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*on the move*

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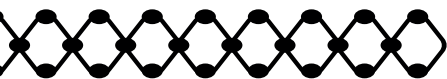
# GENOCIDE IN GAZA



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MARK LEWIS TAYLOR\*

# GENOCIDE, IMAGINARIES AND MASS CIVILIAN DESTRUCTION



Photo: Sihab.

Soon after Israel launched its retaliatory war against Gaza on October 7th, I [emailed](#) all my faculty colleagues, some forty in number, suggesting that because our theological institution in Princeton claimed a close connection to Christian ministry, now was the time to go public with a call to urge U.S. Christians to declare a clear “No!” to U.S.-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

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**M**y faculty responded with silence, some reportedly cultivating their anger. A couple colleagues and I debated over our institution’s faculty email platform.

A primary concern of colleagues was my use of the notion of “genocide” to name the civilian destruction in Gaza. In those early weeks of October, I was not alone, nor surely the first to use the term. As early as October 13, genocide scholar [Raz Segal](#) identified the destruction underway in Gaza as a “text-book case of genocide.” In a [webinar](#) of October 17 (2:05:40), Richard Falk, international law professor from Princeton and former UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, called for denouncing genocide in Gaza. Soon thereafter, some 800 scholars [warned](#) of at least the potential for genocide. Genocide and human rights scholars, such as [Omer Bartov](#) and [Arya Neier](#), now accept the term for Gazans’ destruction, even though both had reservations about doing so earlier. Francesca Albanese, the current UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories wrote, in a [first report](#), that Gaza’s destruction met criteria for “genocide” as

specified in the 1948 UN Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, exposing Israeli leaders' "intentions" as evidence of acts of genocide.

Albanese's work is also important because her second and third reports pushed the debate about the Gaza genocide onto more complex conceptual terrain. While still analyzing the Gaza genocide as event, her [second report](#) insisted that a longer history required examination, one of "colonial erasure" worked by Israel's settler colonialism as supported by other imperial and colonial powers. In her [third report](#), Albanese broadened the context of the Gaza genocide even further, turning to political economy—particularly the role of corporations—to expose the Gaza genocide within a "colonial racial capitalism."

In retrospect, I take Albanese's reports as both confirming and further informing the positions I took in faculty debates. I there had spoken of today's "political economy of genocide," and an "imperial politics of genocide." I provided both evidence and some conceptual explanations as to why Gaza as genocide needed to be thought about in relation to such larger political contexts. But in the contentious world of genocide debates, a deeper scrutiny is needed. It is not enough to only marshal evidence and conceptual clarity. We also need to analyze how people's openness to evidence and their willingness to think about genocide are shaped by how they imagine mass civilian destruction. In short, it is important to take up the notion of "the imaginary," or the "imaginaries," that mobilize and constrain our understandings of transgressive crime relative to mass civilian destruction.

## Imaginaries

"The imaginary" or "imaginaries" are terms often invoked by scholars to name general orientations and stances that people show in their social and political lives—in white racist imaginary, Eurocentric imaginary, modern imaginary, and so on. Often the term is used with little attempt to specify its meaning.

The imaginary is a term impacting U.S. scholars largely through the 20th and early 21st century writings of Jacques Lacan (2007, 74-81), Cornelius Castoriadis (1997, 115-64), and Charles Taylor (2007, 159-211). The term has entered English language Genocide Studies, perhaps most developed by

Australian historian and editor of the *Journal of Genocide Research*, A. Dirk Moses. In one early article, he succinctly summarizes his thinking, suggesting that an "imaginary" is

... the symbolic, generative matrix within which people imagine their social world and constitute themselves as political subjects. It comprises the background assumptions about reality that make daily praxis possible. It is not a set of ideas; it is what makes the formation and articulation of ideas possible. As Charles Taylor puts it, the imaginary is a pre-theoretical sense of human surroundings, "carried in images, stories, and legends"; it underlies and enables the repertoire of actions available for any particular society (Moses 2010, 237).

