

OPINION PAPER (PARADIGM RESPONSE)

As If You Were There

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What is involved in framing a counterfactual? Let's say I have a daydream about living in Shakespeare's time. Who would I be and what would I do? Well, I'd go to the Globe, that much I know for sure, and bring a notebook. Of course, it is impossible for me to have lived in Shakespeare's time, for the "me" that is having this reverie is the result of genealogies, circumstances, and relationships that cannot be displaced from the second half of the twentieth century without tearing apart the structure of all world history. To have this imagination, I must first assume that there is a "me" that can be transported into times and places whose definition excludes that "me." Perhaps the concept of an essential self or soul derives from the wish to pursue such scenarios beyond the point at which they crash into inescapable contradictions.

Daniel Boyarin's thought experiment in "The New Jewish Question" involves going back to an attested moment in the history of "the nation of the Jews" before "Statism, the insistence on sovereignty for the nation" had monopolized the conversation. At the moment examined by Dmitry Shumsky's *Beyond the Nation-State*, most of the world population identifiable as Jewish lived in big multi-confessional empires: Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian.¹ The Wilsonian ideal of homogeneous blocks of "self-determining" citizenship had yet to be imagined. And so it was not self-evident that the aims of Zionism were to be achieved by racking up the Westphalian criteria of statehood (independence, secure borders, a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, international recognition); rather, it was perfectly rational and realistic for those who desired nationality for the Jews to think of it in terms other than those of exclusive territorial dominion. A form of condominium that gave recognition, though not necessarily sovereignty, to Jews would have been a gain for most. Even in countries where Jews enjoyed full civil rights, these rights had only recently emerged from the shadowy condition of "tolerance"; indeed, the rise of explicitly

¹ Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); see also Noam Pianko, *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

anti-Semitic political parties in 1870s France and Prussia served as a reminder of the fragility of equal status. So to put ourselves back in the minds of those visionaries of 1880 requires us to forget a lot of what we know about the present State of Israel. Renan said that a nation is formed by people having certain memories in common, and no less by their agreeing not to bring to mind certain things about the past.² The challenge of Boyarin's article to the reader is: Can you project certain currently foreclosed possibilities into the future and agree not to "know" certain facts or assumptions that, under the conditions set by those past-future possibilities, would never have happened? Some readers have difficulties with the article precisely because they are unable to forget or to project in these ways. To them the article seems to be playing a trick. Like the "me" that phantasmically wanders around Shakespeare's London, those readers' concept of identity, it seems, is unable to let go of certain historical features, and thus the intended thought-experiment stumbles.

To put it crudely, it seems that ungenerous readers see Boyarin as seeking to use Shumsky's historical research as a way of getting "the Jews" off the hook for the crimes of the State of Israel against the dispossessed Palestinians. Naturally, because that is such a crude way of putting the matter, no one will articulate it in quite that way. Rather, Boyarin's participation in the grieving for the victims of American anti-Black racism, signaled on the article's title page by its commemorating Breonna Taylor and George Floyd with the ritual exclamation *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, "May the One whose Name is blessed avenge their blood," was held against him in one discussion that I have witnessed, where a reader found it "odd to begin with BLM ... [It seems] that Boyarin tries to shield himself from certain criticisms from the left by (instrumentally) mobilizing Fanon and threading in a BLM subtext (evident from the dedication and some of the notes). There is something strategically indirect and non-transparent here."³ *Instrumentally, strategically indirect and non-transparent*: this person was unwilling to credit an author with sincere grief for Taylor, Floyd, or the state of the American union, or with sincere interest in Fanon, if he belongs to a group that is, in some milieux, always suspected of dual loyalties and cynical calculations. If "Jews" are aggressors, they have no right to mourn (or cite) the victims of aggression.

I am perturbed by this way of thinking. That person's distrust of Boyarin and his attempt to think differently about the history of the last century or so is redolent of an essentialist theory about "the Jews," whereby all members of that group are collectively responsible for crimes imputed to some of them, none can possibly be exempt, and the deaths of people belonging to other groups must be held "ungrievable" by them, so as to shield legitimate grief from instrumentalization and crocodile tears.⁴ If that's how we think, we can give up on the notion of justice.

² Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha, trans. Martin Thom (London: Routledge, 1990), 8–22.

³ Personal communication from anonymous correspondent, September 2020.

⁴ On making a distinction between lives that are "grievable" and "ungrievable," see Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso Books, 2016).

In a little book of mine, *Are We Comparing Yet?*, which Boyarin does me the honor of citing, I examine what it means to say that two things are “not comparable”—usually more of a moral than a cognitive claim. And conversely, what does it mean to say that they are comparable? What are people arguing about when they express these opposed views, and is it the same thing for both? I take the violent reaction to Boyarin’s analogies to be a symptom of nervousness about comparisons. Certainly, there are reasons to be nervous. By refusing comparison, people are often claiming an exclusive right to something: to virtues, to qualities, to truth, to pain. Or they may be resisting a tyrannical standard. “Les nègres sont comparaison,” said Fanon in 1952, speaking of Martiniquian insecurity and competition, and he wasn’t in favor of it.⁵ The anonymous critic took Boyarin to be using comparison in a territorial sense, as a total subsumption of the things compared under a concept rather than a putting into contact, a subsumption, moreover, that must encompass all aspects of the comparanda. That does not correspond to my reading of the article.

Will it have been true in all possible worlds that the Zionists oppress the Palestinians? Is that a necessary feature of the definition of “the Jews” for any possible observer? I doubt that. I tend to think that, if the political possibilities to which Shumsky and Boyarin return had become realities, “the Jews” would have experienced a different history, been affected by it diversely, and therefore could not have been identical to the group that today goes by that name. If we are to respect Jewish people, singularly or collectively, as moral agents in history, we have to allow them the ability to change circumstances and be changed by them. I rather suspect that that is the “last chance” of which Fanon felt cheated; anyone would feel cheated by the reduction of one’s agency to the acting out of a few qualities.

Boyarin is rightly suspicious of the kind of universalism that requires a sacrifice of one’s individuality, one’s preexisting commitments, one’s way of life, as a condition of acceptance. And yet generality has its uses. We all participate in structures that demand that we show up as impoverished versions of ourselves. For example, voting. Once I have identified myself at the polling place and been matched with a name on the electoral rolls, I do my voting in an anonymized manner. In a booth, unobserved, I indicate my choices on the ballot without leaving any other traces of my personality. These are then compiled for a collective decision. My votes are not bundled with others as they would be in a *millet* system: such packages as “the white vote,” “the teacher vote,” “the Episcopalian vote” would serve only to discount my individual preferences. And indeed, when we see attempts to bundle votes in that way, as happens through districting practices designed to ensure majorities and representation for some and to block them for others, we are rightly scandalized. Targeted political advertising, addressed to some algorithmically defined audience rather than (as a billboard is) to the passerby in general, also fails the sunshine test, particularly when different constituencies receive different promises from the

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* ([1952]; reprint Seuil, 1975), 170.

same advertiser.⁶ When we reject those slicings and dicings of political will, we are demanding that we be treated equally as members of a generality and given proper access to it. I don't think Boyarin would disagree, though in his *fougue* he emphasizes the things universalism tends to filter out. My nearest-to-hand example of frustrated generality is the US presidential voting system, where the Electoral College bundles votes in such a way that my ballot is valued, not as a vote *tout court*, but as "a vote from Illinois," which is worth less than a vote from Wyoming but more than a vote from North Carolina.⁷ Particularity, in such a system, takes more from me than it gives back.

