
Eyal Sivan: ‘If Israel Is a Model of Democracy for the West, That Scares Me’

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il manifesto



Director, producer, essayist and film lecturer Eyal Sivan has built up with each of his films a narrative of Israel seen from the “inside,” through a passionate interrogation of memory and a gaze in constant dialogue with the present and the reality of the world. From the Israel-Palestine conflict to the Holocaust (*A Specialist* retraced the Eichmann trial under the guidance of Hannah Arendt), each scene manages to achieve a refounding of the imaginary around the issues being focused on.

This might also be part of the reason why his works have often been controversial or at the center of heated debates, such as *Route 181* (2004), made with Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi, a road movie that takes place along the border line set out by the 1947 UN resolution (never implemented) that established a possible binational state.

Sivan, born in Haifa, an activist against the Occupation from a very young age, a photographer before he was a filmmaker, refused military service and moved to Paris in 1985. We interviewed him on the phone from Marseille, where he lives today.

In one of your early films, *Izkor: Slaves of Memory* (1991), you analyzed the way in which Israel, in its narrative, uses history to justify choices in the present. Since October 7, the day of the Hamas terrorist attack, the Israeli government has been constantly using the comparison between Nazism and Hamas.

Izkor, which you mentioned, is a film from over 30 years ago. The most terrible thing is that there’s nothing new in this process; sometimes I feel like everything has been said already. The Israeli ambassador’s gesture of showing up at the UN with the Star of David on his chest confirms this conclusion.

The intention is to forget that what happened on October 7 did not begin at that time, and using the dialectic of the Shoah to frame it is a desecration of the memory of the Shoah itself, which is debased by being reduced to terrorism. As a human being, as a Jew, I see this as an insult towards my family history. Instrumentalizing the Shoah to justify any action harkens back to that victimhood ideology, strongly established in our society, which says that when someone is a “victim” they are in a position of “absolute innocence” – something that does not exist as such. But it doesn’t matter: we, because we are victims of the Shoah, are allowed to do anything, even bombing a refugee camp, hospitals, schools – our “total innocence” absolves us. Such a view is nothing other than a desecration of memory and a form of revisionism.

If Hamas are Nazis, then does the Holocaust and Nazism become nothing more than terrorism? What about the millions of people exterminated by Hitler’s ideology? Europe accepts this rhetoric about Nazism because it’s a good way to evade its own responsibility: viewing the Holocaust as terrorism tells us that killing all European Jews wasn’t that serious after all. In this way, the historical uniqueness of the Shoah is lost.

And there’s another point here: it wouldn’t be possible to seek any peace agreement with the Nazis, right? Or negotiate, or attempt a prisoner exchange. Within the framework of this comparison, any possibility of mediation is eliminated. But the Israelis are “condemned” to live with the Palestinians, even if they continue in this mass slaughter – with a shocking number of Palestinians killed that is moving increasingly closer to the notion of genocide. So, Israel, after denouncing crimes against humanity time and time again, finds itself in the position of committing them. It is truly a suicidal policy for all Israelis.

Many European countries, including Germany and France, have banned demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine, while criticism of Israeli policy is branded as anti-Semitism. At the same time, acts of anti-Semitism are multiplying.

Right-wing, liberal-conservative European governments are playing with fire. There is a real danger of importing this conflict into Europe, which is already characterized by repressive policies against immigration, by Islamophobia; and the attitude expressed towards this conflict seems to be intended to set aside the issues that are internal to European countries.

Defining any criticism of Israeli policy as “anti-Semitic” again harkens back to that “state of exception” – a highly ambivalent one – that Israel enjoys, in everything from the bombing of Gaza in 2007 to the attacks by settlers that have resulted in many deaths.

The whole world has let Israel do these things, against all international law. Israel enjoys the power to act without limits, precisely because of that “state of exception”: what applies to others doesn’t apply to them. However, this policy by European governments has been counterproductive for Israel: the fact that it was able to go ahead with its crimes, committed well before October 7, has put Jews, Israelis, in more and more danger.

