

critical (non)thinking 101...by Greg O'Keefe

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, July 15, 2005

<http://politicsrespun.org/2005/07/critical-nonthinking-101/>

The [Palestine Human Rights Committee](#) is an organization at SFU that wants to focus even more attention on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, as if there wasn't enough already or other more pressing issues. About a month ago I went to one of their meetings to see what they are about. Here's what I found out.

On Wednesday, June 8, members of the Palestinian Human Rights Committee participated in a conference here at SFU called "Perspectives on Palestine." It would focus on what they claimed were egregious human rights violations perpetrated by Israel against Palestinian peoples. It was billed as a free and open discussion in which three panelists and a moderator would share their own experience with the audience. I want to first say that my knowledge of this conflict is more than topical, but not as deep as those who presented, let alone some members of the audience. I also think that a 45 minute forum with a few questions posed by those in attendance can not encapsulate a long lasting conflict. I am however open to new ideas which is why I went to this forum.

Excepting a well laid out argument full of facts, positions buttressed by experts, I was surprised to hear the first presenter, SFU grad Ahseaa Ahmed, declare that the truth will speak for itself. Normally, a truth is arrived at the end of an argument and not before it, but not in this instance. The presentation recounted her experience of living and working in Israel for a short time accompanied by series of photos which had been taken throughout her stay. The photos showed checkpoints at various times of the day, both commercial and individual. Ms. Ahmed recounted how while one day she witnessed and managed to take a few pictures of a takedown in which young men were summarily arrested without reason or provocation. How did she know whether they were arrested without reason? Was the image of young men merely being arrested enough to satisfy her burden of proof that the young men were innocent and that this was simply another in a series of violations done by the Israeli police against the innocent Palestinian masses? Can equivocation and emotivism take the place of a solid Cartesian-style argument? Can this same panelist, a Masters candidate no less, make the same kind of argument in a paper and expect to convince her audience? These are questions that need answering.

The second speaker, Eyad Alnuweiri, recounted how the turnstiles for Palestinians entering and exiting Israel looked like and functioned like turnstiles for cattle. Furthermore, the Israelis modeled them explicitly in this way to degrade the Palestinians. Ignoring for the time being that I and you are equally degraded when waiting in line to check in at the airport, for a movie, or roller coaster at the PNE, how are the two connected. Presumably, the gates exist so there isn't mass confusion when entering a checkpoint from either side. Now one can argue that the speaker wasn't arguing about the aesthetics or function of the gate, but the existence of the gates themselves. That may have been the case but it wasn't argued. Instead, the speaker made the more provocative invocation that the Israeli police force and IDF view the Palestinians as cattle, not as people. Very incendiary—reminiscent of H.G. Wells' *Elloi*—but not at all useful to further a debate.

The third speaker, Lawrence Boxall, succinctly managed to boil down 2,000 years of Judeo/Muslim history into 10 minutes. Nice, but not at all helpful or very informative. But the real surprise for me came during question time when an Israeli man asked him a question about whether the Palestinian Authority would rescind its view on Jewishness as equating evilness found in school textbooks. Instead of answering the question, Boxall lashed out at him calling him a liar and/or misinformed. Specifically, Boxall charged that what was said he said was a lie propagated by Zionists. He then demanded that the audience member produce proof of his claim. Keep in mind that demand to produce evidence of such a book was made not more than twenty minutes after the Cole's notes version of history told on the fly, the cattle invocation and the apparent truth of an random series of pictures. Why is it that the panelists had the lock on what is truth and what is fiction but when the other side of the argument is presented it is merely Zionist propaganda? Before the audience member's question could be answered, the moderator quickly wrapped up the forum and invited audience members and panelists to continue the discussion, albeit individually.

I was dumbfounded.

Where was the discussion? Instead, the panel had replaced argument, proof, and analysis with conjecture, supposition and sentiment. I was also dismayed as to the unwillingness of the panelists to dispel spurious or rancorous remarks made by audience members that fail to advance the discussion. One audience member suggested that New York City should be changed to New Jerusalem City as it better reflected its inhabitants. One panel member said it wasn't appropriate to say such things. The other three sat silent. But mostly, I came away disappointed in some of my former SFU classmates that such a seemingly important discussion had been reduced to such a weak series of arguments. If these discussion continue in such a fashion, not only will they alienate those on the fence of the issue, but they risk turning their cause into a caricature.