

THEY NEVER DID ANYTHING WITH THE LAND...

In May of 2002 I was in Jerusalem to make a TV documentary about the South Hebron cavedwellers' case in the Israeli Supreme Court. We were interviewing lawyers and human rights activists in Jerusalem and shooting in the villages, so we had to travel several times through the West Bank to reach the caves. Due to road blocks and checkpoints and the fact that Palestinians are forbidden to travel on the major roads that pass through their territory, this 50 mile journey often took the better part of the day, changing transit van taxis several times at Halhul, Hebron and Yatta and finally transferring to a tractor for the last two hour stretch from Twaneh village next to Ma'on Farm settlement to the demolished village of Jinbeh itself.

On the last day of shooting we decided to simplify things by travelling through Israel to cut under the West Bank and come to Jinbeh on the Beersheba road. Hajj' Issa, the *moukhtar* (village head) of Jinbeh village, had told us it was easy to do this: "just follow the road past the settlement and then come on the track to the village". Of course, we got lost several times, asking directions from people who had never heard of Jinbeh and having to backtrack more than once on roads that led directly to settlements and then petered out. Eventually we got to Jinbeh and were able to complete our shooting schedule, but it was the journey itself that was the highlight of that day for me.

The area south of Hebron on the Green Line (the 1949 ceasefire line) is dotted with settlements, some of them large agricultural communities with greenhouses and large fields growing every possible kind of crop from marigolds to watermelons. The hillsides are planted with extensive conifer forests and for a long time as we travelled through the area it seemed to us that we must be far out of our way, as the hillsides we knew, the hills on which Hajj' Issa and the remaining villagers live in their caves, are completely treeless and arid, with small scrubby plants and bushes providing grazing for their sheep. Here instead, a spectacle of almost exaggerated fertility was displayed for us to admire. A disturbing note was struck by the sight of very large white overseers riding in small trucks or walking around the fields with M16's slung over their shoulders while small dark-skinned labourers wearing coolie hats squatted between the rows of irrigated crops. Nonetheless, the display of the power of Israeli agricultural methods was impressive indeed.

Coming to Jinbeh, on the other hand, was a shock; in the space of a hundred metres or so of road, turning a corner and cresting the hill, we came to the area we knew well from our previous visits: the semi-desert hills, scrubby and dry, with small fertile areas planted with wheat and tobacco in the valleys and in patches between the grazing areas. As we drove towards Jinbeh, I was reminded strongly

of the words I had often heard from my Israeli friends in Jerusalem – and in the speeches of, among others, ex-Prime Minister Netanyahu: “But the Arabs never did anything with the land”. It seemed so evident in the face of the contrast between the settlements and the Palestinian villages: no matter the justice of their claim to live in Palestine, the Arabs had never done anything with the land. Surely the progressive, developing claim of the Israelis to the land weighs more in the balance than that of people who so evidently care nothing for it?

This is of course the claim of colonial thought everywhere: in Australia, British India, South Africa, wherever it may be, and – as is characteristic of mythological thought forms, whose purpose is to deny history by transmuting it into nature – the opposition between the colonial power and the colonised native is represented not as a difference in temporal power, but as a natural, immutable difference between the opposing peoples or cultures.

It is very striking in depictions of the colonised that the baseness of the native (to appropriate the language of such descriptions for a moment) is represented as being *natural to him*, as is indeed essential to any racist narrative. For instance, the Arab’s aversion to the truth, his corruption, his large families, his fanaticism and ignorance, his dirt and noise – all these are presented as regrettable *facts of nature*, so that we are not surprised to hear of yet more examples of Arab baseness. Even his poverty is often represented as part of his very being – inevitable, charmingly exotic perhaps, but nonetheless: they’re so lazy, they sit around all day smoking their pipes or chewing q’at, it’s hardly surprising. To be honest, they’re happier that way. And most importantly: they’re not like us.

Nature, in the Arab, presents itself as a static, unchangeable roll-call of negatives. There is really nothing to be done with these people.

The Israeli – it is hard to use the word “Jew”, which is a prohibited word, the repository of a racist ideology, whereas no such prohibition applies to “Arab” (and, of course, the Israeli is a citizen of a state, while the Arab is merely the inhabitant of a geographical area) – the Israeli represents par excellence the dynamic, historical force of progress, bringing modern ways into a backward part of the world, creating a progressive industrial and agricultural economy where indigent Arabs scratch a living from the barren soil. Even the little red-roofed houses of the settlements are signs of *difference*, so progressive and European when compared to the flat-roofed, squalid cantonments of the Arab villages. And the settlements themselves – if we overlook the imported third world labourers and their white overseers (no doubt a temporary state of affairs, to be explained by the distorting influence of the conflict) – the settlements: well, we can only wonder at the extraordinary achievement of Israeli agriculture in such a hostile context. Indeed, it is the context itself that is hostile to the enterprise: an unwelcoming earth that gives forth such bounty. As

soon as we drive past the confines of the settlements into the lands of the natives, we are confronted by barren, scrubby hills devoid of greenhouses: no contrast could be more instructive.

