

Palestinians inside Israel

A Student Movement without a University

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ABSTRACT The Palestinian student movement inside the Israeli academy was established within hostile universities. Palestinian students were not engaged in any institutional production of knowledge and therefore could not develop an alternative, anti-colonial framework within the Israeli academy. These conditions made the national student movement into a mirror of the traditional political parties in Israel, marked by the uncritical adoption of the traditional parties' positions. The student movement was administered by party power at all levels and was denied any organizational or intellectual autonomy. The parties remained dominant over student politics, and we have not seen any radical breaks with them. This strong tie has weakened the potential for a revolutionary, anti-Zionist approach within the Palestinian student movement and has resulted in its gradual collapse.

KEYWORDS Palestine, student movements, Arab citizens of Israel, Israeli academy, anti-colonial activism

The experience of the Palestinian student movement inside the Israeli academy can be summarized as an attempt to establish a student movement in the absence of a university to represent it. That is to say, it is a political student movement that has not engaged with the institutional production of academic knowledge and has remained aloof from it. The movement never sought to assimilate into the organization of academic knowledge in Israel and has not been able to produce any alternative framework for knowledge within it. Zionist colonialism has created a situation in which Taylorist students, hyper-specialized in their intellectual training, are limited in their political movements to forming organizations that are in no way distinct from other conventional Palestinian political organizations in Israel. Meanwhile, the university itself—its architectural design and ideological foundations, its administrative and teaching staff, and the vast majority of its students—has been a hostile and repressive entity for Palestinian students. Its members were

brought together despite differences to confront Palestinian student action, which is nationalist-revolutionary in character. All of these factors transformed Palestinian students' political action into a movement that reached its apex at the moment of its founding, which, I would argue, is its only achievement. These circumstances have deflated the left-wing fantasy surrounding student movements and revolutions in Palestine, and have transformed these movements into vehicles for passive resistance against another fantasy: the illusion of assimilation into Israeli society through its main gateway—the Israeli university.

The traditional and well-known fantasy surrounding leftist student movements in Palestine has reached the phase of its final decline. This essay is a Palestinian attempt to inspect this fantasy, to review its broad outlines, and to indicate very briefly its sites of disintegration under conditions of Zionist colonialism. In other words, this may be a lament for a revolutionary imaginary that has lived and been celebrated. The time has come to bury it, and to search for a new political imaginary instead.

1

Fantasies surrounding the world's student movements have two main itineraries. The first constitutes an attack on student barricades whose echoes resonate historically. Specifically, for the last six decades, the ruling institutions' media have produced an imaginary that demonizes student organizing and stigmatizes it by means of straw men—the figure of the communist, for example, or the anarchist, among others. This imaginary regards student organizing as a genuine threat to stability and civil peace and considers violence to be an integral part of student movements. Several objective factors (including age, social class, cognitive abilities, and university administration) facilitated the production of this fantasy, which resulted in the alienation of students and the transformation of the university into an isolated community.

Yet there is a second, more important, itinerary for the fantasies surrounding student movements, one that was formed behind the barricades and has been an inspiration and a vital drive for leftists around the world for decades. Left-wing literature produced an all but inextinguishable magic around student movements. This magic originated in the 1960s, turning student movements into a dominant image in the leftist revolutionary imagination, an image analogous to (and perhaps even rivaling) the proletariat as a revolutionary class.

This image brought together several elements that gave it its power: the fetish of uniting theoretical research and political action, culminating in the ability for political organizing to create a crisis in a school of thought (as in the crisis that student activists engendered when they clashed with their Frankfurt School professors); the restoration of Marxism and the awakening of its critical vigor, rescuing it from Stalinism and reaffirming it in the face of functional structuralism;

the ahistorical, Oedipal conceptualization of the student struggle as one between generations, “the children’s rebellion against their parents”; the treatment of the university as a refuge for civilian guerrilla revolutionary action, as in the rhetoric of the 1968 Paris Commune’s occupation of the Sorbonne, or the visions of Rudi Dutschke and Hans-Jürgen Kral, presented at the 1967 German Social Student Union Conference, where they called for organizing students into guerrilla groups and argued that universities should constitute the stages from which struggles against state institutions would be launched.

An essential aspect of the Palestinian experience of student organizing is tethered to the moment the student enters the university. This is the moment of departure from Palestinian society, isolated as it is by deep apartheid, and it marks the student’s passage through the gate into the “other world.” Here the student first attempts to live in “Israel” as it really is: entirely Jewish spiritually, ideologically, demographically. The university, in this first moment of encounter, appears to be a magical, opaque, and closed space that awaits discovery. A Palestinian student enters into this space sentenced to a sense of awe and horror before the unknown. To envision their role in and relationship to this unknown place, Palestinian students have for decades mobilized the leftist fantasy surrounding student movements. By allowing students to balance their desires for personal progress and self-realization, on the one hand, with their efforts to preserve their national and political identity, on the other, this fantasy has helped students not assimilate into the university, and it has organized their relationship with it. This fantasy, with all of its practical and historical elements and all that has been projected onto it by the media, politicians, and thinkers, has served consistently to facilitate restricted entry into the university. Students (especially leftists) try through this fantasy to organize their roles and to further develop inherited vocabularies of student organizing. And so they begin Sisyphean efforts to revive the essence of revolutionary sensibilities in the university.

