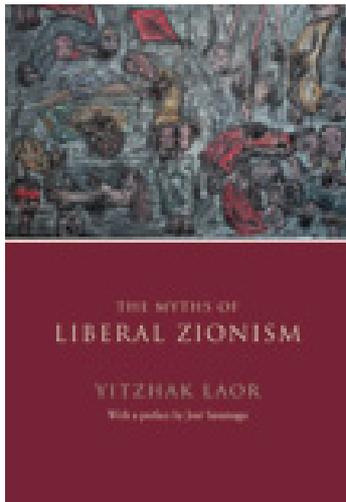


Yitzhak Laor, *The Myths of Liberal Zionism*, Verso, London 2009, 162 p., 23,99 €.



The book deals with the deep contradictions within Israeli society, the fact that a large majority of the population supports the brutal oppression of the Palestinian people, and the role of Israeli intellectuals and their counterparts in the West, particularly in France, in justifying the ongoing colonial endeavour in Palestine and in the "Greater Middle East". By stigmatizing an anti-racist attitude these "liberal" intellectuals try to delegitimize any criticism of atrocities the West has wrought upon the people of the East, the Muslims.

According to Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, the Jewish state was designed as a Western bulwark against the „barbarians“ of the East. The „normalization of the Jews“, so the Zionist reasoning, meant going to the Orient, the East and establish their own state. "The colonized Jews now tried to free themselves by colonizing others", writes the author. This kind of thought finds its famous expression in Ehud Barak's characterization of Israel as a „villa in the jungle“.

According to Yitzhak Laor, a famous Israeli poet, novelist and political activist, „Liberal Zionism“ is a myth and a contradiction in terms because Israeli „liberal Zionists“ believe that millions of Palestinians can be removed from their land, denied their human rights, fenced in so-called homelands or in a "huge ghetto" (Y. L.), and even killed in the name of the state.

The majority of Israelis see themselves als „Westerners“ and therefore part of the West. The creation of a „New Man“ which finds its expression in the „sabrah“ cult, can teach much about the „ideological makeup of the new Jewish society“ that settled in Palestine, so the author. Laor describes some traits of this „New Man“: courage and sacrifice, boldness and arrogance („Israeli chutzpah“). Furthermore, the „sabrah“ is described as „a victim of circumstances, or a victim of cruelty of the generation before him, or the cruelty of Jewish history. In short, he was expected to be cruel, yet his cruelty was forgiven 'in advance' for he was the historical answer to the riddle of Jewish history.“ This image has hardly changed over the generations. Laor cites Israeli literature in which „the others“ are described as the "ugly ones" from the Middle East, the Mizrahim or Oriental Jews, or the Holocaust survivor who was designated as a „podgy bald man“, or as a „despicable crook“. Central to Israeli ideology was the metamorphosis of the Jew from a non-Westerner to a Westerner candidate, so Laor. Despite this transformation process which Laor views as a fantasy, Israel can't be viewed as a Western country because 60 per cent of its population are Mizrahi Jews originating from various Arab countries. Speaking of „native culture“ the real natives, the Palestinians, are not subject of debate but rather the „sabrah“ as a starting point of „civilization“ allegedly connecting directly back to biblical times, so the Israelis argumentation.

According to Laor, there exists a „us/them“-relationship between Israel and Europe which has evolved in the last decade. „Israel is quite a hit in Europe.“ Israelis are living in an imaginary West, but the West sees Israelis as part of themselves. Laor calls this relationship „a late version of pieds noirs“. (The term characterized the withe french settlers and the Arab Jews in Algeria L. W.). According to the author, this European identification with the Israelis works even better with the „Holocaust culture“ that offers the new European „a better version of his own identity vis-à-vis the colonial past and the `postcolonial` present“. Israel apparently won the hearts and minds of public opinion in the West through a special use of "tarnished colonial sentiments" as one provocative thesis of the autor has it. Israel is, according to Laor, Europe's periphery, the last outpost facing „the Barbarians“. The criteria of what is „Western“ have always been based on „borders of white and/or Western Christianity“. So, Israel is part of the West only

according to „this very definition of Europe“. For Laor, it is nearly impossible to determine where Jewish Israel ends and the Arab world begins. The dividing line runs not between West and non-West, Palestinians and Jews, but traverses the Jewish people, as a people, or as a nation. Even the Jews from Europe were never made part of the Christian West even do to the nationalization the Jewish people underwent did make „us“ Westerners, so the author.

