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Harold Wolpe Dialogue
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Topic:

“THE ARCHITECTURE OF ERASURE
IN JERUSALEM”

Speaker:

Prof Saree Makdisi

She is a professor of English Literature at the University of California in Los Angeles, UCLA and the author of several books on British Romanticism, which is his area of expertise, and he writes on contemporary Arab politics and culture.

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

Critical Response

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Saree Makdisi

Dear Editors,

I assume that when you invited others to respond to my essay what you had in mind was the development of a conversation in a scholarly spirit—addressing the main arguments of the original piece, generating new approaches to the topic, offering critiques that might lead me to reconsider or modify my argument. I see no basis for a conversation in the responses that came in. Not only do none of the reactions actually engage the central argument of my article (indeed, they seem studiously to ignore it), none advances a serious alternative argument. In the whole set, there isn't a single credible challenge to what I wrote. And what's missing in terms of challenge seems to be made up for in terms of gratuitous unpleasantness.

Frank Gehry unwittingly set the tone for all these responses. He might have taken this opportunity to show the world that he is capable of broadening the range of his sympathies to others. He doesn't. Nor does he seem aware that Jerusalem is not just a Jewish city but also a Christian and a Muslim one and of course the center of Palestinian life; nor is there a hint that he realizes that Jerusalem is not a sandbox that was just lying there inertly, waiting for him to come and work in it, but rather a city that is the focal point of the hopes and aspirations of millions of people.

Although I had previously read and heard about the complicity of architecture and power, I still find it amazing that any architect (let alone one who can hardly be so desperate for work that he can't afford to have a conscience) seems to believe that he is entitled to get involved in a project in one of the most bitterly contested patches of land on the planet without bothering to learn anything about the context and history as well as the

political significance of what he is getting himself into. Gehry speaks of the court case that suspended the construction of the museum for two years as though it were merely a bureaucratic hassle the overcoming of which he had to wait for patiently in the way that one has to wait for routine planning permits—not an indication that there might be something seriously wrong with the project. The Israelis reassured him that it was only a parking lot, so why ask questions? But did he not hear what Palestinians were (and are) saying? Politics aside, has he nothing to say about the people whose loved ones are buried in the cemetery, or does he really think that it's acceptable that their feelings be dismissed and the cemetery itself wiped clean so that he—a foreigner and a total stranger to Jerusalem—can practice his art on their land?

The irony, of course, is that the kind of self-obsession—the monumentalization of one people's experience at the expense of another's very existence, if that's what it takes—that Frank Gehry's reply embodies is exactly what my article was all about; he proves my point for me. I was glad to hear that he has decided to withdraw his services from the absurd museum project, and it would have been nice to think that my article might have had something to do with that decision, but his response suggests that conscience had nothing to do with it.

It must have been clear to Gehry from the beginning that he was not up to the task of actually rebutting my article, which is why he turned to Rabbi Hier of the Wiesenthal center and his team of Israeli friends to write a response on his behalf. Well, they let him down badly (all four of them, along with their backup team of assistants, advisers, and secretaries). Those who would defend Israel from all criticism grew so comfortably complacent in that long period where hardly anyone dared to question them—and they are now so used to talking only to that ever-narrower circle of those who think like themselves—that they are totally unprepared for a genuinely scholarly argument, with its requirements for factual substantiation, logical consistency, and independent verification. All they can do is fall back on a Zionist mythology that the academic scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s utterly demolished and that today has zero credibility

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outside the echo chamber of Zionist apologetics—a world in which the actual historical record that I cite plays no role, the genuine scholarship from which I quote doesn't count, international law has no bearing, the UN and International Court of Justice don't matter, and in which the most convincing piece of “evidence” is supplied by Alan Dershowitz.

Half of their response is merely a recitation of the most boring and clichéd Israeli government propaganda. The other half reads like copy for a marketing brochure for the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance and what they refer to as its “Tools for Tolerance®.”

