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## (Re)Centering Europe: Competing Israeli and Palestinian Narratives in the Shadow of Europe

### Introduction

This May marked the sixtieth anniversary of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. As the international community attempts to come to terms with Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, the Chinese government's policy towards Tibet, the US-led catastrophe in Iraq, and a plethora of other issues, celebrations and commemorations were held throughout the world highlighting Israel's sixty years of independence.<sup>1</sup> It is worthwhile to pause at the irony in the simultaneity of these events. In the cases of the former, the concept of self-determination is being contested. In the latter, we find unrestricted applause for a specific case of self-determination. Represented as a testament to the Jewish people's resilience in the face of centuries of anti-Semitism and an attempt at their eradication, these events include the participation of government officials, community leaders, and policy analysts in North America and Europe alike.<sup>2</sup> However, like other celebrations of the independence of settler colonial states, this anniversary marked not only the formal recognition of a particular nation-state, but also a process of displacement of an indigenous community, which was integral to the nation-state building project. In the case of the creation of the state of Israel, we are speaking of the displacement of over 750,000 indigenous Palestinian inhabitants of historic Palestine and the simultaneous destruction of over five hundred of their villages.<sup>3</sup> While both the eradication of six million Jews from Europe and the ethnic cleansing of a majority of Palestine's indigenous Arab inhabitants are historical facts separated by time and space, the narratives surrounding these events, their legitimacy as historical collective memories, and the appeal to them as discursive resources are strongly entangled.

In Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre Musique*,<sup>4</sup> a young *Haaretz* Jewish-Israeli journalist interviews the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. Set in Sarajevo, Darwish positions himself throughout the interview as the one history has defeated. "Do you know why we Palestinians are famous?" he asks,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "Israel marks 60th anniversary with Aerobic show," *China View* (9 May 2008) [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/09/content\\_8134203.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/09/content_8134203.htm); "Israel's 60th anniversary celebrated in homes, temples," *Asbury Park Press* (14 May 2008) <http://www.app.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080514/NEWS/805140452>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, "Global leaders convene in Jerusalem to mark Israel's 60th anniversary," *Associated Press* (14 May 2008); "Bush opens visit to mark Israel's 60th anniversary and begins Mideast tour," *International Herald Tribune* (14 May 2008) <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/05/14/mideast/bush.php>; "British PM: Israel's creation one of the 20th century's 'greatest achievements,'" *Haaretz* (5 May 2008) <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/981681.html>; "Pelosi leads congressional delegation to Israel for its 60th birthday," *International Herald Tribune* (16 May 2008) <http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2008/05/16/africa/ME-GENIsrael-US-Pelosi.php>.

<sup>3</sup> Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006); Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, *Notre Musique*, 2004.

and goes on without waiting for the journalist to respond: “because you are our enemy, the interest in us stems from the interest in the Jewish issue. The interest is in you, not in me.”

Such voices are not simple assertions of victimization on the part of Palestinians but are rather reflective of a broader dynamic that is central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, such dynamics of competing narratives of victimization are part and parcel of all societies in conflict. What is particular to each conflict is the nexus of power relations that underpin the collision between such narratives as well as others. While current discussions on the Israeli- Palestinian conflict focus on the United States and its role in the conflict, the role of Europe’s past and present in the conflict has been overshadowed. Nevertheless, the effects of this role play out in the everyday dynamics of the conflict; in the lives of both Palestinians and Jewish Israelis and even more, so in facilitated encounters between them.

This paper seeks to explicate the place of modern European history in the dynamics of Jewish and Palestinian competing narrative of victimization. Reflecting on our work as educators in political education with groups in conflicts, we here analyze our experience of working with a group of Palestinian and Jewish university students from the United States, who came together for a comparative conflict study tour we initiated in the Balkans. This paper focuses on the intersection of narratives of victimization and processes of self-exploration in facilitated encounters of groups in conflict. More specifically, it seeks to explore, through reflective practice, the power relations that underlie the competition over the recognition of victimization. This struggle is very much a struggle that builds on competing narratives about the conflict and collective memories of the groups involved. Europe's relationship to the histories of Jews and Palestinians is crucial in defining the nature of these narrative and memories. We therefore discuss how Europe’s experiences with the Jewish Holocaust and its recognition thereafter plays a hidden, yet central role; especially given the physical and discursive distance of the Palestinian Nakba from the border of Europe.

