

Reflections on Twelve Years of Involvement in Campaigning for Palestine

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Although I had joined the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU) in 1973 and Palestine Solidarity (PSC) in 1991 it was not until the national PSC AGM in 1996 that I became actively involved in campaigning for Palestinian rights. At that meeting I was elected onto the executive committee. My feeling that I must do something arose out of my awareness not only of the plight of the Palestinians (I had lived in the Middle East for ten years), but also of the extraordinarily powerful narrative deployed by Israel's supporters.

In 1993 I started my doctoral studies at the University of Sussex on a psychoanalyst called Wilhelm Stekel. My supervisor, Prof Edward Timms, was at that time in the process of setting up a Centre for German Jewish studies at the university. Since Stekel was himself Jewish it was assumed that my research would come under the umbrella of this Centre. I soon became uncomfortably aware of the incompatibility between Palestinian interests and the kind of Jewish narratives which the Centre almost inevitably came to represent. In an appendix to my thesis (presented in 1999), which was never commented on either by my supervisor or my readers, I attempted to express the conflict which I had experienced:

'The injustice which would be done to Stekel himself by limiting a study of him to his supposed "German-Jewish" background is relatively insignificant when compared with the wider danger of contributing to the cycle of atrocity [in Palestine] of which [Mark] Ellis [a Jewish theologian] speaks. For by lending support to the notion of "Semitism", we buttress Zionist ideology and this leads on to the continuing Zionist-American oppression of the Palestinian people. The problem does not stop there, for in attempting to justify the unjustifiable, the West finds itself taking a quite distorted view of the whole Middle-Eastern region, which comes to be seen almost entirely through Israeli eyes. This can only be extremely dangerous for the future of all of us.' [Clark-Lowes, F, 'Wilhelm Stekel and the Early History of Psychoanalysis', University of Sussex, 1999, p. 349].

PSC very nearly collapsed in 1998. The background to this, as I understand it, was that the executive of PSC had decided to take a wait-and-see attitude to the Oslo accords, with the result that many members - especially Jewish and Arab members - had resigned from the organisation, or at least had become inactive. As the extent of the deception of Oslo became ever more apparent, even those who had elected to stick with PSC lost heart. The result was that correspondence was not attended to, the rent for the office was not paid and many subscription cheques ran out of date before being paid in. At this point Jo Beech, who had been involved in helping Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and John Hart, who as running a computer education project in Gaza, managed to get the key to the office and discovered the dire situation which had arisen. They did a valiant job putting PSC back on its feet, and the organisation owes them a debt of gratitude which I have not often heard expressed. At the time I was in the last stages of completing my doctoral dissertation and so my involvement was

limited to being supportive, but at the next AGM I became Chair, with Jo as Treasurer and John Hart as Co-ordinator.

My two stints as Chair added up to two years in office over three years, ending in January 2001. I am proud that I played a part in resuscitating PSC. I have to say, however, that I found much of this time depressing and de-motivating. Already, all those years ago, I encountered the same unwillingness to discuss important elements of the Israel-Palestine conflict which I still confront today. When I raised what I consider to be serious issues which might well affect our tactics (e.g. the way in which the concept of 'antisemitism' is constructed to defy all criticism), I was met with the remark: 'We're a campaigning organisation, not an academic institution.' Looking back, I wonder why I have spent another ten years of my life expecting PSC to change in this respect.

My last act as Chair was to play my part in getting Betty Hunter appointed as Secretary (later General Secretary) of PSC. She has done an amazing job bringing energetic people into the campaign and putting PSC back on the map. Of course the time was right with the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, and the use of massive Israeli fire power over the following years to crush all resistance. But this does not diminish her contribution. I felt that I left PSC in good hands.

But I must backtrack here to talk about my involvement with the Brighton and Hove branch of PSC. When the old regime was still in situ at national PSC, the objective of setting up Palestine societies at universities was regarded as a priority. As I was still at Sussex at the time, I ran a stall at the freshers' fair in 1997 and attempted to re-establish the society which had lapsed before the end of the previous academic year. We got some support, but insufficient to benefit from union funding. I therefore started to hold meetings which were designed both for students and members of the public beyond the university; that is how Brighton and Hove PSC was re-established. I say re-established, because back in the very early days of national PSC (it was established in 1982) the term 'Brighton branch' was being used.

