

The Situationists on the Palestinian Question

Situationist International

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Israel, The U.S. in Miniature

Much of the population of Israel, no different from people in the United States, denies its past as an invader/settler nation, is oblivious to the suffering which creates its plentitude, revels in self-generated myths of its goodness and bravery, and cannot fathom why such rage is directed at it.

Both nations live in what Noam Chomsky describes as a state of “willful ignorance.” The information readily exists for either people to easily understand their origins and how their country and culture engage the world, but blinders are preferable to many rather than having to face the consequences of what a look at reality would demand of them.

The European invasion and genocidal destruction of the North and South American indigenous cultures, cleansed the continent as part of the importation of a poisonous culture and governmental system that had brought social and ecological wreckage to its homeland. The Israelis, although basing their state on similar land dispossession, are faced with resistance of their victims who remain.

Our coverage includes two essays by Jewish Americans, one which traces the history of Israel from its beginning as a Zionist vision, [The Mythology of Israel] the other [An Anti-statist Opposition] looks at the current intifada. Also included in this section is an essay from the Situationist International written at the time of the 1967 war [this article]. Though written 35 years ago, it retains its sharp critique.

—FE staff

FE NOTE: The following passages are from a 1967 Situationist International article, “Two Local Wars,” commenting on the aftermath of the Arab-Israel Six Day War and the U.S. invasion of Vietnam. It is available in several anthologies of the group’s writing. Besides the enduring relevance of the SI’s critique of Middle East events contained here, what is remarkable is that an FE staff member found this on a Palestinian web site centered in the West Bank city of Ramallah in the Occupied Territories. This speaks volumes to the diversity present in the resistance to the Israeli oppression. See www.ramallahonline.com.

These paragraphs are from an anthology translated by Ken Knabb and published by the Bureau of Public Secrets, PO Box 1044, Berkeley CA 94701, USA. The complete article is at <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/11.wars.htm>.

Two Local Wars

The absence of a revolutionary movement in the developed countries has reduced the Left to its simplest expression: a mass of spectators who swoon with rapture each time the exploited in the colonies take up arms against their masters, and who cannot help seeing these uprisings as the epitome of Revolution ... Wherever there is a conflict they always see Good fighting Evil, “total revolution” versus “total reaction.” .

Revolutionary criticism begins beyond good and evil; it is rooted in history and operates on the totality of the existing world. In no case can it applaud a belligerent state or support the bureaucracy of an exploiting state in the process of formation. It must first of all lay bare the truth of present struggles by putting them back into their historical context, and unmask the hidden aims of the forces officially in conflict ...

Since its origins the Zionist movement has been the contrary of the revolutionary solution to what used to be called the “Jewish question.” A direct product of European capitalism, it did not aim at the overthrow of a society that needed to persecute Jews, but at the creation of a Jewish national entity that would be protected from the anti-Semitic aberrations of decadent capitalism. It did not strive to abolish injustice, but to transfer it. The original sin of Zionism is that it has always acted as if Palestine were a desert island ... The creation of the state of Israel is merely a miserable by-product of the triumph of world counterrevolution. To “socialism in a single country” came the echo “justice for a single people” and “equality in a single kibbutz.” ... The Jews recreated for themselves all the fanaticism and segregation they had been victims of. Those who had suffered mere toleration in their society were to struggle to become in another country owners disposing of the right to tolerate others ...

Brought forth a monster

The co-option of all the “progressive” forms of social organization and their integration within the Zionist ideal enabled even the most “revolutionary” individuals to work in good conscience for the building of the bourgeois, militaristic, rabbinical state that modern Israel has become. The prolonged sleep of proletarian internationalism once more brought forth a monster. The basic injustice against the Palestinian Arabs came back to roost with the Jews themselves: the State of the Chosen People was nothing but one more class society in which all the aberrations of the old societies were recreated (hierarchical divisions, tribal opposition between the Ashkenazi and the Sephardim, racist persecution of the Arab minority, etc.)...

But this is due not only to the contradictions of Israeli society. From the outset this situation has been constantly maintained and aggravated by the surrounding Arab societies, which have so far proved incapable of any contribution toward an effective solution ...