In official Israeli government documents released last week, there is a plan to expel Gazans into the Egyptian Sinai desert. Do you think this is possible? It reads that “they will be helped by their Arab and Muslim brothers.” But we know that in the Arab world, this whole business of solidarity with the Palestinians is quite hypocritical.

That document turns out to have been drafted on October 3, and it reflects Israeli policy since 1948, which can be summarized as the greatest possible land area and the smallest possible Arab population. The difference today is that, as the most radical far right has come into government, they can finally – as they say – get the job done that wasn't finished in '48. This is the great dream, or illusion, of expelling the Palestinians from the collective consciousness – something that, moreover, has already been going on since Gaza became an open-air prison, since the walls were built that eliminated millions of Palestinians from the common space, in the perception of both Israel and Europe.

Regarding the Arab countries, no matter what they're saying, their dictatorial regimes are friends of the West: this applies to Egypt with its 60,000 political prisoners as much as to the Gulf countries. The Arab populations are under the heel of these dictatorships, but the Western countries only care about safeguarding their profits.

I don't expect anything from the Arab countries: Al-Sisi is negotiating whatever suits him in terms of money, weapons, debt cancellation, and if they reach a favorable agreement, he will take in the Palestinians in the desert. There is no Arab policy of solidarity, it's all about individual states and economic interests. The same goes for Turkey: it accepted Syrian refugees for money, promising the Europeans to "hold them back," so it would have a free hand in repressing the Kurds. Instead of solidarity, I would call it a general businesslike attitude.

That Israeli plan confirms that the current conflict is neither ethnic nor blood-based, but political; that is how it should be seen and treated.

In Israel, before the start of the war, there seemed to be an opposition movement against the government.

I would not use the word "war": it might be one on the Israeli side, but the Palestinians don't have an army. In my view, war is a clash of equal forces. This is a military operation and an assault on the civilian population. Just as the Hamas attack of October 7 is not an act of war, but terrorism. Before that day, it was like Israel was enjoying a picnic on top of a volcano. With the widespread belief among Israelis that they were fine, that they felt safe enough to organize a festival on the border with Gaza without thinking about the possible risks.

The internal protests were never against the occupation or the state of war, never critical about the 200 dead in the West Bank this year or the settler pogroms. They were protesting against corruption, judicial reform – very important things, but not the heart of the problem. People were saying they intended to refuse military service; nevertheless, as soon as it all happened, there was an almost tribal reaction, and 90% of Israelis asked to go and fight, showing that they had their eyes and ears closed just like the government. That is, they didn't want to understand that a colonial state of occupation does not allow one to live normally, that the constant repression of suffering people yields no hope.

After all, those protests – which I never believed in – were more aesthetic than structural: they were fighting for democracy, but for Jews, not for everyone, so that they could continue to enjoy their privileges and not find themselves subjected to conditions that are already reality in the Territories.

On that subject: one of the most common objections to criticisms of Israeli policy is that Israel is a democracy.

There is a lot to discuss about what democracy means today. To that argument one can reply that South Africa was also a democracy, but only for whites. There is a very poignant issue of racism in all of this. Proof of this is the worldwide mobilization for the Ukrainians and the deafening silence towards the Syrians and so many other massacres being carried out in our world. So: is democracy today only a matter of whites, of Westerners, and has it been completely emptied of its meaning in terms of equality?

The same goes for Israel: democracy is reserved for Jews, and half of Israel's population – the Arab-Israelis – don't experience it, don't have voting rights, civil rights and are suffering constant discrimination. If this is a model of democracy for the West, that scares me very much. It would mean that the idea of a new European democracy is built on racism, on inequality, on a state of exception that allows one to keep people in prison without trial or to enter their homes at night for any reason.

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