For example, the rabbi and his friends attempt to challenge the reference in my article to the West Bank and East Jerusalem as occupied territories by claiming that the territories are not occupied but rather disputed, and (as if that weren't enough) that “the word *occupation* moreover, is a politically charged term which many international law experts believe has no application to the West Bank and East Jerusalem” (p. 584). Clearly they must think that the UN Security Council and the International Court of Justice (both of which I cite and quote) don't count for much when it comes to international law—or not much, at least, in comparison to the profound gravity of the “many international law experts” who they say hold contrary opinions (of whom they fail to mention a single one). This is not argument; it's an exercise in absurdity.

The same thing goes with regard to the lot of the Palestinians living inside Israel, who, as I explained in my article, are treated as second-class citizens because they are non-Jews living in a state that claims to belong to the Jewish people rather than to the people who actually inhabit the land it controls. As I pointed out in my article, not only does Israel grant rights and privileges to Jews who are not citizens that it denies to its non-Jewish citizens but, both in Israel and in the occupied territories, a whole system of vulgar forms of discrimination privileges Jews over non-Jews (that is, Palestinians) in education, access to land, marriage rights, housing, and so on. Nowhere is the extent and institutionalization of this kind of discrimination more glaringly obvious than in the pronouncements of the Jewish National Fund, which advertises itself as “the caretaker of the land of Israel on behalf of its owners—Jewish people everywhere.” This institution not only acknowledges but proudly justifies its long-established record of discriminating against Palestinian citizens by pointing out that it “is not a public body which acts on behalf of all the citizens of the state. Its loyalty is to the Jewish people and its responsibility is to it [that is, the Jewish people] alone. As the owner of JNF land, the JNF does not have to act with equality towards all citizens of the state.” Moreover, it points out, “Israel's Knesset [that is, parliament] and Israeli society have expressed their view that the

distinction between Jews and non-Jews that is the basis for the Zionist vision is a distinction that is permitted” and, indeed, that its allocation of land to Jews alone “is in complete accord with the founding principles of the state of Israel as a Jewish state and that the value of equality, even if it applies to JNF lands, would retreat before this principle.”¹

Now, when the organs or affiliates of the Israeli state themselves speak so brazenly about the naked racism that they practice, what need is there to respond to the laughable claim made by the rabbi and his friends that “Israeli Arabs are full-fledged citizens who enjoy the same legal rights as their Jewish countrymen and it is fair to say that the Arab citizens of Israel enjoy far more civil rights and liberties than the citizens of any Arab country?” (p. 565). Any reasonable reader will see right through this feeble attempt to challenge the verifiable record.

The same thing goes for the Israeli high court, which the rabbi and his friends say “stands at the pinnacle of democratic judiciaries” (p. 565). No reader would take this claim seriously, given that the Israeli high court presides over and gives its approval to the vulgar discrimination between Jews and non-Jews that (as the JNF itself proudly points out) “is the basis for the Zionist vision” and “is in complete accord with the founding principles of the state of Israel as a Jewish state.” This is quite apart from the fact that it is common knowledge that the Israeli high court has officially condoned torture and extrajudicial executions and took until 2005 to ban the Israeli army’s routine use of Palestinian civilians as human shields (and has turned a blind eye to the army’s continued use of that tactic, most recently in the latest Israeli assault on Gaza). It also continues to flout the requirements of international humanitarian law by approving of the construction of the West Bank wall condemned by the International Court of Justice and the continued privation of the civilian population of Gaza, for whose welfare Israel is legally accountable as an occupying power.

The repeated insistence of the rabbi and his friends that Jerusalem and the land within Israel itself are “undisputed” territories is evidence of the very same insecurity and state of denial that my paper was all about. They may imagine that the Palestinian people have abandoned their moral and legal right to return to their homes in what is today Israel; that the Palestinian people do not dispute Israel’s claim to Jerusalem; that the Palestinian people could be made content with the patchwork of open-air prisons that Israel has prepared for them in the West Bank and the giant prison of Gaza, instead of the right to return and live as free and equal citizens in

1. From the JNF’s response to a petition presented to the Israeli High Court, *Adalah v. the Israel Lands Administration et al.* (HCJ 9205/04).

their homes and on their land in Palestine. But eleven million Palestinians—including those, like myself, who carry the memory of the cities of Palestine in their own names—think otherwise. And not just that but, as I said in my article, Israel's own policies in Jerusalem prove without a shadow of a doubt that the city that Israel claims as "the eternal and unified capital of the Jewish people" is anything but.