Every term in Moses' phrase, "symbolic generative matrix" is important. As symbolic, our imaginaries are stocked by symbols carried by images, stories, legends. Such symbols are imbibed in our dealings with family in the earliest stages of our lives. As adults, our imaginaries may be further cultivated and reinforced in convivial settings with friends and trusted mentors. Imaginaries' formation is largely unconscious, often uncritical or pre-critical as we gather impressions of our world. As generative,

our imaginaries' symbols do not only represent the world around us. It is better to say that our symbols, images and stories contribute to making and shaping that world. Then, with Moses' term, matrix, we are reminded that this symbolic generativity has as its locus our embeddedness in social and historical interaction. As matrix, our imaginaries are fashioned in a web of interplaying forces, intersubjective processes—in short, in the give and take of daily living.

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Imaginaries—as these symbolic, generative matrices—can be powerful forces. They do not rival the ultimately more determinative power of material forces of economic and political structures and relations. But they impact whether we see those material forces at all, how we assess them and relate to them, supportively or in resistance. By means of imaginaries, Moses stresses, people "constitute themselves as political subjects" (2010, 237). In thinking about mass civilian killing, imaginaries operate in ways that have both epistemic and moral impact—that is, they shape our knowledge about mass killing and also our moral practice relative to it.



Photo: Sihab.

## Imaginaries and knowing mass civilian destruction

We may have our best example of imaginaries epistemic impact, by tracing Moses' reflections on how imaginaries shape the understanding of genocide. Moses criticizes especially the 1948 Genocide Convention's focusing of mass civilian destruction as killing motivated by traditions of hatred and discrimination against targeted groups, usually defined by ethnic, racial, national, or religious identities. In his book, *The Problems of Genocide*, Moses shows how this is a function of an insufficient "imaginary of humanity" (2021, 18), one exemplified in the thought of the Convention's chief originator and advocate, polish lawyer Rafael Lemkin. In his imaginary—"a product of his Zionism"—humanity is viewed mainly as "an ensemble of peoples with unique national 'spirits' (Moses 2021, 18)." Lemkin thus made targeted groups the primary focus for imagining crimes of civilian destruction. This omits the mass civilian killing worked by war, bombardment and siege, the death tolls of which can exceed those labeled as "genocide." More importantly, setting the primary focus on identifiable groups can focus on ethnic-national ontologies of hatred, lifting the killing process above political affairs, such as the histories of empire, colonization, and internecine warfare and capitalist extraction.

Even with respect to "the Holocaust," often taken as the archetype of genocides, an epistemic lens that focuses primarily on mass killing as governed by group hatred, here of Jews, insufficiently accounts for the causes of that extreme genocide. Mo-

ses sees this lens as obscuring the Nazi state's deeper crimes, those evident in its drive eastwards in early expansionist moves, with Jews viewed as obstructing the empire's drive for *Lebensraum* or "living space" (2021, 315-24). German commander Otto Ohlenforf himself named this drive, when he explained at his Nuremberg trial why the Nazi state killed even Jewish children. The aim was not due only to racial hatred, antisemitism, or even national security, but due to what Ohlendorf termed permanent security.

I believe that it [killing the children] is very simple to explain if one starts from the fact that this [Nazi] order did not only try to achieve security, but also permanent security because the children would grow up and surely, being the children of parents who had been killed, they would constitute a danger no smaller than that of the parents (cited in Moses 2021, 324).

This acting to gain permanent security is for Moses the more insidious state transgression. It is a "fatally restless and dynamic process (2021, 34, 42). Permanent security is prone to genocidal action against hated groups but also against masses of civilians whose destruction fails often to be criminalized as genocide.