## Facilitated Encounters of Groups in Conflict and Group Dynamics

The idea of bringing together members of groups in conflict, in particular Jewish Israelis and Palestinians, is not a new one. Projects and programs to this end have been taking place in Israel for several decades and began to particularly flourish and gain popularity in the mid 1990s after the Oslo Agreements were signed.<sup>5</sup> Some would even say that such encounters at that time became trendy.<sup>6</sup> This flourishing has also taken place in the context of the United State and Europe where various NGOs have spent a considerable amount of resources identifying and bringing together individuals from societies in conflict.<sup>7</sup> The practice of such initiatives and various projects has been well

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the work prior to the Oslo Agreements took place inside Israel between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel, while from the post-Oslo era until the outbreak of the second intifada, encounter projects were able to take place both in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza. There were numerous challenges and obstacles during these years. See, for example, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, ‘Peace Building in Postsettlement: Challenges for Israeli and Palestinian Peace Educators’, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 6(1), 1-21, 2000. It is also important to mention that many of those who facilitated encounters during these years could clearly foresee, manifested in the dynamics between the groups in such encounters during the late 1990s, the eruption of the second intifada in the West Bank and Gaza and the deteriorating relationship inside Israel between Jews and Arabs that culminated in the October 2000 events.

<sup>6</sup> Haggith Gor-Ziv & Rela Mazali, Reflections on Encounter Groups of Jews and Palestinians from Israel, Report to the Ford Foundation, April 1998.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Seeds of Peace ([www.seedsofpeace.org](http://www.seedsofpeace.org)); Building Bridges International ([www.bbi.org](http://www.bbi.org)).

researched and discussed among scholars and reflective practitioners.<sup>8</sup> However, such projects and the educators involved do not always share the same pedagogical underpinnings in their approach to work with groups in conflict. The main difference is between programs who view encounters as an important means to social change, and others who see encounters as the means and the end itself.

This paper draws its analysis from the broader literature on encounters between groups in conflict. More specifically, it reflects on the experiences of the authors in designing and implementing a summer program for Jewish and Palestinian students in the Balkans. While in the Balkans,<sup>9</sup> students were engaged in two interdependent processes. The first was a comparative study of the Balkan wars of the 1990s and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this aspect of the program, the goal was not to identify who played the “roles” of the Israelis and Palestinians in the Balkan wars. Rather, the goal was to discuss dynamics that occur across conflicts from a comparative perspective. This included topics such as competing narratives, nationalist mobilizations, and questions of guilt and responsibility. The second process of the program consisted of a series of open group-dynamics sessions facilitated by an Israeli and Palestinian facilitator.<sup>10</sup> In these sessions, the discussions were participant-led; there was no particular structuring in terms of what topics would be discussed. Rather, students used this space to process their experiences in the program and how they related to their everyday lives outside of the program on both the personal and collective levels. In this part of the program, the participants brought in their own life experiences, those of their families and friends, as well as those that they had been raised hearing. Students discussed their political perceptions, and popular beliefs and images were exposed, openly discussed, and at times even clashed.

The two processes that made up the bulk of the program were not independent of one another. They were designed to be mutually reinforcing. The comparative method, beyond being a more robust form of social analysis, was an opportunity for students to recognize dynamics that they were unable or unwilling to see when it came to their own roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, the perspectives of the participants would very often be the catalyst for, or the resources in, a discussion about how these dynamics of conflict manifest in their own lives. One of the most interesting dynamics in these groups had to do with the issue of memory and its role in the conflict.

## **Collective Memory and Facilitated Encounters of Groups in Conflict**

Collective memories and the process of its formation or obliteration play an important role not only in the analysis of conflicts and societies in conflict, but also in the dynamics between members of groups in conflict, particularly in the process generated in facilitated encounters. In recent years, numerous articles have been written dealing with the subject of memory and how it becomes created or obliterated. These studies have focused on how individual members of society remember and interpret past events, how from this process they construct meaning to their current realities, and how this becomes modified over time. Maurice Halbwachs, a noted French sociologist, was the

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<sup>8</sup> See for example, Ysrael Katz and Maya Kahanov, "A Review of Dilemmas in Facilitating Encounter Groups between Jews and Arabs in Israel," *Megamot*, 33 (1), pp. 29-47 (in Hebrew); Muhammed Abu-Nimer, *Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, and Change: Arab Jewish Encounters in Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Rabah Halabi (ed.), *Israeli and Palestinian identities in Dialogue: the School for Peace Approach* (New Brunswick N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Visiting Belgrade, Prishtina, Mitrovica (north and south), Srebrenica, Sarajevo and Mostar.