Their prevarication on the distinction between East and West Jerusalem (a distinction that neither the municipality nor the government of Israel recognizes, which makes their tactical insistence on it all the more disingenuous) is no more convincing. Sometimes they want to insist on that distinction; at other times they go out of their way to elide it. They say, for example, that they wanted originally to build the museum in "the French Hill neighborhood in north Jerusalem," without acknowledging that French Hill is not a "neighborhood" (that most beguiling term of Israeli doublespeak) and that, politically speaking, there is no such thing as north Jerusalem; it is a colonial settlement implanted in occupied *East* Jerusalem in violation of international law.

They are similarly mendacious when they go on and on (I counted seven occurrences then stopped counting) about how the Simon Wiesenthal Center is "independent," not tied to the Israeli state, not to be associated with the Israeli government, and so on and on—which left me wanting to ask them how the center happened to come into possession of the very piece of land on which it wants to build the Museum of Tolerance. This whole saga was set in motion by the Israeli conquest of Jerusalem in 1948 and the ongoing violent expropriation of land from its rightful Palestinian owners, and it has been coordinated, step by step, with officials at the highest level of the municipality of Jerusalem and the Israeli government. Moreover, the disingenuousness of their protestations of innocence is betrayed by the fact that the authors of this response include men who have served the Israeli government and even helped it to put together the Oslo Accords (which explains their contempt for international law).

The closest the rabbi and his Israeli friends come to making a coherent argument is this: it doesn't matter what living Muslims say; it doesn't matter what the actual Muslim community of Jerusalem is demanding; it doesn't matter what families with loved ones buried in Ma'man Allah have to say; it doesn't matter what any Palestinian has to say; the only thing that matters is that the Simon Wiesenthal Center and its Jewish Israeli advisers (among them the rabbi's coauthors) have unearthed some medieval scrap of paper that they say says that Islamic law says (no matter what actual Islamic jurists have to say about the matter and leaving quite out of the question the whole matter of property rights) that a Muslim cemetery can

be desacralized so that its land can be put to other uses; they even cite Tahir Hammad, a Muslim official who was a paid employee of the State of Israel and reported to the Minister of Religious Affairs (in Israel invariably an Orthodox Jew) and who was appointed to his post after he had proved his loyalty to the new state as the Israeli army's negotiator with the besieged Arab defenders of al-Lid during the 1948 war; he was persuaded to sign off on such a desacralization at the request of the same government that was paying his salary at a time when Palestinians inside Israel were living under martial law. And therefore, their argument goes, just as, in certain cases they cite (if we believe them, which would be rash), Muslim communities in Muslim countries have decided that Muslim cemeteries can be desacralized and put to other uses to serve those same Muslim communities, it is perfectly permissible—at least to the satisfaction of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Israeli high court—that a Jewish institution can take a Muslim cemetery, which had been violently usurped from its rightful Palestinian Muslim owners by the organs of the Jewish state, and use it to build a museum dedicated to the teleological retelling of Jewish history as Zionist history. It's simply preposterous.

And the closest the rabbi and his friends come to engaging with my central argument, about the dispossession and expulsion of the Palestinians and the consequent erasure of their presence and denial (of denial) of their claim to home in Palestine, is in the footnotes. In one, they try in vain to breathe new life into the tired old Israeli claim that the Palestinians don't really exist. In another, they hopelessly attempt to defy the current of history by pretending that the massive documentary evidence on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 (which has been cited, elaborated, and published since the 1980s by all the leading academic historians of the conflict) also simply doesn't exist. Everyone knows that the expulsion of the Palestinians began as early as January 1948 and was in full swing by the time of the notorious Plan Dalet (the final plan for the expulsion of the non-Jewish Palestinians) in March of that year, weeks before Israel's formal declaration of independence in mid-May and the subsequent intervention of the Arab states. And yet, unwilling to face up to the historical record, the rabbi and his friends fall back on the rags and tatters of the old Zionist myth that two generations of both Israeli and Palestinian (and other) academic historians have long since dispensed with: that Israel peacefully and innocently declared independence in May 1948 and was immediately set upon by all the Arab states determined to throttle the Jewish state in its infancy. By the time they finally lurch to the last component of their sordid attempt to rewrite history in defiance of a massive documentary archive—by denying that there has been any attempt

to Judaize and de-Arabize the country—they really are only talking to themselves.

