

Palestine Solidarity Today (2000): A Personal View

It is a characteristic of unsuccessful groups that they become hopelessly divided, with each faction accusing the others of breaking ranks and tampering with established orthodoxy. All new ideas are met with implacable opposition, and the passage of time and changes in the objective situation are considered to make no difference to the relevance of particular positions. The more evident the failure of the movement becomes, the more its lack of success is attributed to treachery within. Sadly this appears to be what has been happening in PSC for some time now. By contrast, the almost unrelenting progress of the inhumane Zionist dream has been achieved, at least to a considerable extent, by an agreement to disagree and not to rock the boat.

In my view there are two factors which determine the potential success of a movement. The first is a broad agreement on what the objective is. The second is a tolerance of debate and a willingness to adjust the movement's position in the light of that debate. I personally have no serious difficulty with the agreed aims of PSC. What I find less acceptable is the fierce opposition which I have encountered in certain quarters in trying to get any kind of debate going about fundamental issues and ideas.

Zionism is an *idea*, or to be more precise a *group of ideas*. It appeals particularly to people of Jewish background, but it would not have succeeded as a political programme if it had not also appealed to non-Jews. There are three possible solutions which I can see to the injustice caused by Zionism. The first is for it to be defeated militarily. The second is to wait for geopolitical and demographic changes to effect a reversal of the Zionist programme. The third is to deconstruct and fight the *idea* of Zionism. The first of these is in present circumstances impractical. The second condemns many to continue suffering for a long time into the future. The third, in my view, is the area where we could really make a difference.

I have noticed that supporters of the Palestinian cause fall into a number of categories. Firstly there are Palestinians themselves who have direct experience of the situation. Secondly there are people of Jewish background (Israeli and non-Israeli) who have for some reason moved against Zionism, either because of direct experience of it, or because they cannot ignore the consequences of it. Thirdly there is the ideological left who see Zionism as part of the wider problem of imperialism and the class struggle. And fourthly there are those who have experience at second hand of the situation, usually as a result of meeting and talking to Palestinians, or of travelling to Israel-Palestine. Obviously these groups are not mutually exclusive. What is rare is to find people who do not fit into these categories. It is, however, these other people whom I believe we need to convince, particularly when they hold positions of power and influence.

But this will not be achieved by a few demos here and there. The unconverted simply bracket off such actions as being the predictable behaviour of partial organisations. Such people are equally unlikely to choose to read our magazine, still less to believe what we write in it, unless we at least indicate in it that we are willing to grapple with really fundamental issues and *ideas*. By this I mean ideas which are deeply rooted in what I can only vaguely call 'western culture'. Primary among these ideas is the conception that the world's population can satisfactorily be divided up

into discrete groups, and that each group has the right to a national identity based on a piece of real estate. I want therefore to ‘deconstruct’ both the idea of Jewish nationality and the concept that the political ownership of land should be based on constructed nationalities. I will then be in a much stronger position to answer the ubiquitous argument: ‘But surely *they* ought to have a land of their own.’ Who are *they*, and in any case why?

Of course this necessarily involves casting at least an element of doubt on the idea of Palestinian nationality. You may feel that Palestinians are at least a people who lived for centuries on the same piece of land, and that they therefore have more right to call themselves a nation than Jews. My own position is that nationality of whatever kind is usually the creation of powerful élites, or that it is at least manipulated by them. I am therefore disinclined to fight the Palestinian cause as if it were a nationality issue. Nations may still need to exist for the purposes of administration, and a moderate degree of national consciousness is probably inevitable and maybe even desirable. It would, however, be very sad if the Palestinians were to develop the same kind of chauvenism which characterises Zionism, and unlike some liberal Israelis whose conscience troubles them about the latter, I want to have no part in encouraging Palestinian nationalism.

For me, the Israel-Palestine issue is one of human rights, with all the ambiguities and problems which such a position implies. I see the conflict in the context of world peace and justice, of humanitarianism if you like. Where there is a conflict between Palestinian demands and what I might call natural justice, I come down firmly on the side of the latter. Hence I am implacably opposed to some ‘islamic’ solutions which regard Israeli Jews as having no rights whatsoever in Palestine. Zionist Israeli Jews are in most cases themselves the victims of a manipulative Zionist élite who control an extraordinarily effective propaganda machine. Ordinary Israeli-Jews’ relative power vis-à-vis the Palestinians is matched on the other hand by their relative powerlessness in psychological terms vis-à-vis the Zionist power-élite who have, viewed in the longer sweep of history, put them in an extraordinarily dangerous position. It is because of this recognition that my thinking has moved towards a quasi-Marxist one in which I see the enemies not as being one side or the other, but as being the élites who manipulate both sides, often by mutual agreement.

