dimension of memory to non-nationals. However, it also raises a series of problems. Palestinians are not responsible for the Holocaust, but Israelis are responsible for the Nakba and its enduringness. Israeli commemorative practices greatly affect Palestinians, both symbolically and materially. Palestinian commemorative practices affect Israelis symbolically, but not more. Should the all affected principle grant both parties equal weight in the communicative process of shaping memory, or is this weight determined by the degrees of responsibility and affectedness? The all affected principle is silent on these issues. It only justifies the inclusion of those affected by Holocaust and Nakba memories. The principle must therefore be complemented with additional criteria.

II.2. Territorializing/deterritorializing the past

The second dimension that differentiates a postnational from a national memory is its territorialization. Nationalism, writes Nicos Poulantzas, is unique in that it simultaneously historicizes territory and territorializes history (1980: 114). This means that it ascribes one national history to a given territory and expels others from it—glossing over, coopting, or forgetting the narratives of minorities, indigenous populations, and foreigners. This territorialization of history is part of a larger process of homogenizing a territory, ridding it of “foreign populations” through assimilation, forced migration, and genocide. The purpose of the territorialization of memory is the congruence of territory, identity, and memory so that the nation is constructed as whole through time and space.

The territorializing of memory derives its logic from the territorialization of religion that goes back to the sixteenth century and the Westphalian treaties. In response to the wars of religion that plagued Europe, the treaties separated different religious groups by assigning them homogenous territories. The formula was originally agreed upon at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 and captured by the motto Cuius regio, eius religio—the religion of the prince determines the religion of the realm. As nationalism assumed the role of a ‘surrogate religion’ and national wars progressively replaced holy wars, the motto

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34 Ernest Gellner offers a similar definition by arguing that "Nationalism is primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent." Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 3.


Cuius regio, eius religio was replaced with Cuius regio, eius natio—the nationality (rather than the religion) of the rulers determines the nationality of the realm. If in the sixteenth and century, a sovereign territory was meant to secure the space for one religious creed, in the nineteenth and the twentieth, it was meant safeguarded the flourishing of one national identity of which memory was a crucial part.

It is the territorialisation of memory that explains why conflicts over memory take the form of mutually exclusive conflicts where what is historically “ours” cannot be historically “theirs.” In such conflicts, the memory of one historical event crowds out the other, because the public sphere can only accommodate one nation’s past. “Many people assume that the public sphere in which collective memories are articulated is a scarce resource,” writes Michael Rothberg, “and that the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere takes the form of a zero-sum struggle for preeminence.”

Territory is the ultimate scarce good, and when memory is modeled as a space to possess, delimit, and protect, it shapes relationships to the past as exclusive and competitive. This is especially the case of the Holocaust and the Nakba.

The territorialization of Jewish and Palestinian memory is prototypical of both national movements. Amnon Raz-Krakotzin has written extensively on how Zionism has territorialized the memory of the Jewish. This, he argues, has resulted in a series of negation. The first is the negation the history of the Jewish diaspora. In the Zionist narrative, the diaspora is portrayed as a deviation from the trajectory of the Jewish people that was meant to culminate in the return of the Jewish people to historical Palestine. The meaning of the diaspora is teleologically on its disappearance and its integration into a state. Without this “in-gathering of the exiles,” the diaspora is meaningless.

The second negation is the negation of non-Jewish history of historical Palestine. In a narrative built on the exile, diaspora, and return of the Jewish people, non-Jewish history is but filler. Time spent in anticipation of the return of a people to its rightful land. This applies even more forcefully to the history of Palestinians, that right-wing Israelis like to claim does not exist.

The Palestinian tragedy caused by Jewish settlement and by the establishment of the Jewish state was not considered part of the history; rather, it was denied and suppressed. The perception of the state as a manifestation of redemption was based on this continuous suppression of the consequences of the return for the inhabitants of the country. There was no room for the culture of the peoples of the land or the desires and rights of its inhabitants. They were outside “history.”