It is inconceivable that any reader of this journal would take this utterly venal response seriously, which makes a reply by me totally unnecessary. In fact, all we find in their shameless attempt to deny what happened in Palestine is denial building on further layers of denial, exactly as I had argued in the article which these people claim to have read but which they clearly either didn't really read or else didn't fully understand. Either way, like Gehry, they unwittingly prove my argument for me, which makes a formal reply to their response all the more needless.

Edward Said wrote thirty-one years ago that to criticize Zionism is “to criticize a wall of denials,” and what he said in *The Question of Palestine* in 1979 remains true in 2010.² Indeed, the readers of this journal should take a look at Said's response to a similarly venal set of responses to an article he published in *Critical Inquiry* over twenty years ago.³ That so much of what he wrote in his reply could have been pasted verbatim into what I am writing today is a precise indicator of how little the ideological defense of Zionism in America has evolved in the intervening decades; like a stuck record, it hasn't budged an inch. But the rest of us have moved on; we have read, we have studied, we have learned. That the continued defense of Israeli violence and racism in the face of the massive accumulation of documented facts is so dependent on stubborn denial (and the mantralike recitation of the same four or five “ideologemes”) is the best evidence not only of its bankruptcy but of the sheer hopelessness of its attempt to stave off a reality to which the rest of the world has finally come round.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe certainly offers more ground for conversation than either Gehry or Rabbi Hier and his Israeli friends, and maybe, had he been the only respondent or had the other responses been more productive, matters could have developed into an interesting conversation. But by the time one gets to his piece things have already been dragged down by Gehry and his insufferable Israeli friends. The journal's readers would surely have had enough by this point.

There are three things I'd have wanted to say to Gilbert-Rolfe. The first is that if he has a problem with Hal Foster in a debate that goes back to the 1990s (from which everyone else seems to have moved on), he really should go write to or about him, rather than try to turn me into him, which is just silly.

The second thing is that, although we clearly agree on the larger political

2. Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York, 1979), p. 71.

3. See Said, “Response,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Spring 1989): 634–46.

and historical stakes, I find the potential anti-intellectualism of his piece disturbing, and I'd want to see how committed he really is to it. Essentially it seems that he wants to argue with me in spite of our fundamental agreement on the major political issues (which are what matter most to me, though they seem much less compelling to him) because he, like Gehry, seems to think that only certified art critics are capable of the task of writing about art or architecture. This archaic view of the cult of expertise and rigid disciplinary alignment has long since fallen by the wayside in most of the fields in which I am interested.

The third thing that I'd have liked to say to him—and it's a related point—is that his approach to the museum seems foreshortened by his obsession with formalism. He seems to think that buildings can be thought of in aesthetically formalist terms simply *as* buildings somehow separate from sites and contexts. Gehry's building *in itself* is not, and was never, the issue for me; the issue is the site, the context, the situation that the building would take place in, and obviously the building's relationship to the site. And *that's* certainly something that everyone—not just so-called experts—should be thinking, talking, and writing about.

The shortcoming of Gilbert-Rolfe's overreliance on formalism shows up most clearly in his discussion of colonial architecture. "The ur-structure of colonialist architecture must be, surely," he writes, "the stockade or fort" (p. 599). I don't think that it makes any sense to speak of colonialist architecture in the abstract; one must ground it in a place or colonial period, not simply in terms of ur-structures independent of historical context. If we were to risk a generalization about colonial architecture, it would have to be this: what matters in it is not its form but rather the authority and power it implies and is capable of mobilizing. The actual form is almost entirely irrelevant; it could be something as formally simple as a circle of tents; what matters is who's in the tents and how much power they have at their disposal. In fact, many of the Israeli colonies in the West Bank *are* simply circles of tents or mobile homes, so that the architectural form associated with the marginal and the disempowered ("trailer trash") in West Virginia becomes, in the West Bank, the expression of aggressive colonial power backed up with automatic weaponry and reinforced by the armed forces of a colonial state. As many prior articles in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* have shown, Israel's colonies express power through their location, their orientation and their organization, their domination and surveillance over an abject people and their landscape. Power is not about architectural form, then, it's about determining property lines, controlling the land, regulating movement, and so on. (Gilbert-Rolfe might want to

take the time to read Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which applies almost point for point in the occupied territories today.)

