Contemporary Israeli Anarchism

A History

CrimethInc.

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Our anonymous interlocutor traces the prehistory and development of contemporary Israeli anarchism, touching on the origins of punk and the animal rights movement in Israel and presenting a critical analysis of the trajectory of Anarchists Against the Wall. He concludes by reflecting on the function of nonviolence rhetoric in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. We strongly recommend this interview to anyone interested in the Israel/Palestine conflict or, for that matter, in the strategic challenges of formulating an anarchist opposition in adverse conditions.

Is there any continuity connecting the contemporary Israeli anarchist movement to currents preceding the countercultural surge of the early '90s?

None whatsoever, unfortunately. Then again, it might not be *that* unfortunate.

Throughout the hundred years preceding, Israeli anarchists played a part in some successful endeavors, but always at a costly price: the subjugation of the political to the social, which was basically BuberSpeak for attempting to build new worlds *around* the existing one, rather than on its smoldering ashes. The *Kibbutzim* (Jewish socialist agricultural settlements) serve as a cautionary tale—should yet another such tale be needed—of anarchists becoming pawns in authoritarian projects through tentative collaborations based on "temporarily" compromising our *confrontational* and *political* rejection of hierarchy.

Strange as it may sound today, many secular European Jews at the turn of the previous century saw a tacit bond between Zionism and anarchism. Ghettoized and excluded from the national ethos of their own countries, they gravitated towards tendencies that—in their personal lives, if not in the eyes of history—offered opposing magnetic polarities to push back with: anarchism, Marxism, and Zionism. Ironically, as documented by anarchist writers like Voline in Russia, large parts of the Jewish ghettos perceived Zionism to be the craziest and *most utopian* of the three.

So, in what could be seen as a precursor to the pitfalls of modern identity politics, the ties binding the old anarchists to their Jewish identity enabled their Umanità Nova, their vision of a new humanity, to be folded into and superseded by Zionism's vision of a new Jewry, the "Muscle Jew" of Israel, set to replace the frightened ghetto one. On the ground, one of the forms this supersession took was the fast-paced morph of egalitarian *Kibbutzim* communities into strategic colonial instruments at the hands of a nascent state bent on driving indigenous populations off the land.

In this light, it should come as no surprise that in 1994, the first vinyl release of the first Israeli anarchist hardcore band was titled, simply, "Renounce Judaism."

With the establishment of a Jewish state, the Labor Zionism anarchists discovered that the operation had succeeded and the patient had died; much like their contemporaries in the October revolution, the Chinese May 4th Movement, and Madero's Mexican uprising—and perhaps yesterday's Occupy movement—their sole reward was having been forgotten players in birthing the entity that deemed them irrelevant.

The end of the Second World War and subsequent immigration of more European Jews into the newly-established Israeli state, with some anarchists amongst them, further galvanized the tension between the political and the social, between identities freely chosen and identities born into, "anarchist" and "Jewish"—a tension nowhere as critical, of course, as within the borders of a Jewish *archos.*

Coming straight out of the Polish ghettos, they proved unwilling or unable to take the ghetto out of their émigré selves, and rather than flying the black flag defiantly they simply circled the wagons; in their defense, though, surviving the *Holocaust* might do that to you. They organized themselves into historical societies, cultural associations, philosophical discussion circles, and literary study groups, communicating chiefly in Yiddish, a choice oddly reminiscent of that other closed, black-clad Jewish milieu with its back turned on society—orthodox Hasidic Jews—and in stark contrast to the earlier anarchists of the *Kibbutzim,* who spoke Hebrew. During the ’50s and ’60s, the Freedom Seekers Association, Israel’s main anarchist group, produced a monthly bilingual publication called *Problemen* alongside several books, and maintained a library of classic anarchist literature (again, mostly in Yiddish and Polish) as well as a large hall in central Tel Aviv, drawing hundreds of attendees to non-threatening conferences where anarchy was theorized to death alongside Hassidic parables.

Naturally, introverted and self-contained cultural gatherings came at the expense of agitation, outreach, and organizing, which brings to mind certain punk rock scenery we know only too well. In fact, there doesn’t seem to have been even so much as an attempt to build a political anarchist *movement.*

One anecdote from that era illustrates it perfectly: a Shin Bet agent (Israel’s internal security service) came down to an anarchist meeting one day. “I heard you have been discussing the possible ramifications of assassinating the prime minister,” he said worryingly.

“Indeed we have,” came the reply, “but we were talking about the prime minister of *Poland.*” The agent left and they were never bothered again.

