

THE ONE AND THE MANY

Unsettling Gaza: Secular Liberalism, Radical Religion, and the Israeli Settlement Project, by Joyce Dalsheim. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. x + 219 pages. Notes to p. 191. Bibliography to p. 204. Index to p. 219. \$74.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Gil Anidjar

Some binary oppositions—the stuff of much scholarly work way back when—remain difficult to undo. These days we may think more readily in terms of exception or emergency, but the underlying logic, the deictic (or denunciatory) procedure, persists. Now is the moment to act. Or it was all happening then. Over there is where the problem lies. If only these people stopped making trouble. A concomitant, and equally pervasive, habit of thought has to do with the conviction that, if not a god, the plural will save us now. A strange response to “essentialism,” and no doubt a symptom of its “unfinished project,” we think ourselves safer in the vicinity of the many than in that of the one. There is a Right and there is a Left. There is liberalism and there is religiosity. And there is a profusion of modernities, countless capitalisms, and very many kinds of colonialisms.

None of this is patently false (whatever that might mean), and it is not the least of Dalsheim’s achievements skillfully to negotiate the vexing paradox of an analytic or political truth (the plurality of difference) shrouding the multiple folds of its covert unity. One surely does not wish to confuse the Left and the Right, the religious and the secular, the liberal and the fundamentalist, Rabin and Netanyahu—Bush

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and Obama. And yet, here and elsewhere, “the appearance of deep difference can enable the continuation of settler colonial practices while at the same time allowing people to maintain liberal values with a clear conscience, since someone other than the secular liberal subject can be blamed for the outcomes of those practices; someone else is doing worse than what we’ve done and left behind, we—living on Native American tribal land after centuries of genocide—who are opposed to such things” (p. 151). The insistence on difference, this well-honed process of projection that Michael Walzer, of all people, aptly designated as liberalism’s “art of separation,” reinscribes binary opposites, a logic of conflict and of separation. More important, it is an essential mechanism by which the plural occurs within, a “division [that] makes it possible to be in two places—one physical, one intellectual—at once” (p. 151). This is how a (collective) self becomes multiple and antagonistically divided, Dalsheim explains, “a split self” with two proverbially independent hands yet to achieve anything like a double consciousness.

Dalsheim’s anthropology of the religiously motivated settlers of the Gaza Strip, a rare and discomfiting contribution toward a new “portrait of the colonizer,” is demanding and literally (if I may) unsettling. It seeks to generate precisely such a double consciousness by de-exceptionalizing the distant and “repugnant other,” by attending to figures that, on the Israeli Jewish side, contradict established categories—or buttress established contradictions—while failing to undo the status quo, or even worsening it: the 2005 evacuation of these settlers cleared the ground for ferocious assaults on Gaza, which culminated in 2008–2009. The familiar ethos of the Israeli soldier who “shoots and cries” is thus complemented by an exploration of the “narcissism of minor differences” separating religious from secular (chap. 2) or unifying them in their rapport to the land (chap. 3); the uncertain and doubtful (as opposed to fanatical) believer (chap. 4); the Mizrahi (as opposed to anglophone Ashkenazi) settler (chap. 5); the redemptive politics of inaction (rather than militant

brutality), which rejects both state and “religious violence” (chap. 6); and the “left-wing rabbi” or “settler-left” who, along with others, propose the plain abandonment of state sovereignty because “commitment to God takes precedence over their commitment to the government or to the state” (chap. 7, p. 123).

More disturbing perhaps than the undoing performed by the Arab Jew upon which she draws, Dalsheim’s exploration of these sites of difference among and around the settlers makes it less easy to point to them as the expected culprit, or to write of them as a homogenous category (think Muslims in Europe, Dalsheim provocatively suggests), one that would be comfortably opposed to “secular left liberals.” It also makes it difficult to claim that the Left is “better,” less complicit than the Right (think secular left liberals in Europe, Dalsheim continues to push). Indeed, by introducing these differences, by insisting on the many over the one, Dalsheim works very much against the grain and reveals a truer and wider unity. She demonstrates that a terrifying achievement of colonial power (or is it “powers” now?)—of secularism and of liberalism too, if there is a difference—is its capacity to differentiate itself from itself, to operate in a dis-integrated manner, as it were schizophrenically, while nonetheless achieving with ruthless efficacy the singleness of its devastating and destructive purpose, left and right.