# After Savagery: Gaza, Genocide, and the Illusion of Western Civilization

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## HAMID DABASHI

As Tufan al-Aqsa marks its second anniversary, the devastation in Gaza remains immense. Thousands have been killed in relentless Israeli bombardments, and countless children, the sick, and the elderly face starvation under a blockade that has systematically denied access to food, medicine, and humanitarian aid. Relief efforts to reach Gaza's besieged population have been deliberately obstructed, while global protests from India to the United States have been criminalized and severely repressed. Diplomatic initiatives and peace negotiations have yielded no lasting results. In a striking display of hypocrisy, several Western states complicit in the genocide against Palestinians have now moved to recognize Palestine as a state.

This prolonged and visible genocide, unfolding before a global public, has transformed the Palestinian question into a universal moral concern. The future of Palestine, therefore, is inseparable from the moral future of the world itself. It is within this morally and politically charged context that Hamid Dabashi's *After Savagery: Gaza, Genocide, and the Illusion of*

*Western Civilization* emerges as a work of critical urgency. Comprising six chapters, Dabashi's study interrogates the structures of Western power and thought, arguing that the ongoing genocide in Gaza exposes the moral exhaustion and philosophical bankruptcy of the Western intellectual and political tradition. Crucially, Dabashi positions Palestine not merely as a political site of resistance but as an epistemological vantage point, a locus from which to rethink the world and its moral possibilities.

One of the key aspects of Dabashi's book is that he does not view the genocide and savagery in Gaza as isolated events independent of the historical and epistemic structures that produced them. He traces their roots within Western philosophy itself. He writes that Western philosophy, often celebrated as the highest achievement of Western civilisation, is in fact a tribal and racist system that is inherently exclusive. The people of the Global South, he argues, exist categorically outside of it. They are seen as a metaphysical menace to Western philosophy and are denied the very metaphysical existence, and this metaphysical violence culminates in physical violence. The European history of colonialism, he notes, is the history of physically eliminating those people whose bodies are subjected to the same violence that Western philosophy had already enacted upon their souls, those who were metaphysically and ontologically killed long before.

This is a terrifying reality in the Palestinian case as well, where people are simply not considered human beings, an idea to which Israeli authorities repeatedly refer. "We are fighting human animals," Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant stated on October 9, 2023, "and we are acting accordingly." This haunting phrase, along with the solidarity statement issued by the celebrated Western philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whom Irfan Ahmad powerfully described as an "ethnic thinker par excellence" (1), exposes the false claim of universality and the moral bankruptcy of European philosophy. Dabashi holds the entirety of "Western philosophy" accountable for this unfolding terror and genocide in Gaza.

Dabashi further argues that the moral foundation of Western philosophy, especially in Kant's notion of the metaphysics of morals, is itself immoral and distinctly European in nature, which Kant, the philosophical grandfather of Heidegger and Habermas, calls "universal." Dabashi asks, how can racism be universal? Racism is not an accident of Western philosophy but part of its very structure. Within this racist philosophy, the wretched of the earth have no place, no room, no existential ontology. They mistakenly believed that the West's universal claims also spoke for them and that they were part of it, but Gaza has made it clear that they are not. Even before Gaza, Western philosophy had already revealed, through its language and logic, its exclusionary, racist, and dehumanising core. Therefore, Dabashi writes that "the task at hand is to read the metaphysics of morals at the foundation of Western civilisation as a metaphysics of barbarism." (p. 21)

While Dabashi's critique of the Enlightenment effectively exposes its racial underpinnings, it remains largely confined to the register of race and overlooks the religious and theological foundations of Enlightenment rationality. Unlike Dabashi, Irfan Ahmad persuasively argues in *Religion as Critique*, the Enlightenment was not merely a racial project but also a profoundly Christian one, a project that did not reject Christianity, as is commonly assumed, but rather reconfigured and re-evaluated it, positioning Islam as its essential Other. (2) Dabashi extends his critique of Western philosophy to the tradition of "Critical Theory" itself, particularly Adorno, in the section titled "Uncritical Theory." He argues that thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer, often celebrated as radical critics of fascism, remain deeply implicated in the very Eurocentric and colonial structures they claimed to oppose. Drawing on Gabriel Rockhill's analysis, Dabashi recalls how Adorno and Horkheimer, in a 1956 article, defended the imperial invasion of Egypt by Israel, Britain, and France during the Suez Crisis, referring to Nasser, one of the leading anti-colonial voices of the Non-Aligned Movement, as a "fascist chieftain." Such language, Dabashi notes, exposes the racial hierarchy within European critical thought, which is especially applied to Arab, African, and Muslim leaders, while no European dictator is described in such terms.