I should note that all was *not* so quiet on the Middle Eastern front at that time. The famous seamen’s strike, for example—the most radical and violent strike in Israeli history, which for 40 days brought the country’s only commercial port to a standstill—took place in 1951. Incidentally, it was led by a young sailor whose grandson would become a key organizer in Israeli anarchism from the ’90s onwards. 1962 saw a series of wildcat strikes in the wake of the devaluation of the Israeli pound. Through all this, serious disturbances against ethnic discrimination erupted, led by Jews from Middle Eastern and North African countries living in *Ma’abarot,* refugee absorption camps. In 1949, during one such disturbance, angry mobs smashed windows and ripped doors off their hinges at the temporary Israeli Parliament building; in the following year, a leader of similar protests by Yemenite Jews was the first citizen to be killed by an Israeli policeman’s bullet. This, of course, without even mentioning the various forms of resistance Palestinian Arabs were immersed in at the time.

None of the above, as far as I know, elicited any participation or material support from Israel’s exilic anarchists, who seem to have been more attuned to Yiddish labor struggles in New York’s Lower East Side than in their new surroundings.

Zionism and Judaism aside, another key issue on which post-‘90s anarchists broke from the old guard was our blasphemous attitude towards the IDF, the Israeli “Defense” Forces. American anarcho-syndicalist house painter Sam Dolgoff, who visited Israel in the early ’70s, captured the prevailing attitude of the old-timers (as well as his own, apparently):

> “…Israeli comrades are forced, like the other tendencies, to accept the fact that Israel must be defended. […] In discussion with Israeli anarchists it was emphasized that the unilateral dismantling of the Israeli state would not at all be anarchistic. It would, on the contrary, only reinforce the immense power of the Arab states and

> actually expedite their plans for the conquest of Israel. […] the necessity for defense of Israel—freely acknowledged by our comrades—depends upon putting into effect the indispensable military, economic, legislative and social measures needed to keep Israel in a permanent state of war preparation. The Israeli anarchists […] know only too well that curtailing the power of the state under such circumstances offers no real alternative."

Correspondingly, when an anarcho-punk collective stirred up controversy with a headline-grabbing anti-IDF issue of its *War of Words* fanzine in 1996, they were reproached in no uncertain terms by the late Joseph Luden, editor of the aforementioned *Problemen* and author of the book *A Short History of the Anarchist Idea*, who expressed a deep disappointment and insisted that the armed forces are "not the enemy." To us, this showed that the primordial Jewish fear of the Pogrom, of Romans or Crusaders or Cossacks or Arabs awaiting their chance to gut us in our sleep, was strong enough to cloud the judgment of even lifelong anarchists, much like other cultural poisons we drink in with our mother's milk and never fully get out of our systems.

Of course, with the Palestinian death toll reaching its current dizzying heights, attacks on the very *existence* of a military apparatus, not just its prevalence, have become a more common feature of Israeli radicalism; but the early '90s were a different story. Practically all our fellow radicals—when not preoccupied with issues such as the then-popular and extremely safe "religious coercion" theme—were adamant in sharpening a distinction between military duty inside the Green Line (the de facto Israeli borders), which they considered a moral obligation, and troops deployed *outside* of it, in occupied Palestinian territory, which they thought we should strategically oppose and be jailed for. Even anti-Zionist Trotskyist splinter groups and fringe offshoots, who were basically in the same toy boat as us, encouraged their members to join the military, albeit with the aim of relating better to the average worker.

The 1990s generation of Israeli anarchists was in a position to bring something unique to the table—and we did. At first glance, you could diagnose it as Oppositional Defiant Disorder, perhaps, or revolution for the hell of it: a collective middle finger to the army with no blueprints or analyses or structural adjustment plans to replace it. "Serious" revolutionaries frowned upon this, of course. In hindsight, however, I think singling out militarism showed good instincts, a fine-tuned sense of the changing nature of a key battleground—a battleground that was and remains extremely important in both symbolic and practical terms.

Furthermore, it showed that we knew enough to trust our immediate experiences, letting them guide our decisions. All of us were close to the age at which the state's attempt to enlist us into Israel's mandatory military service—and the scars we earned fighting that—were still fresh.

To be clear, I don't want to come off as overly critical of the older generations of Israeli anarchists. They were extremely good at many things, just not particularly at being anarchists, or rather at being *anarchic*—at recognizing and prioritizing the projects that are exclusive to anarchist thinking, that *no one else* can offer. In a country where all political factions—left, right and center—had began as radical subversives not long ago, perhaps "anarchist" should have meant *rebel* rather than *revolutionary.* Nevertheless, I *do* have a tremendous respect for the old-school.