The hostility of the Arab to the Jew is thus conflated with the hostility of Arab soil to European progressive methods, overcome so strikingly and fruitfully. In the ideological context of Israeli industrial agricultural methods – which are, of course, truly impressive when their social and environmental costs are discounted – the Arabs “never did anything with the land”; like the natives in every colonial system, they are mere squatters, and as such, their claim to the land can be dismissed in favour of the *improving* claim of the invading power. But this goes beyond the merely contingent, in the sense that the Arabs could have done something with the land, had they wished, but preferred to simply squat on it, although this is itself already an essential component of the ideology of the *factual* superiority of the coloniser over the colonised: the underlying claim opposes progress to nature, dynamism to stagnation, and this opposition splits the world in half at its base. We are dealing with an *essential* difference here.

In short, when we look at the Israeli and the Arab, we see two of the basic elements in our worldview in their ideal opposition: *history and nature*. But this opposition can only thrive and yield its finest ideological fruits if we are very determined that nature here is not the abundant, fruitful and innocent nature of the Garden of Eden, in which man lived at his ease amid limitless bounty, the nature which precedes history, nor is it the nature of the ecologist, a complex and fascinating web of relationships, an ecosystem, unique, productive, the bed of life, intimately intertwined with humanity, now threatened by the aggressive force of history; it is neither the nature we have lost nor the nature we must save to save ourselves: no, it is the barren, almost irredeemable nature of the desert, in which man lives like a beast, without culture and always at the mercy of forces beyond his control, which it is our duty to conquer and improve (did not God create Adam precisely to govern the natural world?). On the other hand, the history that is so ideally embodied by Israel is not the history of our failures, our wars and oppressive societies; it is the history of progress, the essential and heroic task of which is to gain and secure a place for man in the wilderness. Indeed, the quest of man to conquer and subdue the unformed can be seen precisely as a struggle to achieve *security* – from storm, hunger and predators – a word which is not without resonance in the Middle East.

The demolitions and uprootings, the crop-spraying and use of grazing grounds as firing ranges, the destruction of Palestinian agriculture, orchards and houses – all these are to be seen and understood in the context of the myth of the Arab world as a desert. For it is characteristic of the myth that not only does it explain the present, but it also predicts the future: it is a programmatic narrative which must realise itself in the degradation and destruction of reality. Just as “the land was

empty before we came” has the clear meaning “we will drive them out”, so “they never did anything with the land” must be understood to say “we will destroy all traces of their lifestyle”. The land cannot be allowed to be fruitful until it has been reclaimed and developed by the colonial power. And the purpose of the myth is to explain and *naturalise* the programme by referring it to unchanging values with which we can all identify.

It can't be denied that this colonial narrative is extremely seductive. When I first came to Jinbeh in April, I saw only the barren hills and stony ground that I had expected to see, that the myth had prepared me to see. It was only after I had spent a few days there that I slowly came to *see* the fertility and abundance of the land. Small fields on every hillside, olive orchards and flocks of grazing sheep. And what I was seeing was only the smallest remnant of what had once been there. Hajj'Issa had tears in his eyes when he led us to the last of the almond trees at Jinbeh – the only tree to survive because the IDF bulldozers were unable to reach it – and other villagers showed us the trunks of olive and other fruit trees, some of them laid to rest in the ruins of the demolished houses so that people would not forget what had once been, and what would one day be again.

After my first visit of a week, travelling back through the West Bank to Jerusalem, I saw the land with quite different eyes: the desert had been made to bloom, not by irrigation with water taken from the Galilee and the West Bank aquifers, but by the power of human relations to overcome the grip of life-denying ideas. It is the tragedy of Palestinians like Hajj'Issa and his family that their oppression by the Israeli authorities is backed up by a vast structure of ideas which quite simply makes both them and the land they live in invisible to our eyes. It is a testimony to the extraordinary strength of that identity that they are able to affirm it even in the face of the on-going destruction of the land in which it is rooted and the force of the ideology that supports that destruction.

- *September 2002*