That's why the colonial affiliations of Gehry's design for the Museum of Tolerance are, as I said, conveyed not only in its formal features but in its location, its position and its scale, its assertion of authority on all levels; it is central and commanding, as institution (to the whole world apparently) and as architecture, standing independent and indifferent to the urban fabric around it and the history beneath it.

This all comes to a head in the last line of Gilbert-Rolfe's piece: it's a good building, he says, despite the despicable politics of the site. So is our disagreement merely a matter of taste? No. Where does the building exist? This "good building" doesn't exist in the abstract. So *where* is it, *where* would it be, a good building? He agrees with me that putting any building on this site constitutes a crime. So are we then talking about a building as it is unbuilt? What kind of building is that? A building that exists as pure form, independent of site and context?

Even if we ultimately disagree, these are issues that it might have been worth discussing further with Gilbert-Rolfe. It would not have been a waste of time arguing with him. But, even as I was thinking through my possible reply to him, Daniel Monk's dismissive missive arrived and put an end once and for all to the thought of any possible conversation.

One would have thought that, because of his own work on Palestine, Monk would have the most to say on this issue, but it turns out that he is the least interested in conversation of the lot. Even Gehry and the Israelis actually address me or mention me by name, but not Monk. He is so far above us all, eyeing our evidently minute and pathetic squabble from the immense height of his lofty eyrie on the snowy summits of continental philosophy. And then he swoops down to survey us, spitting epigraphs from Horace and aphorisms by Adorno and slugs of Latin like some dive-bomber discharging its ordnance over a smoky battlefield—"suppositio materialis . . . suppositio intractabilis" (p. 608). My first thought was that this was some kind of parody, and even now I wonder if Monk really thinks he will be taken more seriously because he can cite clever-sounding phrases in Latin.

In all seriousness, having read Monk's piece five or six times now, I'm still not entirely sure *what* he's saying. But I showed it to some friends as well, and they tell me that he seems to think that my interlocutors and I need each other dialectically; that we thrive on conflict and on arguing with each other; that none of us could imagine resolving this conflict and thereby ending it because it would be the end of us if we did. Whereas he, Monk, soars far above. But, given the chance to actually express his

thoughts in a leading academic journal, what does he have to say about the Museum of Tolerance? The desecration of Ma'man Allah cemetery? The uprooting of Palestine? The home demolitions in Silwan? The attempt to erase an entire people and efface the traces of their former existence on their land? Any possible avenue toward a just and lasting peace? Not a thing. The lives and deaths of real people, justice, right and wrong—these are not things he wants to sully himself with by actually taking a position on them.

The only thing I could imagine saying in reply to Monk is that I do not thrive on conflict and that I would rather do almost anything else in the world than waste my time and energy arguing with Frank Gehry and the rabbi and his Israeli friends, or with him, for that matter—if he would actually condescend to an argument by staking a claim. I would be tempted to tell him too that if he read a newspaper or surfed the internet from time to time he would eventually come across one or another of the dozens of articles I have published in which I have actually taken a public position on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most of my articles on this question end the same way, by my saying that I believe in peace *with* justice, not peace at the expense of justice, and that I believe that all people are equally entitled to justice and rights; and that I believe the way to end this miserable conflict once and for all is to create a single democratic and secular state in which all Palestinians (those presently in exile, those living as second-class citizens of Israel, and those suffering in their fifth decade under military occupation) and all Israeli Jews would live as equals in one shared country.

But then, I have said that in every major newspaper from Los Angeles to Washington, on television and radio stations that reach global audiences, and in a book as well, and if Monk really doesn't know about my position already I can't imagine there would be much point in explaining it to him because in any case he seems more interested in pouring scorn on those who take positions rather than having the courage to take one himself.

So all in all, I just don't see the basis for a conversation here. Opposition is true friendship, as Blake said, but in these responses I find neither opposition worthy of the name nor the potential for friendship.

Sincerely,

Saree Makdisi