How did Israeli anarchism arrive with or emerge from the countercultural surge of the early ’90s? What characteristics does it retain from that era? What advantages and disadvantages do those confer?

Even after having been personally involved in both ’90s anarchism and the Israeli counterculture of that time, I’m not sure whether modern Israeli anarchism emerged out of the punk explosion, as in other countries during that decade, or whether both were products of the zeitgeist in equal measure. I guess that should be left to the social historians—or maybe the physicists, since Newton’s third law clearly states that all forces are *interactions* between different bodies.

Speaking of physics—if nature indeed abhors a vacuum, it must have been royally pissed off at us as the ’90s rolled in. The first Palestinian Intifada had lost momentum and direction after three long years, essentially ending at the Madrid Conference of 1991 (though officially only at the 1993 Oslo Accords). This period, right up to the assassination of Prime Minister Yizhak Rabin in late 1995 and the right-wing electoral victory six months later, was marked by a strong sense of euphoria and optimism in the ranks of the left: an uplifting feeling that Peace, ever elusive, was right around the corner, a mere treaty away. Radicals—including anarchists, with the exception of a single individual, if I recall our meetings correctly—were completely co-opted by the so-called Peace Process, accepting it as the only game in town.

There were two reasons for this. First, Fatah opposition to the process had collapsed and Palestinian society seemed to have embraced it wholly, leaving us hesitant to come off as “more Catholic than the Pope.” Second, the right’s hysterical objection to it lulled us further into thinking this was, on the whole, a positive process. Lesson learned: never choose political paths based on which troll is under what bridge.

However, there was a silver lining in our clouded judgment. As Peace dropped a few spots on the list of burning issues to attend to, other issues naturally climbed up, and unfamiliar concepts were sucked into the resulting vacuum, suggesting new ways to approach the old problems. And since people are not one-dimensional, with the changes in politics came cultural changes as well: radical ecology and animal liberation, for example, previously unheard of, burst onto the scene shoulder-to-shoulder with a new counterculture of noise, ‘zines, street art, international contacts, the do-it-yourself ethic, communal living arrangements, infoshops, independent media, and cross-issue alliances and activist practices. Anarchy, explicit or implicit but always _com_plicit, was at the heart of this.

Punk is a good reference point, although this countercultural surge was wider and more aesthetically diverse. Contrary to what many assume, punk’s influence was already roughing the edges of Israeli alternative culture in the late ’70s, and throughout the ’80s punks formed bands, played shows, and released demo cassettes. However, the concept of a “scene” as social unit simply hadn’t occurred to anyone. Punk remained extrinsic to cultural identity and thus punks stayed atomized and fragmented, related primarily through this very disconnection, which I’m guessing seemed part of how they thought punk should “feel.”

Likewise, there were a handful of anarchists in the ’70s and ’80s—something I glossed over in answering the pervious question—but they did not manage to push past their characterization as isolated outliers. Indeed, this characterization was generally self-imposed. In 1973, for example, on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, a three-man commune calling itself The Black Front —

Freaky Anarchist Group put out a humorous one-off publication with heavy R. Crumb influences, *Freaky*, while in the ’80s three Israeli-Palestinian brothers set up NILAHEM, “Youth for Liberty and Struggle,” a small anarchist group in the northern city of Haifa. One of those brothers, our comrade Juliano Mer-Khamis, was murdered by a masked gunman in Jenin refugee camp last year.

Not until the ’90s was there a conscious effort to broaden anarchist practice by advancing it further down the trajectory *group□organization□network□movement.* In a heartwarming case of quantum wishful thinking—or was it an attempt to confuse the enemy?—the main anarchist group of the early 90’s lacked a formal name and simply called itself “Anarchist Movement.”

So, like a real-life chiasmus, ’90s punk borrowed from anarchists the autonomous self-organization, the do-it-yourself scene, while ’90s anarchists borrowed from punk the chromosome of *expansion,* propagation driven by a cultural sense of urgency. Through the logic of “if you build it, they will come,” each cured the other of its respective *delusions of petitesse.* And, of course, both reinforced in each other the notion that one needn’t give a fuck about rules.

