

Pearls and Irritations

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Peter Slezak's speech to the University of Technology Sydney rally on 26 March

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Remarks made by UNSW academic Peter Slezak at a rally at UTS on 26 March, have attracted considerable negative coverage in the Murdoch media. [[The Australian](#) and [The Daily Telegraph](#)]

Pearls And Irritations is carrying the full text of the speech so that readers can make up their own minds.

For over a year now the horrors of the genocide in Gaza mean that we — especially Jews — are facing one of the great moral tests of our time.

We have seen the images. Gaza looks like Hiroshima after the atom bomb in 1945. Who in their right mind can believe Israeli propaganda that this is self-defence, or that it's targeting HAMAS militants?

Given the devastation and sheer quantity of bombing on Gaza, Chomsky's (1971) remarks on the Vietnam War are relevant today. He said:

"With no further information than this, a person who has not lost his senses must realise that the war is an overwhelming atrocity."

However, we are being subjected to intense propaganda to deny Israel's crimes, although everyone can see the truth on our mobile phones.

In these circumstances, the current obsession with a definition of antisemitism is obscene. We are distracted from the horror by panic about an alleged explosion of antisemitism and concerns about Jewish safety – even though it's been exposed as mostly bullshit.

My mother and grandmother survived the Nazi extermination camp Auschwitz, and I grew up hearing their stories. So, I think I know antisemitism when I see it. In fact, there has never been any antisemitism at our rallies, at universities or anywhere in Australia in my lifetime.

Saying "F**k Israel" or "F**k Zionism" is not antisemitic.

The antisemitism crisis in Australia is based on faked incidents like graffiti by people who can't even spell Israel or f**k.

And even hating people who are guilty of committing or supporting oppression, war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing and apartheid – is not racism. It is moral outrage and contempt for what they do, Not what they are. If Israelis and their Zionist supporters were all Buddhists, we would have the same moral outrage and contempt for their crimes.

The wonderful young Palestinian writer Mohammed El Kurd has put it eloquently saying:

"Your warplanes ... have burned Palestinian people alive in their tents while they are connected to IV drips on makeshift hospital beds. And I am asked to care about your stupid feelings!"

Palestinians are expected to put aside their suffering, their trauma and grief, and to pander to Jewish discomfort about a slogan or poster.

The cricket commentator Peter Lalor was sacked because people said they were "triggered" by the sound of his voice. And we are supposed to worry about the feelings of Jews who feel "unsafe" because of seeing a keffiyeh.

The brilliant Randa Abdel-Fattah at Macquarie University put it eloquently: She asks:

"Since when do the victims of genocide have the responsibility to defer to and protect the feelings of those who enact, support, and enable their genocide?"

We must listen to Palestinians. She says:

"The feelings and fragility of Zionists are used as a rhetorical shield to deflect from engaging with the moral and material reality of genocide.

"Palestinians bear no responsibility to coddle the feelings of Zionist racists. We collectively refuse to provide Zionists with reassurances to placate and soothe their political anxieties.

"We have the right to demand an end to settler colonialism, apartheid and occupation without factoring in how our oppressors 'feel'.

"We have the right to imagine that another world is possible. We have the right to refuse to be held hostage to confected feelings by people who support our annihilation."

So, I agree with Randa when she says "Jews SHOULD feel uncomfortable. It is our DUTY to make them uncomfortable.

[Clarification - Peter Slezak says: "During the speech I inadvertently misquoted Randa Abdel Fattah's words in an interview she conducted with Mondoweiss. The recording [<https://youtu.be/LuA59Tu6yZk?si=AeLd05JcUbTWT6l8>] from 5:00-5:34 shows the exact phrase she used was 'Jewish Zionists', not 'Jews'. Randa has been consistent in using the words 'Zionist' or 'Zionist Jews', and never referred to Jews alone. In doing so she was making a clear distinction between those who subscribe to the political ideology of Zionism, and Jews as Jews. As a member of the Jewish community, I use the term Jew to ask my Jewish kin to reflect and feel discomfort about the crimes being done in their name. These are my words, they are not Randa's words."]

For her courage and her powerful moral voice, Randa has been targeted by the Zionist Thought Police in a McCarthy-style witch hunt. Her government research grant has been suspended by Education Minister Jason Clare. This is blatant political interference in the independence of universities – something you'd expect in China or the former Soviet Union.

Now, Australia's 39 universities have endorsed a version of the pernicious IHRA definition of antisemitism that will be enforced on our campuses.

This is a direct attack on fundamental freedoms, stifling freedom of speech, academic debate and protest.

As in the US, here too, the government has relied on consulting fanatical pro-Israel propagandists such as the Executive Council of Australian Jewry whose official, Jillian Segal, has been absurdly appointed as our antisemitism envoy.

Their new definition ties Zionism to Jewish identity and thereby makes criticism of Zionism antisemitic. But Zionism a political ideology, and it is, in fact, an ethno-nationalist, supremacist doctrine responsible for apartheid and the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians.

The universities' definition also states that criticism that calls for the elimination of the state of Israel might be antisemitic. But questioning the legitimacy of the state in its current form based on historical, political, or moral arguments is neither genocidal nor antisemitic.

It's important for me to say something about our chant heard at rallies around the world: "From the River to the Sea ..." The apologists for Israel's crimes claim this slogan is antisemitic or even a call for the annihilation of Israel.

But the charter of Israel's governing Likud Party says there will be no Palestinian state between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected the possibility of a Palestinian state and, in July 2024, the Israeli Knesset voted overwhelmingly against the establishment of a Palestinian state.