I was Chair for a number of years, Mike Shankland was our Secretary, followed by Zoë Mars who until then was our first Treasurer. Grace Blindell took over from Zoë as Treasurer, and well into her eighties she was to be seen walking up the aisle collecting fares on a coach to London! We did lots of good things - Palestinian party evenings, the stall, talks, discussions, demonstrations, marches and so on. One of our earliest visitors was Jo Beech - in the days before her rescue of national PSC. I was particularly keen to establish links with the Jewish community, but my approaches were met with silence. I did, however, take an active part in promoting films sympathetic to the Palestinian cause at Brighton Jewish Film Festival. While the director, Judy Ironside, was open to my suggestions, and included a couple of 'controversial' films, the reaction of the local Jewish community, judging from those attending 'The Jahalin' (directed by the Israeli Talya Ezrahi, who was present), was hysterical.

But still the kind of discussion which I felt these experiences should have led to didn't happen. Everyone seemed so scared that we might be branded as antisemitic, and that this would be a disaster. But there was one person who did not think this way. I had met Paul Eisen, the UK Director of Deir Yassin Remembered, in the late nineties. His

attitude to his own Jewish roots and his confronting of much wider issues such as ‘the Holocaust’, questioning the shibboleths about the Nazi period in Germany, looking again at Jewish history and the hatred of Jews, and embracing the concept of Jewish power - all of these gave me permission, as it were, to explore these areas for myself. Having been married to a Viennese woman for seventeen years, the re-evaluation of recent German history was a subject close to my heart.

Paul has become a good friend. I trust his integrity, and I am strongly opposed to the kind of vilification which certain self-appointed guardians of correct thinking feel it their role to heap upon him and upon his friends such as Gilad Atzmon and Israel Shamir. The power behind such attacks is drawn from the very same source that oppresses the Palestinians. Sadly even anti-Zionists, and particularly anti-Zionist Jews, tap into this source when it suits them, without acknowledging that it exists.

I recently found a paper I wrote in 2002 which summarised my thinking at that time about the Palestine solidarity movement. Shortly after I wrote it I showed it to Ghada Karmi (Palestinian author of ‘In Search of Fatima’ and ‘Married to Another Man’) and she liked it so much that she convened a short-lived discussion group, other participants being Elfi Pallis (Journalist and author), John Rose (author of ‘The Myths of Zionism’), Tim Llewellyn (ex BBC Middle East correspondent) and Mortaza Sahibzada (who set had set up a website promoting the idea of a single state, and who was one of the cast in ‘Jeremy Hardy Versus the Israeli Army’ the following year). It is not entirely clear why the group broke up, but two factors were probably (a) that I was at that time very preoccupied with looking after my ailing mother, and (b) that I was ill, and therefore not entirely on the ball, at our last meeting. In retrospect, however, I wonder whether misgivings about my views on Jewish identity, which were an essential element in the discussions, also played a decisive part.

Reading through my paper I am struck by the degree to which it still represents my position. What has changed since? I have become much more aware of the opposition among anti-Zionists, and particularly among anti-Zionist Jews and the ideological left, to any discussion of Jewish identity. I have tried to get the subject onto the agenda of the local Palestine solidarity movement but have been strongly opposed in this. At a debate convened by Brighton & Hove PSC in January 2007, for example, the matter was thrashed out in some depth but in the absence of a clear majority for my position, there was no change in our approach to campaigning. Perhaps it was naive of me to have thought that such a change could happen at the local level without there first being a radical change of thinking at national level.

In 2002 I was still flirting with the far left - I was, for example, a member of the Alliance Party for one year around that time. I have now become convinced that the attempt to see the world entirely in terms of economic power relations is a great mistake. Certainly economic power is extremely important, and often it is predominant, but there are other forms of power. A recent Al-Jazeera documentary called Balfour to Blair (see <http://tinyurl.com/4jrpsb>) makes it clear that Christian sympathy with Zionism has been a potent factor in the success of the Zionist enterprise. It seems reasonable, therefore, to speak of Christian power in this context, even if many individual Christians did not agree with the policies of, say, Arthur Balfour, Lloyd George, Mark Sykes or, more recently, Tony Blair. Equally, when talking about the pressure exerted by Jews in favour of the Zionist enterprise, and

more widely in favour of a particular way of seeing the world and their position in it, it seems to me perfectly reasonable to talk of Jewish power, even if many Jews do not accept the policies this pressure is designed to promote. The fact that I am considered an antisemite for saying this is an indication of the problem we face. We are, in effect, being told that free speech is all very well, but this kind of free speech is forbidden.

