

Machete Interview with Norman Finkelstein

First Installment

When Theory Meets Practice: All Palestine, All the Time

Machete: Your work is chiefly known for its critique of dominant ideological representations of both the Israel-Palestine conflict as well as of the Holocaust. How do you situate your work regarding these specific issues within the spectrum of dissident voices that have sought to resist the more barbaric effects of global capital and western imperialism?

Norman Finkelstein: Unfortunately, because I have devoted so much time to mastering the fine details of the Israel-Palestine conflict, I have to a large extent -- and I don't say it proudly -- lost sight of the bigger picture. As a young man I read quite widely and had a reasonable grasp on the many manifestations of global injustice. But now it's pretty much, All Palestine, all the time. It's just not possible to be effective unless you have a firm grasp on all the details because Israel and its supporters have created this huge apparatus devoted entirely to falsifying the historical record.

Industry, your work has sought to expose the ways in which history is constantly being shaped and even revised in extreme cases for the sake of various political ends. Do you see historical facts as always being embedded within ideology or do you see the work of the historian as standing outside such ideological forces?

Secondly, do you think that historical facts stand on their own, so to speak, or are they always part of narrative constructions that weave them into a meaningful whole?

Norman Finkelstein: These are quite complicated questions of "theory" that never much interested me -- or, stopped interesting me when I stopped being a Maoist about thirty years ago. Truth is always -- as Sartre put it -- an "indefinite approximation." But once you have given up on trying to find truth, or once you start from the premise that you can't find truth, then in my opinion it's impossible to have a rational discussion. It degenerates into this meaningless claptrap about "narratives," each as valid as the next, and it gets you nowhere, except that it means that all political questions must ultimately be resolved by force.

Machete: In your recent work, your attention has turned to the life and work of Gandhi. How does this research fit into your larger project concerning the role of ideological critique, particularly as it relates to the function of imperialism and its construction of false historical narratives? Does countering the ideological image of Gandhi's practice as it was constructed in imperialist societies provide the basis for a deeper understanding of the relationship between anti-imperialist struggles and the fight to reclaim the past by wresting it from the stultifying grip of the "victors" of history?

Norman Finkelstein: The important thing about Gandhi is that you must read him. The



image projected of him has something, but not much, to do with the real person. There were many aspects of Gandhi that, frankly, were very unappealing. This fellow named Richard Grenier once wrote a long essay on Gandhi that made him out to be a monster and hypocrite. In fact Grenier's details were almost entirely accurate. But it just wasn't the real Gandhi. It was a caricature. Gandhi kept no secrets. He was an open book. He even publicly discussed all aspects of his sexual life. So, if he was really as Grenier depicted him, it would be strange that the Indian people revered him. In my opinion it's hard not to admire the real Gandhi who (1) devoted the whole of his life to what he called "public service," and (2) lived the austere values he preached.

This interview was conducted in March 2010 by Charles Prusik, Alexi Kukuljevic and Gabriel Rockhill.



Machete: Given your virulent critique of what you coin the holocaust industry, and in particular the problematic function of culture in shaping the socio-political landscape, do you see culture as chiefly serving an ideological function? Or can it also serve to critically resist power and its attempts to obscure and falsify the historical record?

Norman Finkelstein: It's nearly impossible to make meaningful comprehensive statements about a subject as broad and abstract as "culture." Obviously, there are aspects of any culture that reinforce the status quo and the prevailing injustice, and aspects of any culture that subvert and undermine the status quo. There are commercials that promote the most egregious forms of material consumption and beautiful songs that resonate with the deepest human yearnings for justice and decency. I for one find great inspiration in the African-American spirituals and even from the Four Tops singing, "Reach out, I'll be there."

Machete: In books such as Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict and The Holocaust

NORMAN SAYS...