In chapter one „The Shoah belongs to us“ Laor states that Germany has provided the darkest chapter in its history to become the symbol of the new European identity: Holocaust Remembrance Day. It was invoked on January 27, 1996 by the President of Germany, Roman Herzog. „The Jewish genocide has since had a universal place in Western culture, as if this narrative had been there from the start.“ The author asks why Auschwitz was chosen as the symbol for this genocide and not Bergen-Belsen, which is at least located in Germany. Laor mentions that also the Nazis relegated the worst atrocities and horrors to an area outside the homeland, far to the East among the „inferior Slavs“. Perhaps Laor does not know that Auschwitz was in Upper Silesia which belonged to the German Reich. A new characteristic of the „new culture of philosemitism“ is the attempt to forge a German „Judeo-Christian“ identity of which the „Rabin“ and „Ben-Gurion“- streets are the obvious signs in many German cities. I think here Laor is overstressing the argument, because Rabin and Ben-Gurion are not connected to the Holocaust, and it seems that this street-naming affair is a parochial one. This „bogus Judeo-Christian tradition does not correspond to any concrete history; it is an ideological invention invoked against Islam, in which the Jew plays the role of the imaginary other“, so Laor. For the author, this newly constructed past serves as a cover for a new Islamophobia which recalls attitudes that Europe once displayed towards Jews. The message is clear: the Muslims must modernize, they must become „like everybody else“, like Europeans. For the new Europe, the commemoration of the Jewish genocide sacralizes new Europe’s liberal-humanist tolerance of „the Other (who is like us)“ and helps to redefine „the Other (which is different from us)“ in terms of Muslim fundamentalism, writes the author. One of the main protagonists of this „ideology of exclusion“ is the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut. In an interview with the Israeli newspaper „Ha'aretz“ he denied that the Holocaust could be put on par with the slave trade. Finkielkraut says that „the Holocaust alone can provide the definition of evil“. In that interview he condemned the „ideology of anti-racism“ in the following terms: „The generous notion of the struggle against racism has been terribly transformed into a false ideology. Anti-racism will be to the 21st century what Communism was to the 20th: a source of violence.“ Finkielkraut further differentiates between Western democracies and their Holocaust remembrance, on the one hand, and the „continuers of Auschwitz“, namely non-democratic regimes, on the other. On this base the new „ideology of exclusion“ was formed, which can be used as a justification to violate „the rights of others“.

In the chapter „The Right of Return (of the colonial)“, the author brings into the picture three main representatives of the „Israeli peace camp“: Amos Oz, David Grossmann and A. B. Yehoshua. They not only contribute to the demonisation of the Palestinian cause, but also promote Israel's wish to be part of the West and reap the benefits of the growing islamophobia in Europe. Laor reveals the hypocrisies and fantasies that make up this love-affair between „liberal Zionists“ and their European supporters. This was particularly obvious after the failure of the Camp David negotiations in July 2000, when together with Ehud Barak, then Israel’s prime minister, they put all the blame on Yassir Arafat, whereas the negotiations failed due to Barak’s intransigence. Barak’s „generous offer“ at the time was revealed as a hoax. Yet European media and politicians fell for it. „The authentic dimension of Oz’s fervor, apart from his total identification with (General) Ehud Barak, is his deep hatred toward the Palestinian desire and struggle,“ so Laor. Laor explains Oz’s anti-Muslim and anti-Arab images as an appeal to old Western colonial sentiments. The disdain toward Arabs and Muslims is interpreted by Laor as „the return to the colonial“. In an interview with „Ha'aretz“ from November 2005 he showed that he is „intellectually“ not far from Le Pen. Laor writes about the French philosopher: „The hapless Finkielkraut (...) drowned in his own identification with Israel and said out loud what he was meant to have kept to himself. He 'felt at home' talking to the Israelis – about the Holocaust and his own history, and about Muslims and Africans,

