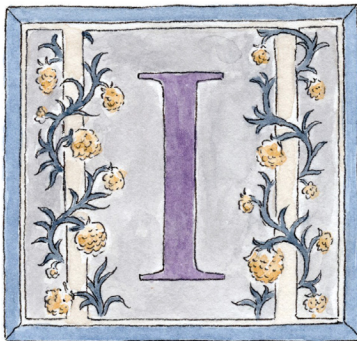


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Root-Causism

The long-running obsession with single ‘root causes’ will never solve the problems of the Middle East



IMMEDIATELY after news of Hamas’s October 7 massacres broke—before it was known just what had happened, before the shock of the cruelty had been absorbed (which will, perhaps, never happen)—instant, and astonishingly confident, analyses of the event’s “root cause” emerged. On October 7 itself, the Democratic Socialists of America, once the home of Michael Harrington’s humane liberal Zionism, issued a statement asserting that the attack was “a direct result of Israel’s apartheid regime”; numerous student groups quickly followed with similar responses. Since then, there has been a cascade of “root causism,” especially from those who identify as pro-Palestinian. Nour Odeh, a political analyst and former Palestinian Authority spokesperson, told *PBS NewsHour* of “the root cause of all this misery,” by which she meant “the occupation.” Marwan Muasher, formerly Jordan’s foreign minister, referred to “the root cause of the problem, which is the

occupation.” Columbia University professor Rashid Khalidi explained on *Democracy Now!* that “the context is settler colonialism and apartheid.” In a subsequent interview he told me, “Any event has multiple causes” but that the “correct origin point” is the Balfour Declaration: “Everything follows a pattern that is set then.”

I firmly believe that Israel will never know peace until a just political solution with the Palestinian people is implemented (though it’s possible that Iran and jihadist terror groups will pursue their intention to destroy Israel even then); during last year’s democracy protests in Israel, leftists referred to the occupation as “the elephant in the room.” Zionism is self-determination, not rule over others. But wouldn’t an event of October 7’s magnitude have multiple causes, from Saudi-Israeli rapprochement to pathological hatred of Jews qua Jews? (See under: Hamas Covenant, suicide bombings, etc.) Most people resisting oppression — indeed, most Palestinians living under the occupation — don’t respond by murdering babies, burning families alive, and raping women. Couldn’t there be numerous factors at work?

“On social media, and in conversations, the root cause is the occupation, settler colonialism, the Holocaust, the Dreyfus case, European imperialism,” notes Michael Kazin, a professor of history at Georgetown. “People are always looking for the magic answer to complicated questions.” On the Israeli Right, too, there was talk of a root cause, which was variously identified as the Oslo Accords, the 2005 pullout from Gaza, or the presumably essentialist nature of the Palestinians.

These hasty “analyses” irritated and fascinated me. It’s banal to say that the attacks did not come out of the blue; no event does. Or to insist that they are embedded in a context; every event is. But these explanations were depressingly formulaic, as if the speakers were on autopilot. In a 1954 essay called “Understanding and Politics,” Hannah Arendt wrote, “Each event in human history reveals

an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend...the significance of all origins.” Moreover, there is a gap between the political causes that underlie an event and what I would call its moral texture. It was precisely the newness — and the sadistic nature of Hamas’s violence — that these instant analysts seemed unwilling, even frightened, to contend with. As Hamas spokesmen have eagerly explained, they aimed to change the existing political equation, not only in Israel but in the larger region as well; and they have. They also altered the moral calculus. Why the inability of these analysts to think anew, to acknowledge that things have changed? Why the inability to grapple with complexity? What is the lure of finding a root cause, and what does one *do* with it once it has, presumably, been found?

Millions of words have been written attempting to explain world-altering events such as World War I, the Russian Revolution, the rise of fascism, the development of totalitarianism, and, especially, the Holocaust. My students often tell me something they learned in high school: that the Versailles Treaty caused the Holocaust or, at least, the Nazi ascension to power. There is a valuable insight here: National humiliation is a fearsome, potent force. But I point out that the Nazis were a tiny, marginal party for more than a decade after Versailles — and that, in any event, there is a great distance, and no straight line, between Versailles and Treblinka, just as the Balfour Declaration did not predetermine October 7. A lot of bad things had to happen, and a lot of bad choices had to be made, to transform one into the other. Nothing was preordained.