For Dabashi, this complicity represents not just an individual failure but a deeply rooted structural problem. Consequently, he argues that Adorno and his generation of European thinkers must be understood as the rightful descendants of the racist philosophies of Hegel and Kant. In his own words, "Their works have never been sufficient for our critical understanding of the global context. Their blinding Eurocentrism, their unfailing racist preoccupation with 'Western Civilization,' their numbing indifference to the world at large, and their astonishing ignorance of non-European critical cultures make them not entirely useless but, in fact, useful as symptoms of the disease they think they want to cure but instead exacerbate." (p. 54)

Dabashi continues his critical engagement with Adorno in Chapter 3, "Poetry After Genocide," where he responds to Adorno's well-known assertion that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Dabashi challenges this claim, arguing that such a view remains confined within a Eurocentric horizon that fails to engage with the moral and historical realities of the world beyond Europe, thereby revealing its inability to learn from or relate to experiences outside the European context. For him, poetry after genocide is not an act of barbarism but an affirmation of life, resistance, and the liberty of a people to fight against barbarism.

After exposing the structural racism embedded in the philosophies of Adorno, Hegel, and others, Dabashi turns to a detailed examination of Agamben's concept of the camp, extending Agamben's theorization to reveal its colonial genealogy. While Agamben identifies the camp as the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of modernity, Dabashi insists that it is, in fact, the paradigm of colonial modernity. Situating Israel as a garrison state and Palestine as a constellation of camps, he exposes how both are structurally intertwined forms of colonial domination. The colonial condition, overlooked in both Harold Lasswell's theory of the garrison state and Agamben's concept of the camp, is in fact their original site. Dabashi argues that the genocidal logic of the Holocaust was not an isolated event in Europe but a continuation of colonial violence long practiced in Africa and Asia. Before targeting their "internal Others" (the Jews), Europeans had already experimented with mass extermination and concentration camps in the colonies, a historical reality Agamben overlooks this fact due to the limits of his European imagination. Dabashi contends that the genocidal mechanisms used in German concentration camps prefigured the logic later applied by Zionists in Palestine. However, while Agamben studies European camps like Auschwitz and Buchenwald, he ignores Palestinian camps such as Yarmouk, Rafah, Khan

Younis, and others. Dabashi calls this omission an epistemic limitation, even in radical theory, that prevents him from grasping the global and colonial implications of the camp as a modern structure of power.

This moral and philosophical collapse that Dabashi traces within Western thought finds a resonant echo in Pankaj Mishra's reflections. Like Dabashi, Pankaj Mishra, in his article *The Shoah after Gaza* (3) and later in his book *The World After Gaza* (4), powerfully argues that the destruction of Gaza marks a decisive moral and civilizational rupture, the moment when the post-Holocaust moral order of the West, built on the vow of "Never Again," finally collapses. He contends that the memory of the Shoah, once a universal moral warning, has been transformed into a political instrument that legitimizes Zionist violence and shields Western complicity. Mishra sees October 7 as a profound rupture that divides time into a world before and after Gaza, leaving humanity caught between an insufficiently understood past and a menacing future.

Both Mishra and Dabashi thus converge on Gaza as an event that exposes the exhaustion of Western moral and epistemic traditions, Mishra articulating this collapse through the history of moral philosophy and Holocaust memory, and Dabashi through the philosophical genealogy of Western metaphysics and colonial power. Dabashi describes Palestine as "the bleeding wound of Western colonial projects," implying that the Palestinian genocide and occupation are direct outcomes of Western colonial modernity: moral, military, and epistemic. Hence, resistance cannot be merely political or military; it must also be moral, imaginative, aesthetic, and epistemic. The struggle for Palestine, therefore, must reshape the very foundations of how we think, imagine, and see the world. Dabashi insists that the Palestinian experience, with its history of Nakba (catastrophe), Intifada (uprising), and Sumud (steadfastness), should not be viewed merely as acts of survival or passive resistance but as conceptual frameworks and modes of knowing and resisting that disrupt Eurocentric paradigms of thought. By linking Palestine to decolonial theorists such as Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo, Dabashi situates it within a broader global struggle for epistemic decolonization, an effort to displace Europe as the center of thought. Ultimately, Dabashi contends that without Palestine, the global project of decoloniality and postcoloniality remains incomplete. It is Palestine, as an epistemological site of anticolonial contestation, not Europe, that offers the moral and epistemic ground for a new moral and intellectual order.

