

## Amira Hass

Freedom of expression and dialogue are two venerated milestones in the progress of democratic thinking. Dialogue means the necessity to listen to one another - and this is possible only if individuals and social groupings of all sorts are granted their right to speak up, to express emotions, to give information and share their thoughts. Indeed, it is impossible to think about one concept without the other. Dialogue invokes the understanding that every human assembly is pluralistic by nature, and that its permanent growth requires the permanent refinement of nuances - intellectual, political, emotional, cultural, religious.

But we should not forget that the fiercest battles for freedom of expression and freedom of information (inseparable) were part and parcel of years-long struggles for decent livelihood, for equality in social and national and gender rights, for women's right to vote and workers' right to strike etc. These have been struggles - far from being obsolete today - against the abuse of power and dominance and against the notion that human beings are not equal. So it is today, in many parts of the world: the fight for freedom of expression in China cannot be seen as a distinct goal in itself, but esp. as a means in combating against cultural and national oppression in Tibet, or wild capitalist exploitation in a country ruled by one party, the Communist. The fight for free press and against Berlusconi's grip on it in Italy is interwoven with the protest against maltreatment of the Roma and the disregard of the needs of people - immigrants without papers - who refuse to be only the enslaved, disciplined part of the globalized world, but also demand to share some of its fortunes and exercise the freedom of movement that the privileged have appropriated exclusively for themselves and their money.

In countries where freedom of expression is violently strangled, as in Russia or Colombia or Syria, it is both a means in fights against injustice and a just goal that we should protect and venerate. But being a journalist in Israel, a society where freedom of expression is guaranteed and where dialogue is practiced in endless ventures, symposia and meetings - my experience tells me that it is misleading to separate these two concepts from the broader social and political context of forms of domination, of power structures. Societies - the so called liberal democracies included - are not only pluralistic, benign human formations. They are no less the playground of groups and classes and persons that would do all in order to preserve their privileges and economical interests, at the cost of others. And these exist no less in the self-acclaimed democracies such as US, France etc.

In such a context, we should ask: what and whom does freedom of expression serve? Does it serve democracy only? And dialogue (assumably between opposing or rival groups)- what is its purpose and does it benefit all parties concerned? These are not abstract and theoretical questions in the Israeli Palestinian context.

As I said, we Israelis enjoy the freedom of expression, opinion and information. There is no danger to our life and liberty if we expose the corruption of a PM or a former minister of finance, if we ridicule a certain ridiculous member of parliament or fail to cover the intensively PR'ed elections campaign of a candidate. Israeli journalists have extensively criticized the poor performances of military officers during the 2006 war against Lebanon, or the expensive, luxurious house of a certain minister. Information about and opinions against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territory and Israel's repressive measures can be found in the Israeli media and much more so in independent electronic websites. An Israeli

group called yesh gevu gathered information about alleged war criminals among Israeli generals, in order to file complaints against them in other countries. Last week one of the group's activists was interviewed for the military radio. There was an attempt by the right wing to take the program off the air, and it failed.

Therefore Israel, as a state (in its 1967 borders), has the reputation of being a democracy. It's true that Palestinians who are Israeli citizens enjoy a considerable freedom of speech and expression - probably much more than a Syrian citizen or a Jordanian. But this is not enough for a democracy: What about their economical rights, what about their collective rights as a national group - deterritorialized and dispossessed 60 years ago? In this sphere they are being systematically discriminated against. And the world wide veneration of the Israeli freedom of expression helps deviate attention from this fact. I am not saying to eliminate that freedom, i simply state it is not sufficient.

As I hinted, the Israeli press publishes only limited information about the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. The impression is the opposite, but i know how little it is. There is no official, governmental censorship, but the editors are acting as representatives of the readership. And the readership is not interested. Information and ideas are taken as a commodity, which therefore can be also superfluous, they are not taken as a staple for a democratic society. Journalists indeed exercise their right for freedom of expression, but the society does not have the duty to listen and to know. Without popular struggles in all arenas - take the demonstrations against globalization when the G8 convene - which FORCE the society and its leaders to listen, the freedom of expression is a fiction, is theoretical or worse: a tool in the hands of the privileged.

And dialogue, that interaction of opinions that naturally develops out of the acknowledged and exercised freedom of speech: again in our context, it has become one in a list of hollow terms: peace, for example, peace process, co-existence. Why hollow? because words are taken more seriously than the political reality of a cynical and sophisticated hybrid of Israeli domination over the Palestinians. An amalgam of military occupation, apartheid, colonialist rule in process, a democracy for Jews and limited self rule for Palestinians in their territorial enclaves.

There is a lot of dialogue going on: negotiations, UN-sponsored meetings, NGO's, people to people programs generously financed by European governments. Dialogue, as such, is taken as an interaction between two equal, symmetric groups. Is that so? Can we term negotiations between employers and trade unions as dialogue? Can we term the exchanged literature and deliberations on the position of women in the Western World as dialogue? Or talks between representatives of the indigenous people in the Americas - with the governments? In all cases, we talk about groups which are placed vertically, at a hierarchical order in the society: employers and workers, men and women, indigenous and colonizers. The fact that they are engaged in verbal discussion (and not in a warfare) does not make the situation between them symmetrical and does not obliterate the excessive power that one group has over the other. There can be no dialogue between the non-equal - and inequality is a basic social component, inseparable from daily reality, a social product that often is disguised as god-sent, biological fact.

Dialogue, after all, should not be taken as a mere act of the intellect. Therefore, dialogue for the sake of convening together and talking is hollow, if it is not coupled with social movements that struggle at the background and the forefront against the intrinsic violence

that Power or states or employers exercise , in order to strengthen the position of the lower party in the hierarchy. Women, workers, native Americans, Palestinians - their right for freedom of expression and their participation in dialogue with men, employers, white-dominated governments and Israeli representatives - only assist Power if they are not a part in the struggle for equality.