Perhaps I should make it clear what I mean by saying that there is a need to talk about Jewish identity. I see Zionism as the product of a national view of Jewish identity. At a time (the nineteenth century) when Jewish identity was in decline through emancipation, assimilation, intermarriage and loss of religious faith, emphasising the ancient idea of 'the Jewish people' and conflating that with the German conception of the nation and nationalism offered the hope of cultural survival. That in itself need not have been problematical, but the way in which Zionists achieved their objectives, against all the norms of international behaviour, by presenting Jews as victims rather than oppressors, and their opponents as antisemites, has, in my view made it necessary to deconstruct the whole ideological apparatus of Zionism. And central to this is a particular conception of Jewish identity. Of course, any questioning of this or other Jewish narratives is likely to be regarded as 'antisemitic', and since 'antisemitism' is perceived as an unanalysable disease of gentiles, and now even of some Jews, the debate is supposed to end here. It takes a lot of courage to argue on.

I will shortly be standing down from the committee of the local branch of Palestine Solidarity Campaign. This marks a further stage in my withdrawal from active involvement in PSC, but not the end. I will remain a member, and will support local and national PSC events from time to time. Raising consciousness of the issues in the old time-honoured ways, will hopefully, over time, have a drip-drip effect on politicians and their policies. It will not alone be decisive, however. There is here a parallel with the effect of anti-apartheid movement where the campaign prepared the ground for the time when the Soviet Union collapsed and F.W. de Klerk saw a window of opportunity to wipe the apartheid system off the map. The increasing pariah status of South Africa was a motive for change, but so long as the Soviet Union existed and the cold war continued, an insufficiently powerful one.

But in the case of Israel-Palestine the geopolitical shift in power which is required is not simply the decline of US power. I believe Zionism could survive this. It is the decline to Jewish power to a reasonable level. Every group needs power - indeed the *raison d'être* of a group is that it can exercise power. The problem with Jewish power at present is that it has made itself immune from criticism and control by using the accusation of antisemitism to crush anyone who attempts to criticise it or control it.

I ask myself a simple question: 'Do I believe a resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict is possible without radical change in the way Jewishness is understood and privileged?' I answer with a definitive no. The brilliant Zionist narrative, and its supporting Jewish narratives about Jewish identity, Jewish history and antisemitism, if unchallenged, will continue to provide a cast-iron case for Israeli behaviour. That is why Jewish power needs to be challenged.

Palestine Solidarity Campaign largely draws its support from people on the left who are unaccustomed to think in terms of what might be called cultural power. They may recognise that at the personal level there are issues of power between individuals -

between husbands and wives, children and adults, students and teachers, for example. But when it comes to larger groupings, they tend to be unimaginative in their analysis. On the one hand they recognise direct political power, wielded by governments - without necessarily asking where this power derives from. On the other hand they recognise the power of money, i.e. of the rich. The kind of leftish rhetoric which dominates PSC seems to preclude the possibility that other large groupings, such as Christians, Muslims and Jews, might also exercise considerable power. Combine this with an almost pathological fear of being accused of antisemitism, and you have a blanket embargo on discussion of Jewish power. The argument is put forward: 'If you go down this road you are doing exactly what the Zionists want.' I disagree. Once they realise that you are serious and will not bow to pressure it will be the last thing they want. They will see that their game has been rumbled.

Suppose I were sitting face to face with an ordinary Jew, who has accepted what s/he has been told over the years, saying what I have written here. It is, of course, easier to *write* such ideas because there is no interruption. We can imagine that this Jew would not sit quietly listening to what I have to said; s/he would have a great deal to protest about. I won't rehearse the arguments because if you've read this far you will certainly know them. The question is, what would I say in reply. I don't dislike this person - s/he is quite likely a friend of mine. I don't like hurting people's feelings. The temptation to moderate what I am saying is strong.

In the same appendix to my thesis (p. 346) I imagined a British Mr Brown meeting a German Nazi Herr Braun in the 1930s and challenging his ideas. In the end he caves in to Herr Braun's arguments because he likes the man himself and is insufficiently clear about his own position. I don't intend to cave in now like Mr Brown. I want to say: 'What is being done in your name as a Jew, and what you are trying to protect by protesting, is not only monstrously inhumane; it is also a very grave risk to world peace and therefore to the future of all of us. None of this would be possible if it were not backed up with a narrative which persuades most Jews, and indeed most Westerners, that your survival can only be ensured (a) by the existence of the exclusivist state of Israel, and (b) by a ruthless control of discussion of anything remotely related to Jews, unless it is couched in positive terms. I understand that you will find what I have said very hard to accept, but I hope that after you have pondered the matter you will recognise its truth and make it clear that you are not a fellow traveller. If enough Jews did this, the whole enterprise would collapse.'