Boyarin is right to question the division of labor that puts culture and religion under the category of "spiritual goods" and political power under that of "material goods." Both kinds of goods, in his view, belong to an undivided set of material attributes. We might, however, ask how the division arose in the first place. My sense (very schematic) of the history is that medieval and early modern Europeans did not conceive of political affiliations separately from religious ones. Christian kings ruled in the name of the Christian God. Wars of religion were inevitable: crusades against nonbelievers, purges against heretics. Then, with the Westphalian system, which put an end to the bloodiest phases of inter-Christian conflict, and later with the reforms that introduced tolerance, an arrangement was reached whereby the spiritual matters were left to the spiritual authorities and the temporal ones to the temporal authorities. The spiritual authorities couldn't very well refuse because, by their own code, theirs was the superior part.⁸ Not to have politics subordinate to religion was, I think, a good thing. But the move implies a Christian account of church and state, and may not have the same meaning, or any meaning, in another religious framework. One of the tasks Boyarin invites us to take on is rethinking the distinction in other than Christian terms. More than just words will be unsettled if we do so. I am reminded of an old joke about a door-to-door evangelist. At one house, the resident shoos him away: "I'm an atheist," the householder explains. The missionary replies with a smile: "Well, isn't it the same God, after all?" The easy way to take the joke is to suppose that it's about the missionary's ignorance: he's never heard of atheists, so he supposes that the Atheists are just another religious denomination like the Presbyterians, the Quakers, the Muslims, the Jews, the Mormons, and so on. We laugh because we know that one of these things is not like the others. But a finer kind of humor comes if we regard the atheists as no different from the Presbyterians, and so forth: all of them, in this atheistic interpretation, are praying to the same God, which is an empty signifier. In that case, the missionary's right, though we might wonder what exactly he is ringing doorbells for.

⁶ See Carole Cadwalladr and Emma Graham-Harrison, "Revealed: 50 Million Facebook Profiles Harvested for Cambridge Analytica in Major Data Breach," *The Guardian*, March 17, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>).

⁷ See John A. Tures, "The Electoral College System Isn't 'One-Person-One-Vote,'" (<https://theconversation.com/the-electoral-college-system-isnt-one-person-one-vote-150342>).

⁸ Matthew 22:21: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." See also Luke 10:38-42 (the story of Martha and Mary, taken as a comparison of the active life and the contemplative one).

Just so, we realize that we can't quite say "this religion and that religion, they're all just religions, after all," even when the state enjoins us to do so. We treat them as equivalent not because they are in truth equivalents (there is no point of view, not even the atheist's, from which they can be entirely the same thing), but because treating them as such is the condition of living side by side and not perturbing one another with claims of precedence. I realize that this position is not very avant-garde; it may very well be "secular" in a sense that many people I read with fascination disprize.⁹ But it is certainly possible to move fluently between the registers of particularity and generality. We do it all the time. Coordination of action could not happen were it not for such shifting. Another joke to mark this point: "You know you're living in a liberal state when, on Mother's Day, you bring flowers to your mother." "–What, that's ridiculous, that has nothing to do with politics!" "–In an illiberal state, on Mother's Day you bring flowers to the dictator's mother."¹⁰ In the second case, saying "Well, she is a mother, after all" is decidedly inadequate to the threat posed to one's particularity by another particularity posing as universal. Because it makes exclusive claims to territory, authority backed by threat ("keeping the peace"), and allegiance, the nation-state has what it takes to supersede your affinity to an individual mother, and this is something to be wary of.

The nonsovereign nation is both a thought experiment and a condition experienced by those who, within currently delineated nation-states, sense their collective non-coterminousness with the state envelope. This, I surmise, was the condition of the revivers of the Jewish national idea chronicled by Shumsky and Pianko. The efforts to think a Black nation, a queer nation, a nation of civil disobedience, and the like sketch the contours of partial belonging, a "doubled solidarity" according to Boyarin. The disappointments of the postcolonial order have brought forth, for similar reasons, "nonsovereign futures" that depart from the imagined teleological path.¹¹ It would be a pity if these were responded to only with the conceptual apparatus of a state theory that has already met widespread disenchantment.

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⁹ See Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Loosely based on actual events in Turkmenistan under Niyazov.

¹¹ Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); "Unsettling Sovereignty," *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (2017): 330–39.

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