The question of what characteristics contemporary Israeli anarchism retains from the ’90s is interesting, but a more poignant question would be what characteristics it has lost. In four words: *the element of surprise.*

In the early ’90s, we tried our best to avoid becoming “far left,” trapped at this or that edge of the political spectrum with nowhere to go but center; instead, we simply did not register on it. Our natural habitat was the left, true—the progressives, the bleeding hearts, the peace camp—but we moved in it like some sort of new and wild exotic animal. We were composed of post-leftists and past-leftists, but we all agreed we didn’t want anarchy reduced to the conjugation of a leftist verb. Some pigeonholed us as yet another type of commies, while others interpreted our unconventionality to mean we had nothing relevant to offer those who, in the end, see their lives as conventional. But a lot of people, especially younger ones, were intrigued and open to new messages. The ’00s, however, changed that.

Around 2003, during the low tide of the *second* Intifada—one could say parallel but underneath it—a popular struggle against the Israeli Separation Wall exploded, a struggle which could be seen as a sort of different, *third* Intifada. It began—and still rages on—in a handful of small West Bank villages whose lands were being confiscated, either to construct the wall or to fatten up the ever-expanding Jewish settlements. Almost immediately, anarchists recognized this as a situation where our position as Israeli citizens, coupled with our unique brand of confrontational praxis, could make a significant contribution, and thus Anarchists Against the Wall was born.

This was a calculated gamble. In many ways it *did* pay off, but the extreme intensity of that particular struggle made it inevitable that all other facets of our politics would be eclipsed by it, which is precisely what happened. Soon, the term anarchist became synonymous with one thing and one thing only—Palestinian nationalism—through a polarizing dynamic we had known we wouldn’t escape. The opportunity to engage the state in a violent, bloody, and charged conflict—although not in an ideal setting for anti-nationalists—came at the expense of our effectiveness in practically all other arenas. We were forced, if you will, to make a choice between being an *attractive* prospect to the Israeli public and a *threatening* one to the Israeli state; we didn’t manage to beat the odds by reconciling the two.

Besides Anarchists Against the Wall, what other initiatives arose in that era? Describe, for example, the origins and trajectory of the contemporary animal rights movement in Israel.

I think the most interesting part of the Israeli animal rights movement—certainly the most relevant to radicals—is its inception. Not to oversell it, but it was one of the few genuine *structural* anarchist conspiracies I know of in the last 140 years, and a farsighted one at that. Plus, it worked; perhaps too well.

Needless to say, when I speak of real anarchist conspiracies I do so treading lightly, given the proclivity of law enforcement agencies to conjure up fake ones, whether in Bologna, Moscow, Cleveland, or the village of Tarnac, France. But this was a conspiracy of an entirely different kind.

The concept of animal rights arrived late on the Israeli scene, towards the early ’90s, courtesy of anarchists. There had been an anti-vivisection society since ‘83, but it was caught up in the scientific angle and shied away from the broader implications of its own ethical concerns. Just to illustrate how late things bloomed here: the first book in Hebrew on animal experimentation came out in ‘91, the first law even to mention the subject was passed in ‘94, and a translation of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* was not published until ‘98.

As I mentioned, at the beginning of the ’90s, new perspectives took precedence over Palestine-centered politics—a tendency reversed, quite violently, come the new millennium. As anarchists were leaving no stone unturned in search for new ways to amplify our impact on society, some concluded that, rather than advancing anarchism as a package deal, it would be more effective to introduce it through the prism of a single issue. And so began constant discussions, formal and informal, in sunbathed public parks as well as poorly guarded high-school shelters at midnight, all focused on a single question: which issue could offer the firmest foot in the backdoor, through which to disseminate the widest assortment of radical ideas?

Brief tactical forays were made by some into the terrain of nuclear disarmament, Israel’s taboo public secret, as well as social ecology, with the group Green Action, but ultimately we realized that a new and unspoiled lump of clay was needed. And none fit the bill like the hitherto unknown, seemingly safe concept of fighting for the rights of seals or elephants—as fur shops and circuses were the first two major targets of local animal rights campaigns.

While this focal shift was conscious and premeditated, it should not be seen as some manipulative ploy or cynical *The Man Who Was Thursday*-type stuff. Tactical considerations aside, we really *were* passionate and sincere about ending nonhuman suffering—other motives were merely an added bonus, a realization that of all the various injustices we could be organizing around at that particular time and place, animal rights happened to be the most conductive.