Being outside of history means not relevant or meaningful for the making of history, but

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37 Amnon Raz-Krakotzin “Exile, History and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory: Some Reflections on the Zionist Notion of History and Return” *Journal of Levantine Studies* Vol.3, no.2 (2013): 37-70. As Raz-Krakotzin rightly points out, this negation mythicizes the territory and greatly simplifies “the complex conceptual load that characterized the attitude toward the land in Jewish thought.” (p.58)

38 Ibid, 58.
it also means outside the territory where history happens. Concretely this translates in the physical attempts to destroy the remnants of a people and replace them with another. In the case of Palestinians, it has meant the memoricide of the Nakba, the criminalization of Palestinian commemorative practices, and the destruction, repopulation, and renaming of Palestinian villages and towns.39

The territorialization of the memory applies also to the memory of the Holocaust. In the effort of creating an exclusive relationship between the Jewish people and the land, the land itself becomes a living memorial for the Jewish genocide. “The one fitting tombstone in memory of European Jewry exterminated by the Nazi beasts,” proclaimed the Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion, “is the State of Israel.”40 The state and the land thus become a living memorial. Questioning the Zionist project in this sense is akin to desecrating a tombstone commemorating and the memory of six millions Jewish souls. This locks the Holocaust into an ethno-national and territorial narrative.

The Palestinian territorialization of memory is of a different nature. As the losers of the conflict, Palestinians could not physically territorialize memory by erecting statues and outlawing Israeli commemorative practices. Only the victors get to write history and physically inscribe it into space. Palestinians, however, are engaged in a similar territorialization of memory, but at the symbolic level. Unlike the Zionist narrative, the Palestinian national narratives is not based on ethnic continuity, but on a continuous presence on the land.41 The Palestinian people are the people of the land. While this strongly emphasizes the period starting with the Arab conquest, it also encompasses other historical layers that include the Canaanites, the Philistines, and even the Israelites. This continuous presence was disrupted with British imperialism, Jewish settlement, and the creation of the state of Israel. In this narrative of continuous presence on the land, Jews have a place as a religious group, but not a national one. Secular nationalist parties, such as the PLO, have typically endorsed this narrative. Religious nationalists such as Hamas have endorsed another and more totalizing form of territorialization by declaring the whole of historical Palestine a “waqf”—an unalienable land that is designated for religious purposes.42

The territorialization of memory, however, is clear when it comes to the issue of the Holocaust. The Palestinian national narrative typically dissociates the story of Jewish suffering in Europe and Jewish settlement in Palestine. The first is confined to a history of Jewish suffering in Europe, while the latter is restricted to a history of colonialism in the Middle East. The two exist in two separate time/space continuums. At best, they are


41 Scham el al. 2013

42 See Hamas’ charter
recognized as two separate stories, at worst the former is conflated with the latter, and the Holocaust becomes an invention by colonial powers to justify the expropriation of land. In the latter case, anti-Zionism becomes a venue for Holocaust denial.

Edward Said was opposed to both positions. He lambasted Israeli politicians and intellectuals for not acknowledging their responsibility for the Nakba, for erasing the memory of Palestinians, and abusing the memory of the Holocaust to silence any criticism of Israel. He also castigated Holocaust denial in the Arab world. “The history of the modern Arab world,” he writes, “is disfigured by a whole series of out-moded and discredited ideas, of which that the Jews never suffered and that the Holocaust is an obfuscatory created by the elders of Zion.”43 He was opposed to both for reasons that have to do with morality and justice, but also because he was critical of nationalism and its territorialization of memory. His call for a dialogue between the Holocaust and the Nakba should be interpreted as an attempt to de-territorialize memory. Said achieves this deterritorialization in a series of moves.