A more adequate imaginary will focus the stories of empire-building, settler colonialism and class exploitation. Punishable wrong will be identified not only by foregrounding various hatreds for particular groups, but more by identifying

states and leaders who pursue “permanent security.” Moses recommends permanent security as the paramount international crime, valuable for understanding and preventing mass civilian destruction (2021, 34, 42-43). This drive has powered empires and particularly settler colonial projects. The mass civilian killing that served as prelude to modernity—the killing for labor and resources in Abya Yala (“the Americas”)— especially displays the drive for permanent security (Ceceña 2025, 1-2, 3-4). Also implicated are the atrocity crimes of the great modern empires of Spain, Britain, the Dutch, France, and especially the U.S. today. Consider the U.S. drive for permanent security, evidenced by the U.S. Department of Defense’s aim to seek “full spectrum dominance” on all continents (Bacevich 2002, 117-40; Ryan 2019, 73-4). Millions of civilians are crushed by this drive, as evidence by the U.S. in its Vietnam and its Iraq.

A political imaginary—imaging the histories of empires, colonialisms and capitalism— yields the better epistemic result for understanding mass civilian destruction. It does not yield to the depoliticization (Moses 2021, 16-28, 479-81), which often attends making hated groups the victims of the crime, pushing “genocide” more toward the category of an identity-based crime or a “massive hate crime” (279, 451-2). This more political imaginary leads to a greater knowing for analysis of mass civilian destruction.

### **Imaginaries and resisting mass civilian destruction**

Imaginaries are also found among those forced to live on the underside of empires and colonization. Here we find a moral practice, a working out of collective solidarity, among those resisting their destruction. I illustrate this with an example taken from the research of Palestinian anthropologist, Lena Meari of Birzeit University, and from her interviews with Palestinians interrogated by the Israeli Shavak, Israel’s internal security interrogators.

Meari reads the interrogation encounter as a confrontation between colonialism and Palestinian *sumud*, the latter meaning resilience or perseverance. Just since 1967, when Israel began its belligerent occupation of Palestine, “over 800,000 Palestinians have been arrested and interrogated by Israel. This figure constitutes approximately 20% of the total Palestinian population, 40% of Palestinian males” (Meari 2011, 32). Meari reports the words of Mahmoud, one interrogated Palestinian man:

### **A political imaginary—imaging the histories of empires, colonialisms and capitalism— yields the better epistemic result for understanding mass civilian destruction**

While chained and tied for days in a distorted and extremely painful position in a closet, a narrow cell used by the shavak as a torture technique, I was walking around my city of Ramallah, accompanied by my comrades, family and beloved. I was envisioning how I would be received by them when released without providing a confession (Meari 2012, 1:03:51 minute mark).

Meari explains just how powerful the Palestinian imaginary is. Mahmoud’s “envisioning” emerges from the matrix of his people’s shared political struggle against occupation. “For Mahmoud,” she stresses, “imagination opened a wide world. Through imagination he transcended his narrow cell and unbearable pain” (Ibid).

This conjuring power of the imaginary—a “magical force that drives the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle,” Meari muses (Ibid)—includes perceiving “Palestine” not as the shrinking parts that are left by the Zionist settler colonialism,” but as “all Palestine” (Ibid.). Meari also reports a “long conversation” she had with “Aisha,” a Palestinian woman who resisted rape in the interrogation cell. “While resisting the interrogators and shouting NO, I felt I was struggling against all types of oppression the Zionists committed against Palestinians and Arabs.” (2011, 21). Aisha continued,

It was an attack on my being as a Palestinian Arab. I decided they could not penetrate my core. Then, the whole energy of the cosmos and of all peoples gathered in my body and rejected them. I sensed their absolute injustice, and their sense of villainous viciousness. At that moment I had hope. I did not perceive my own body. It was the body of Palestinians and all Palestinian Arabs and all those oppressed (Meari 2012, 1:03:51).

We stand here before a Palestinian imaginary, one with effects expressed in moral contestation with occupying powers.



Photo: Sihab.

## Perceiving “Palestine” not as the shrinking parts that are left by the Zionist settler colonialism,” but as “all Palestine”

As part of *sumud*, this is not so much a morality of obedience to command, as it is a moral practice generated by imagined solidarity within a community of resistance on the underside of Israeli power and of a world arrayed against Palestine. The social and political imaginaries operative here—these “symbolic generative matrices”—are resources for contestation. They contend with the effects of the imperial imaginaries that drive for permanent security. They are a crucial part of mobilizing a material, liberative politics. ■

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