Our first group was called, simply, Anonymous, a strange, somewhat dark name for an animal rights organization, unless you keep in mind it was a kind of anarchist front. Besides the aim of radicalizing young animal-lovers who might join in, it had another, more practical aim: to recruit people for clandestine Animal Liberation Front activities. Anonymous’ small headquarters, filled to the brim with information about various radical struggles, nonhuman and human, was also the nocturnal rendezvous point for almost all ALF activity in Tel Aviv during that time; it was even conveniently located on Ben Yehuda street, the very same street where most of the cities’ furriers had set up shop! According to interrogators at the adjacent Dizengoff police station,

at least, Anonymous activists were the ones who introduced Israeli storeowners (and cops) to superglued locks.

Today, Anonymous for Animal Rights as it is now known, has grown into Israel's equivalent of PETA, the biggest, most respected mainstream organization in the field, complete with lobbyists and reform-oriented consumer campaigns. This was the end-process of a gradual influx of activists who were not in on the original plan, people whose entire scope truly began and ended with animal rights. Once enough of them were in the core group, the inevitable power struggles and infighting ensued, prompting anarchists to accept the fact that their work there was done—the wooden puppet had become a real boy. It was time to pursue other avenues.

Of course, working above *and* underground at the same time is not a sustainable strategy for radical organizers, to say the least. But as we learned during those few years, if you are small enough, know your coordinates and read the political map accurately, you might be able to pull it off. It's also not without its perks: somewhere in the middle of that period, for example, I distributed homemade stickers calling for Jewish settlers to be shot in the head, signed with a circled A. The biggest Israeli newspaper at that time made the mistake of reporting that the symbol stood for Anonymous, the animal rights group, so naturally, we sued for defamation of character and settled out of court for a hefty sum, which kept our political activities afloat for a while longer. Who says you can only wear *one* hat at a time, right?

One final thing to note regarding trajectories is the elegant dance of cyclical synergy between anarchism and animal rights. I'm not sure how widely known this is outside of Israel, but just as the animal rights movement was kick-started by anarchists, Anarchists Against the Wall was in turn conceived by animal rights activists, two carrier waves in small congruent circles that would fit neatly within the dialectical materialism of scientific socialists—*if* by "scientific" we meant *chaos theory.*

One Struggle was a veganarchist group formed around 2002 by some of the people who had left Anonymous in the aforementioned split. Although its professed aim was to engage in antispeciesist agitation from an antiauthoritarian perspective, it succeeded chiefly in implanting antispeciesist perspectives into antiauthoritarian agitation.

In late 2003, as part of a joint effort with Palestinians, One Struggle activists took part in an attempt to dismantle one of the separation barrier's gates near the West bank village of Mas'ha, four miles from the Green Line. As in previous One Struggle actions, the accompanying press release was signed with a fictitious name, randomly chosen at the last minute: in this case, "Anarchists Against the Wall." Israeli soldiers reacted harshly during the action—which, by the way, was successful—firing live ammunition and severely injuring one activist; it was the first time ever that the Israeli army had opened fire on Jewish citizens. In the heat of the ensuing media frenzy, the name "Anarchists Against the Wall" became indelibly etched into the public mind (sometimes as "Anarchists Against Fences"). One Struggle disbanded after a few years, having fulfilled its historically ordained role—but AAtW carried on in full swing.

Comrades visiting Israel are often surprised at how prevalent antispeciesist discourse is among local anarchists. In fact, even Israeli radicals of the non-anarchist variety needed a few good years to adjust. When Ta'ayush (a radical Israeli organization) attempted to organize the reconstruction of battery cages destroyed by Israeli soldiers in the village of Hirbet Jbara, for example, this met harsh opposition from anarchists; the same thing happened when Gush Shalom organized a solidarity action with Gazan fishermen. The preceding paragraphs shed some light on the historical context for this.

What were the dynamics between those campaigns and Anarchists Against the Wall as the latter came to define Israeli anarchism?

When discussing today's Israeli anarchists, one should keep in mind we are not talking about thousands or even hundreds of people, but *dozens*. Concepts like "movement," "characteristics," "dynamics," or "tendencies" should therefore be scaled down to an almost intrapersonal size. In all honesty, two roommates and a small wireless router can become an anarchist tendency here, for better or for worse.

Regarding the question: first of all, as I've already lamented—and in spite of its crucial contributions—AAtW wrote us back into the left/right binary code that defines and confines Israel's political spectrum, the same spectrum we had tried to escape a decade earlier. We have been "far left" ever since and, unsurprisingly, it has limited our room for maneuver in other arenas. To make matters worse, this binarization was swallowed whole and internalized, slowing down our political metabolism, as we became more and more dismissive of anything and everything that did not speak its name clearly in the language of left/right, Zionism/Intifada dichotomy. One Struggle was at times a fairly good example of this, as was Black Laundry, an anarchist LGBTQ group that began protesting Gay Pride events around the same time, under the slogan "There is no pride in the occupation."