First, he blurs the boundaries of ethno-national identities, refusing to subscribe to a dualistic ontology that homogenize Palestinians and Israelis and therefore separate Arab and Jew into dualistic identities. Instead, identity is part of a permanent process of narrative retelling, where the other is in the self and the self in the other. Richard Kearney defends a similar position when he writes about Irish nationalism and identity:

The ‘post’ in postmodern refers then not just to what comes after modernity. It signals rather another way of seeing things, which transmutes linear history into a multiplicity of time-spans. Thus the modern idea of a millenarian state in which culture and political differences might be subsumed into consensus, is challenged by the postmodern preference for dissensus—diversity without synthesis.44

The land is not the locus of one historical trajectory, nor the tombstone for one historical tragedy.45 We have to rethink it so that it can accommodate both, without falling into equivalence, competition, or mutual negation. Said became known for such postmodern disruptions. In an interview with the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, Said famously declared that he was “the last Jewish intellectual” in a long line of exilic and diasporic tradition of Jewish social criticism. He concluded the interview by referring to himself as a Jewish-Palestinian. The hyphenated identity is meant to collapse the territorial and homogenizing logic of nationalism that leads to the opposition between Arab and Jew. This “keeping-indifference inseparability of the Jew and the Arab” is crucial for Said’s writing on the

43 Said, “Bases for coexistence.”
45 Other advocates of the link such as Ilan Pappe and Ilan Gur Ze’ev also stress the importance of postmodernism for such an enterprise. “The starting point, we think, is overcoming nationalism and ethnocentrism. Critical theory and postmodern elaboration of the historical constitution of the subject, knowledge, identity and memory, together with empirical studies should impel this deconstruction and reformulation of the hegemonic Palestinian and Israeli narratives.”
politics of memory. It is the basis of the connection between the Holocaust and the Nakba.

Another way the Holocaust and the Nakba challenge the territorialization of memory is by disrupting it with diasporic memory. For Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, the figure of the refugee that is so central to both the Holocaust and the Nakba has the potential to disrupt the territorial logic of national memory:

The Palestinian and Jewish refugees of the Nakba and the Holocaust not only serve as disruptive and alarming reminders of the exclusionary forces of identity politics in Israel/Palestine, but also as a challenge to the statist mainstream Palestinian and Israeli politics that view exclusive and separate ethnic nation-states as the ultimate and desired institutional frame within which the political rights of the respective people are realized and protected.

[add more about Edward Said and diasporic memory]

If Palestinians and Israelis are to have a future, Said insisted, it cannot be achieved by means of “exclusivism and separatist nationalist” logic but must be based on a different and “more creative” logic, one that acknowledges differences but does not enforce a “policed separation of populations into different groups.” The clinical partition Said is referring to is not only a matter of geography, but also of history. In fact, the narratives that were supposed to emerge from the Oslo Accords were expected to coincide neatly with geographic borders. “Insofar as Israelis and Palestinians are negotiating on the basis of a ‘land for peace’ formula,” argues Herbert Kelman, “they are accepting territorial limits to their national identities, which have, after all, been historically linked to the whole of the land.” This means that the 1967 border works simultaneously as a physical and symbolic border, one that delimits the territory and the history of Israelis and Palestinians. For Palestinians, this partition has resulted in an imposed forgetfulness of the 1948 Nakba in exchange for a narrative that is limited to the West Bank and Gaza and that begins in 1967. For Said, this partition of memory and territory is bound to lead to the indifference and forgetfulness of the other’s suffering. Indirectly, this will lead to more injustice. Therefore it is the connection, and not the separation, of memories and narratives that should be pursued. The mutual recognition of the Holocaust/Nakbah is a cornerstone of this link.

46 On this subject, see Gil Z. Hochberg, “Edward Said: ‘the Last Jewish Intellectual.’
50 For more on this issue, see Yehouda Shenhav, Beyond the Two State Solution: A Jewish Political Essay (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Khoury, “National Narratives.”
In sum, negotiations over the Holocaust and Nakba deterritorialize national memory through a series of disruptions: challenging the congruence between one territory and one national memory, disrupting the sedentary with the diasporic, and challenging the logic of territorial and narrative partition. For Said, deterritorializing memory is a way of neutralizing the very thing that makes memory competitive. It is, to use Michael Rothberg’s terms, an attempt to transform memory from being one-directional to being multidirectional. Importantly, deterritorializing memory does not mean embracing an absolutely fluid notion of identity. Rather it is meant to break the congruence ethnonationalism seeks between territory and memory. For Said, like for Bashir and Goldberg, it is also a way of endorsing a binational ethics and integrative solutions for the Palestinian-Israel conflict, such as a one-state solution.