One of the most acclaimed, and contested, accounts of the Holocaust is Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, which posits that a deep-seated culture of German eliminationist anti-semitism was the primary cause of the genocide. Historian Götz Aly found a different answer in *Why the Germans? Why the Jews?»: German*

envy of Jewish success, material and other. These are important books, and each offers crucial insights. But surely a continent-wide event involving millions of people had an almost dizzying number of factors and contingencies. Every root cause leads not to a definitive answer but, rather, to another set of questions.

Middle Eastern politics have been particularly prone to root-causism. At least since the 1950s, it has been a truism within the Arab world that the existence of Israel was responsible for the region's underdevelopment and chronic violence; accordingly, the defeat of the Jewish state was the road to Arab renewal. (A fixation on Israel as both hated enemy and mysterious neighbor weaves through Egyptian writer Yasmine El Rashidi's haunting novel *Chronicle of a Last Summer*.) The Arab Spring was an on-the-ground refutation of this concept: For the first time in modern history, millions of courageous Egyptians, Syrians, Tunisians, Libyans, and others streamed into the streets demanding rights, freedom, citizenship, and liberation from their hated homegrown dictators. The rallying cries "The people want the fall of the regime!" and "Karama!" ("Dignity!") replaced "Death to Israel!"

The catastrophic results of those uprisings—the brutal military dictatorship in Egypt, the even more brutal civil wars in Syria and Yemen, the violent dissolution of Libya, the reversal of democratic gains in Tunisia—should have put the Israel-first (or Israel-only) concept to rest, because the Jewish state played no role in either the uprisings or their defeats. But the Hamas attacks and the subsequent war in Gaza have thrust the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the almost mythological power of the Nakba, back onto center stage with a vengeance, essentially obliterating all other causes. As Ghazi Hamad, a senior Hamas official, told a Lebanese television station in the wake of the attack: "The existence of Israel is what causes all that pain, blood and tears." And whereas some Arab countries

may have dropped the obsession with Israel, the ayatollahs in Tehran have taken up the mantle with fanatical vigor. Iran itself can be seen as a root-cause regime, one whose major institutions are organized around the conviction that Israel is the ur-evil that must be defeated at any cost.



The lure of the root cause isn't confined to the Middle East; it is alive and well here at home. The American Left's most influential thinker is popular precisely *because* of his monolithic thinking. Throughout a long career, Noam Chomsky has analyzed virtually every international conflict through the prism, and as the result, of U.S. imperialism. This enables his followers to believe that they understand the bewildering nature of the world in which we live and to center the U.S. as the prime motor in world politics, thereby denying agency to pretty much everyone else. It is a strange combination of American guilt and American narcissism.

In the past several years, root-cause thinking has become prevalent in much of American academia, the “mainstream” media, and a swathe of corporate America. Our society is undeniably permeated by deep inequalities, but is racism — “systemic” or otherwise — really the only explanation for every phenomenon from low reading scores to Donald Trump's populist power? Slavery is certainly a foundational part of our history, without which the American experience cannot be comprehended. But can every event, starting with the American Revolution, be seen as a subsidiary reflection of the slave regime? (And isn't the struggle *against* slavery and other forms of oppression an equal part of the American tale?) Talk of racism as America's “DNA” is another form of root-causism and, like other versions of the concept, deeply fatalistic. Its proponents seem alarmingly unaware of the fact

that injecting biological terms into politics has proved to be a dangerous endeavor.

Post-colonialism and “decolonialism” are root-cause ideologies that have taken hold in (dare I say colonized?) numerous academic departments; institutions including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and NYU (my own) have programs and a capacious menu of courses devoted to them. At my university, students have been offered “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” “Poetry and the Politics of Decolonization,” and “Decolonizing NYC,” among many others.