I have been watching with some interest the developing saga in Zimbabwe. While I’m inclined to agree with those who consider that Robert Mugabe is unscrupulously using the land-ownership question for his own political ends, I cannot believe that a situation where 70% of the country’s land is owned by white farmers came about in a just way. But once again it is difficult not to recognise that historically the whites in Southern Rhodesia acquired their land because they were convinced of a colonialist ideology by the British imperial élite. In some ways, therefore, there is a parallel with Palestine.

If I were to be involved in devising a just solution to the Zimbabwe question what would I do? Would I perhaps attempt to establish in each case whether the white land-owners had acquired their property through a legal purchase? In this case, I would be acquiescing in the idea that financial power is paramount and that the legal system imposed by the colonisers was just, or at least relatively so. Would I perhaps

take account of the length of time that the white owner's families had occupied the land? Southern Rhodesia was a trendy place to go in the late fifties and sixties and one might consider that people who went there then (at the end of the colonialism era) have less right to the land than those who have been there for several generations. But where do you draw the line? Or I might maintain that whites who were born in Zimbabwe and have Zimbabwean nationality have equal land rights to black Zimbabweans. On the other hand, I might be tempted to take the simplistic position which is to say that there never should have been any whites in the country now called Zimbabwe, and hence such people should be deprived of their land-owning rights. I suspect the best solution would be to start a debate, involving all parties and no doubt involving commissions of enquiry. Due account would be taken of the imbalance of power between the whites and their ancestors vis-à-vis blacks and decisions for action would be arrived at which would be uncomfortable for some, but where there would be some degree of compensation and where there would be at least a moderate degree of consensus.

This brings me to UN resolution 194. I accept that PSC's policy on the refugee issue is at the moment still based on this resolution, and I would not make public statements of behalf of PSC to the contrary. But I believe I should be entitled to a private opinion which should not involve me being made a pariah in the organisation whose Chair I am. The problem for me with 194 is that it speaks of a right of return to the same property from which the refugees came. Now we all know (a) that most of the refugees are in reality the children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren of the original refugees, (b) that in very many cases those properties from which they came, and indeed whole villages have disappeared, (c) that there are living in those houses which remain not only a few of the original colonisers, but also their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. None of the latter asked to be born into Jewish-Israeli families, but because they were they inevitably regard Israel as their home and feel they have a natural right to the property in which they live.

Any peaceful outcome of the Israel-Palestine situation must ultimately rest upon an acceptance, reluctant or otherwise, by a sufficient number of Israeli Jews that the present situation is unjust and that it therefore needs to be resolved. But they are unlikely to agree to a resolution which in their eyes will *inevitably* appear as unjust to them, that is a resolution which requires them to give up property which they have lived in all their lives to people who have never lived there (to slightly oversimplify the issue). I know that the great majority of people who support the Palestinians and continue to insist on 194 do not really believe that Palestinians could in most cases return to the same property which they, or much more probably their parents or grandparents, left. They argue that 194 is a starting point for negotiations. My point is, however, that such a position, without qualification, is likely to be a block to any meaningful debate with the other side. On the other hand, I am entirely in favour of advocating Abu Sitta's solution, i.e. the resettling of Palestinian refugees in the relatively empty parts of Israel.

I realise that my position differs from that of many prominent supporters of the Palestinian cause, among them people whom I admire such as Edward Said, Noam Chomsky and, of course, Abu Sitta. I can only say what I think. It is not just that I find it inconceivable that 194 could ever be acceptable to a sufficient number of Jewish Israelis. It is also that this position is likely to seem totally unrealistic to that

group of people whom I believe we should be targetting. It just might be possible to retain the resolution by expressing our position in the following terms: 'We base ourselves on the principle of resolution 194, the details of which would have to be negotiated.' But this is quite different from saying that we are entirely committed to the implementation of 194 in every detail.

There is one more important point to be made. Movements aiming at achieving justice tend to rely heavily on the emotional commitment of their members. There is a need to keep this ingredient alive if the movement is to survive, and this aim may at times come into conflict with the desire or need to change policies. So, for example, 194 may be considered too crucial to the morale of our organisation for it to be dropped. Without reengaging in the particular debate about 194, it can easily be seen that there may sometimes be a conflict between keeping the home fires burning and engaging in workable strategies in the outside world. The contentious issue of whether or not to use the name Israel, or Israel-Palestine, or Palestine-Israel, is another case in point. My own view on this, as you know, is that I believe we need use some such formulation with the uninitiated, otherwise we'll simply be misunderstood. I recognise, however, the enormous emotional opposition to using the name Israel, and I know that we have supporters who still refer to 'the Zionist entity'. Such difficulties can only be resolved by debates which engage the whole membership. It is this kind of debate which we have so singularly failed to foster in the last few years.