

Palestine, platitudes and silence

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'In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.'
— Martin Luther King Jr.

It is no secret that the history of Palestinian resistance is deeply intertwined with the socialist movement. As anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism are basic principles, socialists have always opposed the occupation of Palestine by both Britain and Israel. Anarchist-Communists are part of the broader socialist movement and said principles are just as, if not more, deeply embedded in the tradition.¹ However, in the face of the latest barbarity unleashed by Israel upon the Palestinian population, two anarchist-communist organisations in Europe have taken stances that amount to either passivity or tacit endorsement of genocide. Their positions are illustrative of how mistakes in theory can have practical repercussions.

Anarchist Communist Group – Are all nationalisms as bad as each other?

“The struggle must be against Imperialism first, against Zionism secondly, and lastly against the bourgeois nationalist government when created.”Anarchist Tactic for Palestine – Albert Meltzer 1939 (Meltzer, 1939)²

The United Kingdom based Anarchist Communist Group (ACG) holds a standard anarchist critique of nationalism. That is, they understand that the project to construct a modern nation state is a bourgeois one, where a nascent ruling class attempts to organise a population in a manner that facilitates the exploitation of their labour power. In the context of the Israel-Palestine ‘conflict’ the ACG recognise the limits of the so-called ‘one and two-state’ solutions. By subordinating their needs to either state, the workers of Israel and Palestine do themselves a disservice. The ACG rightly recognise that even if Palestine was liberated from Israeli colonisation and a single, unified and democratic state was formed, it would not keep Palestinian workers safe nor guarantee their liberation. Such is the nature of the capitalist state. The ACG rightly identifies Hamas as a reactionary, bourgeois organisation and that their strategy will not ultimately succeed in liberating Palestine from Israeli colonisation.

Unfortunately the ACG takes all of these critiques and all the negative factors of the Palestinian movement for national liberation and draws the conclusion that the first duty of anarchists is to present arguments against nationalism. Their engagement with nationalism is one dimensional, and they neglect to even consider the arguments for anarchists to engage with national liberation movements. The ACG’s position also leaves them with no way to engage the largest mass movement of a generation. They fail to contribute in any meaningful way to opposing Israel’s colonial project, nor the imperialist forces that back it.

Not all cultural identities are reactionary, and by extension nationalism cannot always be reduced to a bourgeois project. For example, while indigenous communities may develop nascent bourgeois classes, the identity of indigenous populations in Canada, Australia and many other parts of the world are not the same as nationalisms of colonial, settler regimes. Sovereignty to

¹ The USSR for example was one of the first states to recognise Israel. Some (admittedly inconsistent) Trotskyist organisations defend the Zionist regime, and radical left-liberals such as Albert Camus have also been apologists.

² Albert Metzler was a Jewish anarcho-syndicalist from England.

such communities can mean collective control of land and life, rather than an identity forged and disciplined as an aspect of capitalist society. The ACGs view is limited and does not consider such nuances. As such their position represents a failure to understand the national liberation of oppressed nationalities, which thus includes that of Palestinians, in terms of concrete struggle.

The very real experience of oppression of a 'nationality', as identified and categorised by the occupying force, is subsumed under the broader abstraction of class. While class is shaped by the structure of economic relations, there are forces beyond relations in the workplace that determine social life. For example, that West Bank Palestinians are forced to drive on designated roads away from Israeli civilians, or that inhabitants of the Gaza strip are forced to go through designated, militarised checkpoints during daily commutes to employment in Israel. Thus to be concretely liberated as a 'Palestinian' requires smashing the Israeli regimes control over their lives first and foremost. The complicity of much of the Israeli working class in Palestinian oppression makes this even more difficult. ACG may grasp conceptually that apartheid must be smashed, but the answer they propose is simply to demand social revolution across Palestine and Israel now. This ignores strategic engagement with the problem.

For example the ACGs recent statement 'Neither Israel nor Hamas!' opens with a condemnation of Hamas' atrocities, before explaining many of the problems with Hamas reactionary politics (Anarchist Communist Group, 2023). These critiques are fair, but they totally avoid the question of why Hamas was elected in Gaza, or why they represent one of the few currents unwilling to totally surrender to Israel. The ACG instead suggests that industrial action is a solution to the crisis, with no analysis of the serious limitations to this strategy (Anarchist Communist Group, 2023). Unemployment in Palestine is incredibly high, and Palestinian workers in Israel are severely limited by laws, oppression and scabbing by Israeli workers. There is also the problem of just where Palestinian workers are employed, and how they could possibly shut down the Israeli economy.