In this view, the anti-colonial revolutions of the post-World War II period failed to create new dispensations. On the contrary, the subsequent trajectories of those nations—which, especially in the Middle East, are often tormented by dictatorship, corruption, poverty, religious persecution, oppression of women, illiteracy, terrorism, and religious-ethnic violence—must be attributed to colonialism, which has apparently persisted for decades after its presumed overthrow. In his 2004 book *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, Albert Memmi described this as “a new reality . . . of people who were once but are no longer colonized” but “sometimes continue to believe they are.” The world is divided into a Manichean binary: the global south versus the developed north, the colony versus the metropole, the indigenous versus the settler-colonial, the marginalized versus the privileged. (And underneath it all: the good versus the bad.) As Kian Tajbakhsh, an Iranian-American international-affairs scholar and democracy activist, recently argued in *Liberties*, this paradigm may have made political sense at the time of the anti-colonial revolutions, but it has become absurdly anachronistic in the decades since; he described decolonialism as an “often bizarre messianic theory, premised on a stupendously simplified picture of what is in fact a maddeningly complicated and tragically fragmented world.” An infelicitous development is at work here: As the world becomes

less simple, political analysis becomes more simple. Like Lot's wife, post-colonialists are mesmerized by the past; they reject Arendt's idea of bringing newness into the world.

Post-colonialism's close cousin is settler-colonialism, which may be an even more powerful contemporary political concept. Though rooted in the past, it addresses the present and has plans for the future. To its adherents, Zionism is the prime example of settler-colonialism—and the one that can, and must, be dismantled. “The pervasiveness of this notion goes well beyond academic programs,” observes Steven Zipperstein, a Stanford historian. “It is manifest everywhere. It's how you understand the world, and it intersects with Zionism, which emerges as the greatest sin of all.”



Root-causism is the fundamentalism of intellectuals (and activists). It dispenses with dialectics, uncertainty, contingency, agency. It also lacks a tragic sensibility: the knowledge that our greatest victories can be our most severe defeats; that failure and loss without compensation or meaning are part of the human condition; that contingency and finitude, which is to say mortality, define us. The acceptance of these truths is sorely needed at the present, and dire, political moment in which we find ourselves.

Root-causism lacks humility, too. Not everything can be “mastered,” as the Germans would say: certainly not instantly or completely. Human beings are puzzling creatures, ones that, as Primo Levi wrote, are capable of constructing “an infinite enormity of pain.” Our capacity for cruelty should continue to shock us; there are some things to which we should not be reconciled and that we don't entirely comprehend. After the Shoah, the historian Isaac Deutscher, whose worldview was rooted in rational Marxism, expressed a sense of profound

ethical bewilderment. In an essay called “The Jewish Tragedy and the Historian,” he wrote, “We are confronted here by a huge and ominous mystery of the degeneration of the human character that will forever baffle and terrify mankind.” Deutscher’s usual analytic tools faltered when confronting this; he suggested that we might need a tragedian — an Aeschylus or Sophocles — to help us understand it.

In Joshua Harmon’s play *Prayer for the French Republic*, now playing on Broadway, a Jewish-French family called the Salomons faces resurgent antisemitism in the midst of cosmopolitan Paris. In the last scene, the family asks itself, “Why do they hate us?” A cascade of suggestions follows, including “We’re different!” and “We’ve survived!” It’s clear that the history of the Jewish people would be drastically different if there were one simple answer. But alas, there is no root cause.

Benny Morris, one of Israel’s finest historians, takes a nuanced view of the root-cause explanations that flourished after October 7. “From the Palestinian perspective, pointing to the occupation as a root cause for the Hamas attack certainly has some legitimacy,” he told me. “The Israeli boot has been on the Palestinians since 1967.” And, he adds, “from 1948: The Palestinians were driven out, though they started the war. I would add that jihadism and religious fanaticism are a root cause as well. Children in the Gaza Strip are inculcated from a very young age: Jews are the enemy, and you have to kill them. That accounts for the viciousness of the attack. Hamas attacked Israel because it hates Israel.” A longtime observer of the region’s apparently inexhaustible forms of destruction, he adds, “As usual in the Middle East, there is enough blame to go around.” The Middle East may lack for many things, but as Morris says, it offers “root causes for everybody.” *