<sup>10</sup> The staff was a mixed staff of Israeli and Palestinian group facilitators and educators.

first contemporary scholar to discuss the concept of collective memory and was the first to analyze the subject in a systematic manner. He later inspired a growing body of research on the social and political dimensions of memory.

Collective memory, according to Halbwachs, is not a given but is rather a socially constructed notion. "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember. There are as many collective memories as there are groups and institutions in a society. It is, of course, individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past. Hence, every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time."<sup>11</sup>

The literature on facilitation of groups in conflict discusses the process that such groups go through as comprised of several stages that tend to repeat themselves in a variety of shapes and forms: from the initial stage of group formation, followed by a stage in which the dominant group insists on maintaining power and the status quo, to possible change in power relations, when, for example, the subordinated group refuses to accept the status quo and manages to rebel against it. When such a change occurs in the group process, it can, at least in theory, allow the participants to explore an equal sharing of power among them. At this stage, the group may examine the consequences of such a demand to share power and the dynamic it generates. A more equal dialogue then begins to take shape between the groups.<sup>12</sup>

At the stage of the encounter when the groups engage in a struggle, quite commonly, the main issues around which the group dynamics revolves seem to focus on themes such as 'who is more humane', 'who is morally superior', and 'who is the ultimate victim'. We see these questions in particular connected to the collective memories and narratives of the past that each group shares, at times in complete negation of the other.

Based on our experience, we find the competition over victimization in facilitated encounters between Jewish and Palestinian groups to be of particular importance and reflective of the reality as exists outside of the room. Such competition brings up the Jewish holocaust within minutes of conversation. In this process, there is usually a strong demand from the Jewish participants for the Palestinians to recognize the Jewish holocaust as a unique incomparable historical event, as well as the exceptional Jewish suffering and fears of existence such a past has created. The Palestinians, however, request for not only recognition but acknowledgment in their Nakba (great disaster) from those they hold responsible.

In this stage, recognizing each others' pain and suffering is far from being a feasible choice for participants of both groups. Instead, they are more likely to engage in a competition over 'whose suffering was/is greater.' The Palestinian participants either compare their suffering to that of the Jews in the Second World War, or completely negate the Holocaust, or at least attempt to argue about numbers or details as such, posing the questions 'why did they have to pay the price for crimes

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<sup>11</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 22. According to Halbwachs, only the sphere of dreams is not rooted in a social context and structure.

<sup>12</sup> Nava Sonnenschein, Rabah Halabi and Ariella Friedman, *Israeli-Palestinian Workshops: Legitimation of National Identity and Change in Power Relations*, in Eugene Weiner (ed.) *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

of others (the Nazis and Europe)?' The Jewish participants, on the other hand, do not recognize their role in the displacement of Palestinians from their native lands or their position of power and privilege within the current status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Two sets of issues are then raised by the nature of such an encounter: The first revolves around the challenges of discussing the historical events and the collective memories surrounding them. While the Jewish Holocaust ended in 1945 and is currently an historical event around which national and international communities have come together in acknowledgement and commitment to recognizing, the oppression and occupation of the Palestinian people at the hands of the Israeli state is still ongoing. This dynamic cannot yet be discussed in past terms and is implicated in current geopolitical great power interests. In addition, the competition over victimization as constructed around these two events (i.e. the Jewish Holocaust and the displacement of Palestinians) serves to conceal the dramatic power imbalance between a settler community and indigeneous community. Put otherwise, while the competition over who is the ultimate victim is a real and visceral experience, it is implicated in discourses of power which mask the reality that exists outside of the facilitated encounter: that of a power relation between occupier and occupied.

The other set of issues raised by the encounter brings into relief the power relations that underlie the competition over victimization. This is best grasped when the nature of the collective memories invoked are analyzed. By nature, we mean the characteristics of the collective memories in question; their integral organization and their relationship to society at large. Two dichotomies frame how these discourses interact. On the one hand, the collective memories of Jews and Palestinian can be distinguished at the level of consolidation. Throughout the encounter, the Jewish narrative of the Holocaust is fixed, adhered to by all Jewish participants, and subjectively understood by the Palestinian participants. The Palestinian narrative, on the other hand, can be understood as a fragmented narrative in which Palestinian voices point to a common experience; but each participant is able to recount the narrative partially. The articulation of that experience, thus, is not standard. Rather, Palestinian participants share different parts of the narrative based on their level of political awareness.

The source of such a discrepancy in the nature of the collective memories at play in the encounter can be better understood when viewed through the framework of *dominant* and *marginal* narratives. At the international level, as well as the level of the encounter between Palestinian and Jewish students, the Jewish collective memory of the Holocaust assumes a dominant position.