The ACG has made a mistake in its focus in the current political context. Many of the claims about Hamas, and Palestinians in general made by the Israeli media and parroted by the West have been debunked. Making Hamas the focus, rather than the Israeli occupation and imperialism only feeds into Islamophobia and hysteria, the result of which sees the ACG line up more closely with liberal positions than revolutionary ones. The ACG is also hosting a series of talks addressing the question of nationalism. As though nationalism were the most pertinent question, rather than what it takes to stop the war. This reflects more of a focus on distinguishing themselves from the rest of the left than engagement with the political tasks of the day.

French anarchists worked through these problems during the struggle for Algerian independence. The majority of the movement came to the conclusion that, despite criticism of the methods and organisation of the Algerian national liberation movement, a lack of engagement would not help the mass of the oppressed in their struggle nor offer the possibility of a reaction that could ripple across global capitalism (Walmsley, 2021). National liberation is a messy process, but it necessarily draws the mass of workers into actions that cannot be totally controlled by a nascent bourgeoisie, unleashing new desires and adding new dimensions to the potential of emancipation.

Hence, the destruction of the Israeli apartheid regime may not result in libertarian socialism. But not only would decolonisation be a moral good in and of itself, an anti-imperialist victory over Israel could be a very real challenge to capitalist interests and could open the potential of broader horizons. The success of Palestinian liberation invariably hinges not on how successfully

Hamas conducts guerilla war against the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), but on the activity of the region's working classes. The fight against Israel could unleash a second, deeper 'Arab Spring.' The struggle however is not only a localised affair, it is also shaped by the activity of the global working class and the revolutionary forces within it. From the UK to Uruguay, anarchists and workers more generally have a role to play in the anti-imperialist, anti-colonial struggle.

Anarchists cannot simply denounce both sides as nationalist projects and proclaim the answer is international socialist revolution. It may be true in the abstract, but communism is an ideal and a vision we strive towards. The path there requires concrete goals and actions undertaken through strategic vision, and national liberation is an important concrete step towards liberation. While there are nearly a million people on the streets of London, mobilised against imperialism, the ACGs approach buries strategy and action under abstract ideals. They are rendering themselves and anarchist ideas redundant.

Die Platform – Silence is support for the oppressor

“Zionism serves as a screen for English imperialist policy, by the regime of inequality which dominates in Palestine” – Camillo Berneri, 1929 (Berneri, 1929)

It is over a month into the war in Gaza and the anarchist federation Die Platform (DP) is one of many German Left organisations that is silent on the Palestinian question. Die Platform is yet to present a statement or even a post on social media calling for a ceasefire, denouncing the war or declaring solidarity with the struggle of Palestinians. Last weekend the organisation held its 9th congress, where surely time could have been found to discuss the most pressing political issue of the moment. Instead, the only reference to the conflict is from a statement provided by the Catalan anarchist federation, Embat (Die Platform, 2023). There is no doubt Die Platform has internationalist values. They are outspoken in their support for the struggle in Sudan, and often report on relations with anarchist groups around the world (Die Platform, 2023). So why are Die Platform silent? Their failure to address the 'Palestinian question' reflects the broader mood in Germany and the influence of anti-Deutsch ideology on the German left.

Anti-Deutsch is a trend of thought that declares total opposition to all traces of German nationalism. In the context of the nation's history and the holocaust this seems a reasonable reaction. However it goes much further than anti-nationalism. Anti-Deutsch activism is famous for giving uncritical support to Zionism. The Zionist myth of a Jewish 'people' is blindly accepted and turned into a fetishised concept.³ This is an inversion of fascist Nazi ideology and false 'race science'. Anti-Deutsch thus rejects any forms of Arab nationalism, despite Pan-Arab ideals having developed as a response to colonialism and imperialism. Anti-Deutsch are thus unable to relate to anti-colonial projects in the Arab world, identifying them incorrectly as inherently anti-semitic. In some parts of Germany, anti-Deutsch is most common amongst the militant 'anti-fascist' subculture. They use tactics of intimidation and violence against other tendencies on the left, including non-Zionist Jews. This is not, however, purely a problem of anti-Deutsch ideas. German society today continues to struggle with extreme racism, evidenced by attitudes towards refugees and a dangerous neo-Nazi movement. Giving a free pass to Zionism only covers up generalised racism by pretending that German culture has overcome its anti-semitism.

³ For more on the construction of Zionism see the works of Jewish Israeli author Schlomo Sand. Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pape are also Jewish authors worth consulting for deconstruction of Zionism and the Israeli project.