In 2018, Israel passed a Nation State Law according to which Israel is the state of the Jews alone. Human rights organisations HRW, Amnesty and Israel's own B'Tselem have recent reports showing that Israel is an apartheid regime. The Israeli NGO Adalah lists over 50 laws that discriminate against the citizens of Israel who are Palestinians.

Obviously, the global chant is a plea for liberation.

The point has been made by US Palestinian Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib who also said "a call for freedom, human rights and peaceful co-existence" is not "a call for death, destruction or hate".

My Palestinian colleague, Dr Lana Tatour, has pointed out: We "ought to listen to Palestinians who have been articulating liberation as an inclusive project of equal rights for all." She says, this liberation means "equality for all the inhabitants of the land — and the dismantling of the settler colonialism and the apartheid regime that exist now". This is "the demand for ... the right of Palestinians to live in dignity and equality in their homeland."

This is not antisemitism.

It is a desecration of the memory of the victims of real antisemitism when it is weaponised by Zionists to silence justified criticism of the racist, criminal State of Israel.

We should also listen to Palestinian Nasser Mashni, president of APAN, the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network:

"The call is 'a vision for a shared political reality beyond Israel's current brutal colonial apartheid. It should not be controversial for Palestinians to reject oppression or to aspire for liberation, to live a life in their own homeland, free from Israel's racist system of control'. ...

"That's why we say Palestine will be free from the River to the Sea for everyone. And if you have a problem with everyone being free, because you only want some people to be free, the problem is not the chant, the problem is you."

American historian Norman Finkelstein is the son of Holocaust survivors and among the foremost scholarly critics of Israel. Finkelstein warns that "the real enemies of the Jews" are "those who debase the memory of Jewish suffering by equating principled opposition to Israel's illegal and immoral policies with antisemitism".

US political scientist John Mearsheimer points out that the attacks on free speech at universities is a "fundamental threat to academia" — the very idea of universities as we have known it.

The foundation of a liberal decent society is the protection of dissent — unpopular opinions — especially at universities. Despite the official warnings, I used to begin my lectures by explaining that my classes are not a "safe space" for ideas you don't like or don't agree with.

In fact, during the Vietnam War, Noam Chomsky pointed out:

"[Universities] are institutions for indoctrination and for imposing obedience. Far from creating independent thinkers, schools have always, throughout history, played an institutional role in a system of control and coercion.

"Academics and students have been rewarded for obedience and submission to authority."

But in a healthy society, Chomsky suggests, "the social and intellectual role of the university should be subversive".

This is the spirit in which our students have been exemplary, leading the way with their encampments which always included Jews.

One handwritten sign by a student put it best: ****You f**ked with the wrong generation. Hashtag #FreePalestine".

As today, in the 1960s, beginning in the US at my own Columbia University, the students launched a national and international protest movement.

However, today, Columbia, and other universities have chosen to be active collaborators and facilitators in the neo-McCarthyist erosion of due process and academic freedom.

Here, the entire political class and media are having a meltdown about antisemitism. Sky News held an "Antisemitism Summit" to address the "National Emergency" of antisemitism in Australia

ECAJ co-director Alex Rychin said: "We face a crisis that has brought open support for terrorism to our streets." He means us!

So Ryvchin proposed a 15-point plan of action. These are totalitarian mechanisms of thought control that would have impressed Stalin or Mao Tse-tung. As one commentator remarked "In short, ECAJ has become drunk on the possibilities of using the state to advance Zionism and suppress its critics."

Recommendations include:

Tougher legislation to overcome restrictions on disciplinary action against academics.

In other words, it should be easier to suppress criticism of Israel and penalise dissenting voices at universities. This means weakening traditional protections for academic freedom, undermining the very foundation of universities with punitive action against critical academics like Randa Abdel-Fattah.

Developments in the US serve as a warning to us.

At Columbia, post-graduate student and legal resident Mahmoud Khalil was abducted and threatened with deportation by federal immigration agents.

At Columbia, one academic law professor and vocal advocate for pro-Palestine students, Dr. Katherine Franke, was terminated.

She said:

"Rather than fostering critical debate, research and learning", the university had "demonstrated a willingness to collaborate with the very enemies of our academic mission".

Columbia University was accused by the Trump administration of a systemic failure to protect students and faculty members "from antisemitic violence and harassment".

Columbia University capitulated, agreeing to overhaul its protest policies, security practices and Middle Eastern studies department in a concession to the Trump administration, accepting increased criminalisation of its students and the dismantling of academic freedom for its Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies Department. The Columbia administration has made these enormous concessions with no certainty of even salvaging the US\$400 million federal funds that were withheld.

Columbia will also adopt the notorious IHRA definition of antisemitism.

Columbia's response to the White House's demands sets a dangerous precedent.

Edward Said's legacy at Columbia stands today as a condemnation of the hypocrisy of US liberal institutions, their moral corruption, and the hollowness of the very values that they profess to teach.

This irony is best illustrated by a Columbia student's protest sign, which read:

"Columbia, why require me to read Prof. Edward Said, if you don't want me to use it?"

Chomsky (1969) wrote: "Traditionally the self-image of intellectuals and academics has been that they are independent thinkers and dispassionate critics. But in fact,

"Insofar as that role has been lost, the relation of the schools to intellectuals should, in fact, be one of self-defence."

I quote our Macquarie University colleague Amanda Wise on Twitter:

"If you are more worried about disruptive students being a bit noisy and untidy on campus, and using words that make you uncomfortable than you are about actual violence, genocide, the destruction of entire universities, targeting professors, and the genocide of civilians in Gaza then you do not stand for the kind of university I believe in."