We are less interested here with the claim of the Holocaust as the ultimate form of oppression. We are more interested in the fact that the particular collective memory of the Jewish Holocaust has been institutionalized sufficiently that it is viewed as common sense by both the Jewish individuals and the broader societies they are a part of. The Palestinian narrative in that sense can be understood only as a marginal narrative. Debates about the ethnic cleansing of Palestine between 1947 and 1949 and of the nature of Israeli policies towards the various Palestinian populations continue until this day within mainstream political and media circles. The Palestinian narrative is constantly subject to denial whereas the Jewish narrative is constantly subject to assertion. The consequence of this discrepancy is the lack of an intersubjective acknowledgement of the Palestinian collective memory. Consequently, the terms of the debate in the encounter between Palestinian and Jewish students is structured by this imbalance.

Europe and the role it plays in Jewish collective memory allows the Jews in a Jewish- Palestinian encounter to reclaim their role as victims in a way that overshadows the Palestinian collective memory, in particular the Palestinian *Nakba* as occurred in 1948. While Europe in the Jewish and Zionist Israeli narrative is the reminder and the justification for the right and need of Israel to exist as a Jewish state (as opposed to, for example, as a state of all citizens), in the Palestinian narrative, Europe is a reminder of marginality and lack of official international recognition in their loss.<sup>13</sup>

## Group Process and the Competition over Victimization

The group of Jewish-Palestinian participants we worked with in the Balkans reached its height of the struggle phase in Sarajevo, following its participation in the July 11th memorial ceremony in Potočari in memory of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide.<sup>14</sup> One Palestinian student related to this stage of the group's dynamic in her blog-entry:

"Is it within human capacity to fully feel and understand complex and wretched histories of massacres, genocides, and destructions of entire societies? Today, July 12, 2006, was the first day our group spent in Sarajevo, Bosnia. We awoke to an intense group process discussion trying to absorb and sort our feelings about yesterday's Srebrenica memorial; however I can guess that many of us left our discussion more upset, conflicted, and confused than ever before.

We as human beings seem to try to relate complex and uncomfortable issues to our own living condition so that we can attempt to sleep with some understanding of why such atrocities are repetitive in our human history. Is there a need to recognize each other's suffering and pain if all we think about in the back of our minds is how the other's suffering is more or less worse than our own?"<sup>15</sup>

Such competition over recognition of victimization and over who is more humane or who suffered more is prevalent not only between Jews and Palestinians but in the Balkan region as well. The competition emphasizes the need of each group to receive recognition and acknowledgment from the other – acknowledgments of the collective memories and the past. However, such acknowledgement can rarely be given at this stage, as the groups are still engaged in a struggle. The visit to Srebrenica, a site of memory, a site of genocide in the middle of Europe, in particular raised the issue of competition over victimization. At this point, some of the Jewish participants demanded recognition by the Palestinian group of the Jewish Holocaust as an incomparable historical event.

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of denial of victims see Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Srebrenica, previously a small unknown town in eastern Bosnia, has become a symbol of the return of genocide to Europe and for the failure of international politics. The premeditated murder of thousands of boys and men before the eyes of the 'protective troops' of the United Nations raised challenges and moral dilemmas for the entire international community. The verdict against General Krstić of the Republika Srpska Army confirmed and named the horrifying mass killings in Srebrenica as genocide. In Serbia, among those combating the official denial of these events, Srebrenica also became a symbol of the war crimes committed by Serbs, of the cruelty of the war, of the need to address questions of guilt and responsibility, and of the need to resist the neutralization of the Srebrenica massacre – to refrain from the tendency to equalize all crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia. Today in the nearby town of Potočari there is a large site of memory where the remains of the victims found in mass graves are being buried in an annual ceremony on July 11th.

<sup>15</sup> Student entry in program weblog.

While some of the Palestinian participants did acknowledge the Jewish Holocaust, they likewise demanded Jewish recognition of the suffering, victimization and inferiority that Palestinians experience as a result of the Israeli occupation.