It is in this context that Die Platform is quite likely struggling to articulate a position. This is either because they are unwilling to confront anti-Deutsch activism, or because there is influence of these ideas within the organisation. Die Platforms failure to openly address and confront a modern genocide is an uncomfortable situation for the global anarchist movement. The neo-liberal President of France, Emmanuel Macron, has called for a ceasefire before German anarchists. Germany itself actively participates in the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. The German state supplies the IDF and German companies produce arms used to kill both the Palestinian resistance and civilians. There is a responsibility for genuine revolutionaries to confront the German ruling class.

Anarchists in imperialist nations have a duty to take on revolutionary defeatist positions. Organisations from Columbia, Uruguay, Brasil, Argentina, France, Spain, America, Australia, and others have no hesitation in denouncing Zionism. Die Platform is welcome to join countless voices across the world in solidarity with Palestinians against imperialism and colonialism.

Anarchism and the National Question

Anarchism has always supported the struggles of the oppressed, and by extension, national liberation. The debate over national and cultural autonomy was after all, one of the issues we can say Mikhail Bakunin was fundamentally correct and Karl Marx was sometimes wrong. But anarchists have not supported national liberation blindly. It is always a matter for concrete analysis. Hence Errico Malatesta supported the struggle in Egypt against British, but thought it was unwise that his comrades sacrifice themselves in Greek nationalist struggles in Candia (Malatesta, 1897)⁴. Similarly Alfredo Bonnano concretely analysed Sicilian nationalism in his pamphlet *Anarchism and National Liberation* (Bonanno, 1976). Nestor Makhno and Maria Nikiforova utilised the fight against Austro-Hungarian occupation of the Ukraine to turn the struggle into a class war (Shubin, 2017). Similarly Ricardo Flores Magon and comrades in the Mexican Revolution (Morris, 1994). During the Spanish Revolution, both the Nosotros group and Camilo Berneri saw how inciting insurrection in Morocco through building relations with rebels there was key to international revolution and defeating Franco's fascist armies (Berneri, 1936).

In the context of Palestine, anarchist analysis has been clear since the British Mandate. Camillo Berneri identified Zionism as a tool utilised by British and American imperialism to exploit tensions in Arab territories. As Albert Metzler pointed out, Zionism brought a type of 'Jewish fascism' to Palestine, and with it anti-semitism. He understood that for social revolution to be achieved in Palestine, imperialism and colonialism would have to be confronted first (Meltzer, 1939). As Wayne Price has noted, anarchists do not have to fall into a trap of 'all or nothing.' They can find ways to give practical support to the struggle. Anarchist support for Palestinian self-determination without having to support a bourgeois Palestinian state is perfectly consistent (Price, 2009).

The state that Israel has become is perhaps more authoritarian, more violent, more fascist than anarchists like Metzler or Berneri could have ever imagined. Thousands of Palestinian children have been indiscriminately murdered by the IDF, Gaza turned from an open air prison into a hellish landscape. In response, anarchists from all across the world have thrown themselves into

⁴ This example is also illustrative of Malatestas approach to the conditions of joining a national liberation struggle. The lessons here are relevant to the war in the Ukraine.

the struggle with solidarity. There is little time, nor need, for platitudes about the solutions of 'states'. One thing is incredibly clear; there will be no peace until the Israeli regime falls.

Conclusion

Support for Palestinians overthrowing the very real oppression they face cannot be abstracted away by platitudes about nationalism nor can it be ignored. The Anarchist Communist Group of the UK and Die Plattform of Germany are not being consistent with anarchist principles nor practice. This appears to stem from mistakes in their approaches to theory and organising, and difficulties of their national context. But both organisations should understand that engagement with national liberation movements in general is necessary. It can be nuanced and considered, rather than blanket opposition. Everything from slogans to action can be carefully utilised to encourage popular mobilisation, to heighten the struggle against imperialism and connect these battles to the class struggle in general.

This is a historically defining moment. The massacre of Palestinians by Israel has brought millions of people onto the street. They are marching, blockading industries that supply the war, harassing politicians and finding creative, inspiring ways to take direct action. The injustice of the moment is broadly defined along class lines. The rich tend to support Israel and colonialism, while the rest of us stand with Palestinians.⁵ As the mask is torn away, a whole new generation is learning how cruel the capitalist class truly is. Solidarity is a word on the lips of millions of young workers. True to their history, principles and theory, anarchists have a role to play. They should live up to the moment.

Long Live the Intifada.

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⁵ And I might add, the tiny fringe of revolutionary defeatist leftists in Israel.

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