This fantasy is in the process of collapsing, and so is the student movement. This collapse is due to objective reasons related to the dynamic of a Zionist ideology eager to establish a total system, especially at the economic, educational, and cultural levels. Such an ideology seeks to replace the political identity of Palestinians with a fractured identity that merely aspires to assimilation, allowing colonial hegemony to perpetuate its strange and aggressive existence in the country. We need to investigate the collapse of this fantasy and understand its demise.

2

All of the elements that make up this picture of Palestinian student movements are on the verge of being entirely wiped out under Israeli colonialism. The entire Palestinian situation is characterized by the lack of Palestinian knowledge production

in the context of the Israeli higher education system. The Palestinian student is not a partner, in any sense, in the production of academic knowledge, whether in the humanities or in the social sciences. There is no room in Israeli higher education for the construction of a Palestinian theoretical framework or for any active Palestinian participation in Israeli theorization, given that the most deeply rooted intellectual foundations of Israeli academic research contradict the foundations of Palestinian consciousness. The Israeli system of higher education is unable to overcome or criticize the justifications for its racist existence—and thus unable to reckon with the essence of the Palestinian political struggle. For Palestinian students, Palestinian reality—the reality of the confiscation of land, massacres, occupation, military rule, and so on—did not require theoretical analysis either to reveal or to understand it. Colonial reality was never a matter of theoretical exchange; it was a fierce confrontation between colonizer and colonized.

To this, other reasons for the collapse of Palestinian student movements can be added. These include Palestinian educational models that are fully oriented toward participation in the Israeli labor market (after land confiscation, the theft of resources, and the destruction of the traditional Palestinian economy). These lead to very low numbers of Palestinian students enrolled in studies at the Master's level, fewer still in doctoral programs, and even fewer engaged in teaching and post-doctoral research. The university is not treated as a living space for the production of knowledge but as a certification factory. Therefore success in the university also becomes associated with a shortened university experience, which results in very rapid changes in the student population (while the student leadership in charge of political organizing remains rigid and is given no intellectual role). All of this is compounded by sharp separations between fields of knowledge and by Taylorist imperatives that demand specialization in narrow fields. The severe intellectual humility that prevailed in student organizing, which was also characterized by an absence of dialogue between student organizing and academic research, produced a student movement without a clear intellectual orientation. This resulted in stronger ties to political parties and an adherence to their literature.

As a set of physical buildings, the university was not, in any sense, a safe and fortified space for Palestinian students, a place in which they could organize their movement and enjoy the freedom to assemble. Student work is organized through university-granted permits that are political in nature and subject to political dictates and rhetorical maneuvers. This has, for example, compelled students to self-censor their political speech. The nationalist character of the conflict transformed the university, including the vast majority of its teachers and staff as well as the vast majority of its students, into a hostile entity, a force waiting to attack, monitoring any Palestinian student movement as a danger that must be suppressed immediately. Furthermore, the university had also been primarily—and this has been the

source of its strength for most Arabs—a site of transition from the Palestinian society isolated in villages and cities to Israeli society. In other words, the university has been a gateway to the Israeli market and thus Israeli society, and therefore success in the university has also meant success in the exchange with the colonizer's society.

3

Attempts have been made to characterize the Palestinian student movement, or even the youth movement more generally, as a “Stand Tall” generation, struggling against a clumsy one. But the use of this kind of analysis in understanding the Palestinian student movement produces delusions. The student movement has played a central role in strengthening traditional Palestinian party power in Israel since the Nakba, and it has not been separate from the formation of the party or its central movements. The student movement was, in its overall experience, an arm of traditional party politics, promoting it and imbibing it. The student movement was administered by party power at all levels, and the movement was denied any organizational or intellectual autonomy. The party remained dominant over student politics, and we have not seen any radical breaks with these parties, which have led the student movement to maintain the system and traditional powers existing within it.

Furthermore, in a society lacking the frameworks for the formation of future internal leadership—such as the army, the market, or the bureaucratic apparatus—the Israeli higher education system was the only such framework available. Over time, the student movement turned into a production line for party leaders. This was a central consideration in political competition, and it worked against the possibility that the student movement would see itself as an organization standing on its own. Many student leaders gained a place in the movement not because of their effectiveness or their intellectual and organizational abilities, but because of the strength and confidence they were given by the central party. That is, the legitimacy of their leadership was not derived from the movement, but from their relationship with the parties responsible for student organization. This situation has encouraged an uncritical adoption of the traditional parties' positions and led to a refusal to deviate from them, or even to discuss them. This has prevented the development of political thought linked to the student movement.

4

Many explanations can be given for the nihilistic status of the Palestinian student movement. These may explain the fate of attempts to build a political movement against Zionism from within Israeli universities. There remains perhaps the possibility of a political movement against Zionism that is built outside the universities.

But the fact is that these interpretations call for a dialectical historical inquiry, which would challenge a large part of the legitimacy of the current political

leadership of the Palestinian parties. Pursuing this inquiry, while considering the possibilities of (student or non-student) political action within Israeli institutions, would challenge the foundations of political action inside Israel. Has there ever been a real Palestinian student movement inside Israeli universities with a narrative and organization and knowledge all its own?

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