Srebrenica forces us, as outsiders, to face the horror that occurred there only a decade ago, in spite of and after the promise of "never again,"<sup>16</sup> while Sarajevo and its very recent history exemplifies what evil can generate and destroy. As if mirroring the horrific events that took place in these European towns and cities, the group rejected all attempts at mutual recognition or acknowledgment. The Palestinian participants attempted to reach a more equal dialogue between the two groups, requesting that the Jewish group acknowledge their plea for recognition of the suffering of the Palestinian people, while the Jewish participants rejected such attempts, entrenched in their own fears and sense of victimization. By this rejection, they maintained their power in the room – i.e. the status quo. At this stage, activated and motivated by their own fears, neither group could see the other's needs, open wounds, and fears. As one Palestinian female wrote in her blog-entry after Srebrenica and the group process session that followed:

"I believe today's events reaffirmed something in myself and in all of us. It reaffirmed the fear we all have of being wiped out, forgotten, and our rights to self-determination being denied. It reaffirmed the fear that we as Jews and Palestinians have no assurance that the world will interject if this type of atrocity was to take place to us. It reaffirmed my fears that after 56 years of Palestinians being oppressed, displaced, persecuted, occupied, and being denied their right to self determination, nothing will happen until my people are erased from human history. Then and only then will the international world look back and say how could we have let this happen?"<sup>17</sup>

## Concluding Comments

The preceding discussion attempted to highlight various issues related to facilitating encounters between Jewish and Palestinians in the context of comparative conflict analysis. It is meant to serve as an initial reflection on what the authors of this paper view as a promising avenue for academic and practical engagement in questions related to societies in conflict, political education, and social change. Though tentative, some concluding comments are in order to both summarize the arguments of this paper as well as to propose further work on these issues.

What becomes immediately apparent from an analysis of the narratives deployed throughout the participants encounter is the role of Europe. While contemporary discussions focus on the triangle of Israel, the Palestinians, and the United States, it is clear that Europe's history as well as its present is deeply implicated in the dynamics between Palestinian and Jewish communities. The role of Europe, however, is not fixed. Rather, this role can be flexible and dynamic. As we saw in the encounter between the Palestinian and Jewish students, Europe took on a double role in the group's process.

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<sup>16</sup> As one student wrote in a short article she published in her school's online journal: "I was taught to proclaim "never again" before I learned to locate Poland on a map. And yet before this past July, I had never heard of the massacre at Srebrenica. Eleven years ago, when I was eleven myself, about 8,000 Bośniak (Bosnian Muslim) men from the town of Srebrenica were brutally castrated, starved, shot, and killed by Bosnian Serb forces in about a week." See Yael Hammerman, 'Bearing Witness in Srebrenica', *the Current*, Fall 2006.

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/current/articles/fall2006/bearing-witness-insrebrenica.html>

<sup>17</sup> Student entry in program weblog.

On the one hand, history of the 'center' of Europe vis-a-vis the Holocaust and the Middle East plays a silent yet powerfully structuring role in the competing narratives and collective memories of Palestinians and Jews. On the other hand, 'peripheral' Europe, more specifically the genocide of Srebrenica, allowed the group to become reflexive about their competition over victimization and possibly find ways to break through it. This should not be viewed as an attempt to assign blame or guilt. This fluidity serves as a call for action to fundamentally question the ways in which the European community has addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its roles in it, and possible future role. While the realm of negotiations, aid packages, and ceremonial events is important, further attention needs to be paid to questions of recognition, education, and institutionalization.

In addition to the political question of the role of Europe, a methodological question also presents itself. Clearly, encounters between members of groups in conflict, when facilitated appropriately, are a fruitful avenue of education and empowerment. Nevertheless, comparative conflict analysis has much to offer when the two approaches are combined. In the case of the encounter we discuss in this paper, the comparative method complimented the process the students were undergoing through their encounter. It assisted them in raising questions, the very ones they were struggling with, in a context completely different than their own. As such, the comparative method achieved two objectives. On the one hand, it de-exceptionalized the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, allowing participants to understand oppression, violence, and change in multiple contexts. On the other hand, it allowed participants to view themselves in the mirror images of the roles they have taken up in their own conflict (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). This was not accomplished by seeking out the 'Israelis' and the 'Palestinians' of the Balkans. Rather, it was accomplished by seeking out dynamics of perpetrator and victim statuses, communal memory and collective denial, and the different ways our everyday actions are implicated in these dynamics.

Our final comment builds on our previous point: given the utility of comparative conflict analysis in the realm of facilitated encounters between groups in conflict, we wish to explore what possibilities exist in the development of a four-way encounter between two sets of groups in conflict. In this particular case, the argument could be made for a Jewish-Palestinian-Serbian- Albanian encounter. More specifically we pose the question: how would/can such an encounter, constructed with a comparative analysis component, deepen the utility derived from comparison and offer a space for the development of solidarity across conflict zones that go beyond mere rhetorical support for peace and in fact delve into the exchange of challenges surrounding questions of communal memory, collective denial, power relations, and social change?