and Jews, and of course the West, the great defender of tolerance." The author continues: „Tragically enough, all too many Jews have taken up this dirty gauntlet, to express the old racism with a new form of invented history: 'the Judeo-Christian tradition', with one common enemy – Islam." The Right of Return of the Palestinians was transformed by Oz, Grossmann and Jehoshua into an existential argument which was eagerly taken up by their French counterparts like Bernard-Henri Levy and others and used in France to promote a „racist fear of immigrants“.

Beside the deconstruction of Amos Oz, Laor dedicates a special chapter to A. B. Yehoshua, a well known Israeli novelist and essayist, who is a Mizrahi Jew who (apparently) disdains his own background. Oz, Grossman and Yehoshua belong in Europa to the "good Israeli guys". But in Europe Yehoshua is not known for his hate of the East and his Mizrahi background, writes the author. He supported all Israeli wars, but what Laor found remarkable, was the brutality of Yehoshua's language. Thus, on the war against Lebanon in July 2006, Yehoshua said in Ha'aretz: „Finally we've got a just war, so we don't need to gnaw it too much until it becomes unjust.“ Over 1.000 Lebanese were killed and tens of thousands were made homeless. In an interview with Ha'aretz on March 18, 2004, titled „A nation that knows no bounds", before the publication of his book Mission of the Human Resource Man, the following parts (in italic) were redacted from the English version of the newspaper: „It's possible that there will be a war with the Palestinians. (...) Because after we remove the settlements and after we stop being an occupation army, all the rules of war will be different. We will exercise our full force. We will not have to run around looking for this terrorist or that instigator – we will make use of force against an entire population. We will use total force. Because from the minute we withdrew I don't even want to know their names, I don't want any personal relations with them.“ Laor cites quite a bit of the interview and asks at the end: „Would it be wrong to suggest that this is a fascist text?“ The real subject of this chapter is the deep hatred of Arabs that is found among Mizrahi Jews of which Yehoshua is a famous representative. The term Mizrahi ("oriental") was incidentally created after the birth of Israel in 1948. The newly created state defined the Jews from Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Iraq etc. within an older colonial discourse as Mizrahim ("orientals") – that is, in line with the prevailing division in the Western mind: East for Islam versus West for Christianity, so Laor.

Laor delivered a broadside against the so-called liberal Zionist's, especially A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz who, according to Laor, try hard to get some day the Nobel Prize in Literature. Having deconstructed Oz's work and deprived him of the mystique that surrounds him in the West, the Nobel Committee might think twice before presenting this prestigious award to him.

In lieu of a conclusion Laor quotes a scene from Hanoch Levin's play „Those who walk in the darkness“. Levin understood that the Israeli fantasy about the West is a wet dream. This reveals itself in the following scene:

Lazan Thought: I hang around Luxembourg ans Saint Germain, sit in Café de Flore and Brasserie Lipp, sleep at the Hotel Passy, will die in Neuilly, and will be buried in Père Lachaise. And you?

Ass Thought: We live in the gutter ...

Herring Thought: And will be buried in the sewer ...

Ass Thought: But dreaming of Paris.

But at the end I do object at the notion that Israel is not perceived as part of the West like Yitzhak Laor is arguing. Although Israel is not located in Europe it is culturally considered by the political elite as part of Europe in every way. It also takes part in all European sporting events (being that Israel was banned from the Asian sporting events by the Arab states). This has led to Israel virtually becoming part of

Europe. In the past several years some Israeli ministers have expressed that they would like to see Israel in the EU. Not to mention that leaders of the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland and Italy have publicly announced their support and hope that Israel will become an EU member. Most recently Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who visited Israel in February of 2010 said that his "greatest desire" is to see Israel join the European Union. It seems that the intellectual world is totally different from the political one.

Reading the book was a real treat. A translation into German is a must. Perhaps it will bring some light into the darkness.

Ludwig Watzal