The 1948 defeat signaled the end of the “bourgeois-feudality” as the leading class of the Arab movement. It was the opportunity for the petty bourgeoisie to come to power and to constitute, with the officers of the defeated army, the driving force of the present movement. Its program was simple: Arab unity, a vaguely socialist ideology, and the liberation of Palestine (the Return). The Tripartite aggression of 1956 [England, France and Israel's joint attack on Egypt during the “Suez crisis”] provided it with the best opportunity to consolidate itself as a ruling class and to find a leader-program in the person of Nasser, who was presented for the collective admiration of the completely dispossessed Arab masses. He was their religion and their opium. But the new exploiting class had its own interests and goals. The slogans used by the bureaucratic-military regime of Egypt to win popular support were already bad in themselves; in addition, the regime was incapable of carrying them out ...

Freezes the process of social revolution

Twenty years after the first Palestinian war [1948], this new stratum has just demonstrated its total inability to resolve the Palestinian problem. It has lived by delirious bluff, for it was only able to survive by constantly raising the specter of Israel, being utterly incapable of effecting any radical solution whatsoever to the innumerable domestic problems ...

The latest war [1967] has dissipated all these illusions. The total rigidity of “Arab ideology” was pulverized on contact with a reality that was just as hard but also permanent. Those who spoke of waging a war neither wanted it nor prepared for it, while those who spoke only of defending themselves actually prepared the offensive. Each of the two camps followed their respective propensities — the Arab bureaucracy that for lying and demagoguery, the masters of Israel that for imperialist expansion. The most important lesson of the Six Day War is a negative one: it has revealed all the secret weaknesses and defects of what was presented as the “Arab Revolution.” ...

As for Israel, it has become everything that the Arabs had accused it of before the war: an imperialist state behaving like the most classic occupation forces (police terror, dynamiting of houses, permanent martial law, etc.). Internally a collective hysteria, led by the rabbis, is developing around "Israel's inalienable right to its Biblical borders." The war put a stop to the whole movement of internal struggles generated by the contradictions of this artificial society (in 1966 there were several dozen riots, and there were no fewer than 277 strikes in 1965 alone) and provoked unanimous support for the objectives of the ruling class and its most extremist ideology. It also served to shore up all the Arab regimes not involved in the armed struggle ...

No short-term solution is feasible

As always, war, when not civil, only freezes the process of social revolution. In North Vietnam it has brought about the peasants' support, never before given, for the bureaucracy that exploits them. In Israel it has killed off for a long time any opposition to Zionism, and in the Arab countries it is reinforcing temporarily—the most reactionary strata. In no way can revolutionary currents find anything there with which to identify. Their task is at the opposite pole of the present movement since it must be its absolute negation ...

Unlike the Vietnam war, the Palestinian question has no immediately evident solution. No short-term solution is feasible. The Arab regimes can only crumble under the weight of their contradictions and Israel will be more and more the prisoner of its colonial logic. All the compromises that the great powers try to piece together are bound to be counterrevolutionary in one way or another. The hybrid status quo — neither peace nor war — will probably prevail for a long period, during which the Arab regimes will meet with the same fate as their predecessors of 1948 (probably at first to the profit of the openly reactionary forces).

Arab society, which has produced all sorts of ruling classes caricaturing all the classes of history, must now produce the forces that will bring about its total subversion. The so-called national bourgeoisie and the Arab bureaucracy have inherited all the defects of those two classes without ever having known the historical accomplishments those classes achieved in other societies. The future Arab revolutionary forces that will arise from the ruins of the June 1967 defeat must know that they have nothing in common with any existing Arab regime and nothing to respect among the powers that dominate the present world.

They will find their model in themselves and in the repressed experiences of revolutionary history. The Palestinian question is too serious to be left to the states, that is, to the colonels. It is too close to the two basic questions of modern revolution — internationalism and the state — for any existing force to be able to provide an adequate solution. Only an Arab revolutionary movement that is resolutely internationalist and anti-state can dissolve the state of Israel while gaining the support of that state's exploited masses. And only through the same process will it be able to dissolve all the existing Arab states and create Arab unity through the power of the Councils.

Web archive note: All brackets and elipses in this article are in the print original.



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