Before moving on to the third criterion, it is important to see how two defining features of a postnational memory—the communicative and territorial—relate to one another. Both are similar in that they challenge the boundedness of national memory, opening it up to the non-national other. There are differences, however, and it is in fact possible to endorse the communicative dimension of a postnational memory without calling for its deterritorialization. Nations can and do engage in a negotiation of their national memory, but they do so while subscribing to the territorial logic of national memory. The narrative negotiation that characterized the Israeli-Palestinian peace process does exactly that. Israelis and Palestinians were asked to negotiate their memory - not to deterritorialize it, but to re-territorialize so that it mirrors the two state-solution. In this case the congruence between territory and memory is left intact. The only thing that changes are the boundaries that both parties impose on national territory and memory. A postmodern conception of memory must subscribe to both criteria, not one without the other.

II.3. Universal dimension

The final dimension I want to address revolves around the classical distinction between the particular and universal, the national and the cosmopolitan. The distinction is at the heart of discussions on postnationalism and, I want to show, is crucial to understand postnational memory. Put briefly, a national memory is characterized by its particularism: this is our history and no one can ask that we critically revise it in light of a cosmopolitan memory. A postnational memory removes certain historical events from their national mold and makes them universal: they become everybody’s history. This cosmopolitan memory then acts as a benchmark to critically revise national narratives.

Said suggests a turn towards universalism and a cosmopolitan memory as one way to move away from the current Holocaust Nakba memory deadlock:

51 The following section borrows largely from Nadim Khoury, “Political Reconciliation: With or Without Grand Narratives” Constellations Vol.24, no. 2 (2017): 245-256.
53 I realize that this is a simplification of the national position. My goal is not to be reductive, but to create categories so that we can situate certain commemorative practices. The national/postnational distinctions represents two ends of a continuum, and commemorative practices are situated somewhere along this continuum.
Understanding what happened to the Jews in Europe under the Nazis means understanding what is universal about a human experience under calamitous conditions. It means compassion, human sympathy, and utter recoil from the notion of killing people for ethnic, religious, or nationalist reasons.\(^\text{54}\)

Said’s universalism needs to be unpacked. What is a cosmopolitan memory? How does it provide venues to unlock deadly battles over memory?

Part of the answer requires interpreting historical tragedies like the Holocaust and the Nakba not as unique, but as connected. “The simple fact is that Jewish and Palestinian experiences are historically, indeed, organically, connected,” writes Said, “to break them asunder is to falsify what is authentic about each.”\(^\text{55}\) The connection here is not a causal one (the Holocaust caused the Nakba), but one that contextualizes these historical injustices within a broader historical framework. This point is made by Bashir and Goldberg who connect the Holocaust and the Nakba as symptomatic of the nation state’s exclusivist nature. Following historians such as Dirk Moses and Mark Levene, we should understand the Holocaust as a constituent of a unified process that relates colonial genocide (including cultural genocide) and the mass exterminations of the twentieth century.\(^\text{56}\)

By linking the Holocaust and the Nakba to this larger dynamic, we draw a crucial lesson from the past, namely that the homogenizing logic of the nation-state is the problem, not the solution, something Hannah Arendt noted in 1951:

> Like virtually all other events of our century, the solutions of the Jewish Question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of stateless and rightless by 700,000 to 800,000 people. And what had happened in Palestine…was then repeated in India on a large scale.\(^\text{57}\)

A purely Jewish state that rids itself of the indigenous Palestinians cannot be the solution to the Holocaust, just like a return of refugees to replace those that settled in their place be the solution to the Nakba. By limiting the commemoration of these events to one’s own nation, we risk encouraging this lesson By linking the Holocaust and the Nakba to a larger historical dynamic, we learn to avoid it and encourage a different relationship to the other. As Said writes:

> We must think of our histories together, however difficult that may be, in order for there to be a common future. And that future must include Arabs and Jews, free of any

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\(^\text{54}\) Said, “Bases of coexistence”

\(^\text{55}\) Ibid.