After this entire discussion, where Palestine should emerge as an epistemic epicentre, Dabashi's proposal as a postcolonial scholar carries certain limitations. Dabashi proposes what he calls a syncretic Palestinian liberation theology, a framework that transcends Islamic, Jewish, and Christian theologies. Dabashi's formulation of this syncretic Palestinian liberation theology appears appealing at first, but it also exposes a tension within his own project. While he calls for an epistemic decolonisation rooted in Palestine's lived experience, he simultaneously sidelines Islam as a distinct intellectual and spiritual source of resistance. In doing so, Dabashi risks reproducing the very epistemic erasure he attributes to European philosophers like Kant, Hegel, and Agamben, thinkers who universalised knowledge while ignoring non-European categories of thought. By framing the future of Palestine primarily in ecumenical terms, Dabashi abstracts the Islamic moral and civilizational dimension of the struggle, even though Islam has historically shaped the Palestinian consciousness of justice, resistance, and liberation. His treatment of Islam as sectarian also neutralises the spiritual foundations of resistance. Moreover, Dabashi's persistent emphasis on overcoming "sectarianism" implicitly positions Islam merely as a sectarian identity rather than as a civilizational and epistemic framework. In doing so, he risks casting Islam as something that must be transcended or domesticated within a universal, non-sectarian framework. This move echoes the secular-liberal impulse of Western critical thought, where religion, especially Islam, is often seen as an obstacle to modernity rather than as a potential site of liberation and moral, epistemic, and political renewal. Dabashi's framework thus remains caught between critique and complicity, attempting to provincialise Europe while still operating within the secular logic of its epistemic order.

Furthermore, Dabashi speaks of both a post-Islamist and a post-Zionist Jewish liberation theology in parallel, envisioning them as complementary theological projects of decolonization. However, this symmetry flattens a crucial asymmetry. While Zionism is a colonial project sustained by imperial power, Islamism, despite its internal diversities, has largely emerged as an anti-colonial response. By placing them on the same plane of “post-” transcendence, Dabashi risks equating the colonizer’s theology with the colonized’s resistance.

In sum, the central concern is that Dabashi’s portrayal of Palestine as merely another chapter of Western colonialism is analytically insufficient. The current Palestinian genocide is not occurring in the lawless context of historical colonialism but in an age defined by the United Nations, international conventions, and human rights discourse. It is happening in real time, before the eyes of the world, which remains both morally outraged and politically impotent to stop it. This unprecedented visibility and the failure of global governance render the Palestinian genocide exceptional, unique in its conditions, its spectatorship, and its exposure of the profound contradictions of the international order. Moreover, reducing Palestinian resistance to a purely secular narrative effectively suppresses the religious and spiritual dimensions that animate a significant part of the struggle, from the sanctity of Al-Aqsa to the theological meanings attached to steadfastness and martyrdom.

Dabashi largely omits Islam as a moral, political, and epistemic category in his analysis of Palestine and in his envisioning of its future, revealing a significant epistemic limitation in his postcolonial scholarship. Denying Islam in the discourse on Palestine is itself a product of secular colonial power that disciplines Muslims and erases their political subjectivity. Even in a book written in the aftermath of October 7, there is a conspicuous silence regarding Hamas and its role as a central actor in both resistance and the imagination of Palestine’s future. This deliberate omission raises critical questions about Dabashi’s framing of Palestinian agency. By effacing the Islamic intellectual and political dimensions of the struggle and overlooking its primary agents, he inadvertently reproduces the same epistemic exclusion he attributes to Western thought.

Such an omission is not merely analytical; it is profoundly political and epistemological. When read alongside Muneeza Rizvi’s powerful intervention in *Palestine and the Question of Islam* (5), Dabashi’s framework appears insufficient to capture the full moral, spiritual, and civilizational depth of the Palestinian question. While Dabashi’s postcolonial humanism situates the Palestinian struggle within a broader critique of empire and Orientalism, Rizvi reclaims an Islamic moral vocabulary that resists the secular compartmentalization of faith and politics. Her intervention thus restores to Palestine a spiritual depth and ethical totality that transcends the limits of secular decolonial frameworks. From this position, re-centring Islam does not signify a regression to "sectarianism," as Dabashi fears, but rather a reclamation of an epistemic and moral horizon long suppressed by Western secular paradigms. Recognising Palestine as an Islamic issue thus enables a move beyond Dabashi's postcolonial humanism toward a genuinely decolonial project, rooted in the everyday experiences of Palestinians and grounded in the spiritual, civilizational, and epistemic ethos of Islam.

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