exclusionary, denial-based schemes for shutting out one side by the other, either theoretically or politically. This is the real challenge. The rest is much easier.\(^{58}\)

Calling for a postnational memory is arguing against the recognition of historical injustices in their singularity (“what is authentic about each”), but for the importance of recognizing what they have in common (this “historical” and “organic” connection). There is a need to acknowledge these historical injustices in relation to other historical injustices, so that the past evils suffered by the Jews and Palestinians, amongst others, are dealt as differently experienced crimes of a larger dynamic. This will create the basis of a global memory where particular narratives can be negotiated, revised, and linked in cross-cultural ways. This commonality opens up the process of reconciliation to broader historical imaginings, links it to larger struggles against colonialism, and creating transnational solidarities amongst descendants of victims of historical injustices.

To a certain degree, we can already see the emergence of this global memory in what sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider have called a “cosmopolitan memory.”\(^ {59}\) According to Levy and Sznaider, the commemoration of the Holocaust in several countries indicates the creation of a cosmopolitan memory that transcends national borders, a way for humanity to say “never again” and for victims of other horrendous crimes to demand the past and enduring injustices they have suffered be addressed. For Levy and Sznaider, that the Holocaust figures as the foundational event of this cosmopolitan memory makes sense, since the unspeakable crimes of Nazi Germany as well as the German and European attempts to deal with the Holocaust have set a legal precedent for matters of historical injustice. In its wake, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948, and the meaning of reparations shifted from a punitive measure inflicted on the surrendering party following a conflict (such as the German reparations paid to the allies after the First World War), to compensation paid to the victims of severe human rights violations.

As anti-colonialist activists and scholars have rightly noted, however, placing the Holocaust at the center of a global memory suggests a Eurocentric view of the world that might make it blind to other horrors of our modern period, such as slavery, colonization, and other genocides. This Eurocentric global memory of the Holocaust has, and will continue, to block the memory of the Nakba. A global memory should be weary of creating a competition over victimhood, and aim for what Michael Rothberg called “differentiated solidarity” that “allow us to distinguish different histories of violence while still understanding them as implicated in each other and as making moral demands for recognition that deserve consideration.”\(^ {60}\) For Rothberg, the emergence of the Holocaust memory on a global scale has created grounds for a struggle for recognition

\(^{58}\) Said, “Bases of Coexistence.”


and a competition over memory, but it also produced a productive and “multidirectional memory” that has contributed to the articulation of other histories—some predating World War II, such as slavery in the United States, and others postdating it, such as the Algerian War and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia Herzegovina. A global memory allows the remembrance of particular historical injustices to cut through different spatial, temporal, and cultural sites and contribute to the task of “reframing justice in a globalizing world.” This is the kind of justice Said and other advocates of the Holocaust and the Nakba have in mind.

Before concluding, and as a way of teasing out a postnational conception of memory, it is important to look at how this cosmopolitan dimension relates to the first two dimensions: the communicative and the territorial. There are clear links with the communicative dimension in that both, the cosmopolitan and the all-affected principle open up a national memory to others. The cosmopolitan dimension pushes this even further, by involving (in a different fashion) those not affected. What characterizes a cosmopolitan memory built around the Holocaust according the Levy and Sznaider is that the it becomes an object of memory even for those who were not involved in the genocide of the Jewish people. The same can be said about the deterritorialization of memory, since a cosmopolitan memory is by definition deterritorialized. There is a problem, however, if we understand deterritorialization as a kind of postmodernism. Here there could be a tension between an incredulity towards grand narratives and a cosmopolitan memory. There could also be a tension between the anti-humanism of postmodernism and the humanism that underlie a cosmopolitan memory. Said’s call for a connection between the Holocaust and the Nakba calls for a kind of universalism and is grounded in a commitment to humanism. While Said contributed a great deal is deconstructing such notions, he did not abandon them and was highly critical of the anti-humanist positions espoused by certain strands the critical left. His universalism is attentive to ideas masking as universal, and his humanism is grounded an aversion to cruelty, which makes it very close to the humanism of a philosopher like Stephen White and Richard Rorty.

III. Concluding remarks.

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