As AAtW gained momentum, the mere act of participating in radical queer actions, for instance, without mentioning the occupation, became tantamount to "Pinkwashing". When the 9th international Queeruption gathering, held in Tel Aviv in 2006, coincided with Israel's heaviest bombing of Lebanon in 24 years—also known as the second Lebanon War—as well as with the annual WorldPride events scheduled to take place in Jerusalem (but later cancelled), tensions rose violently to the surface at an anti-homophobia-cum-anti-militarist protest in Jerusalem; you can read about it more in the Queeruption fanzine, specifically the "You Can Call Me Gay"/"You Can Call Me An Anarchist" exchange.

Generally speaking, it felt as if failure to link everything *explicitly* and *incessantly* to the Palestinian issue became a sin of omission, as if all other struggles had been drained of any intrinsic value they might have had. In a way, this was a rehashed version of mistakes New Leftists made, in all their Marxist-Leninist glory, when they relegated every struggle except Third World/Black liberation to secondary status. Unlike the '60s radicals, though, we had no pretense of following scientific analyses of society, so our harsh prioritizing was informal, seldom articulated or even acknowledged—a result of group dynamics as well as of political definitions in which action really meant _re_action. When you are always reacting rather than initiating, you naturally run a higher risk of mirroring the state's priorities rather than your heart's desire.

Our readiness to "link" struggles by subjugating all to one is still quite prevalent. The Social Justice tents' protests that gripped Israel in the summer of 2011—a local version of the Occupy movement, largely inspired by the Arab spring—saw anarchists participating with the sole purpose of imposing the Palestinian cause, willfully blind to the myriad of other opportunities the protests opened up for us. As tens of thousands of ordinary people marched through the heart of Tel Aviv's White City behind a wide, tall banner that read "When the Government Is against the People, The People Are against the Government," anarchists reduced themselves to waving anti-occupation placards from the sidelines, conveying a message that nothing, not even genuine

popular protest, has any worth unless it carries the West Bank and the Gaza Strip coiled around it like constrictor snakes. In the 2012 Social Justice protests, it looked like more of the same as far as anarchists were concerned.

Attempts to identify this tendency—and, by inference, to recognize AAtW as a manifestation of sublimated political prioritizing—usually end up locked in emotional and personalized systems of representation, which at best reveal only half a picture. It is true that those were very demanding times for us personally, and that the Palestinian popular struggle, then as now, involves highly charged situations that burn intensely enough to dim out most everything else if you let them. But there is also a more abstract, notional component at play.

Anarchists often use theoretical frameworks that present everything as interwoven and equally important to avoid putting their priorities on the table regarding struggles and issues. Being rather averse to both formulas *and* hierarchies—not to mention formulaic hierarchies!—we tend to favor integrative, circumfluent political outlooks, in which a constant reaffirmation of common grounds trumps that ill-famed need of revolutionaries to identify a key issue, a chief contradiction. And yet, our deliberate vagueness notwithstanding, we *all* prioritize struggles—its our self-awareness of this that varies. Like hypocrisy, the only sure way to avoid this is to sit at home and do nothing. The important question, then, is not *whether* we prioritize struggles, but what criteria, if any, we employ in doing so. Geography? History? Morality? Mass psychology? And how do we conceptualize such prioritizing—by definition a process of stratification—to make it compatible with concrete, everyday anarchist politics?

It seems to me that the wrong way to do this is by inertia, by default, by letting the chips fall where they may. Like structures, priorities are most dangerous when they are invisible. And this leads us back to the example of Anarchists Against the Wall.

AAtW owes the strength of its tactical diction—its very existence, I would say—to the unspoken notion that the Palestinian issue crystallizes the general crisis in Israeli society, that this national conflict is the prime seismic fault line. As far as I know and can remember, there have been no concerted efforts on our part to step back and question the reasoning that anointed this notion as self-evident truth. Through which eyes does this issue crystallize the general crisis? From what perspective is this issue the prime seismic fault line?

We know that politicians, their media, and the phantasm they call "the Mainstream" all adhere to this notion, and work diligently to enforce it, although their criteria is hardly ever discussed in factual terms. It couldn't possibly be based on the number of fatalities, for example, when over a thousand Israelis die every year from pollution, and car accidents have claimed more lives throughout the country's existence than all of its wars combined; it couldn't possibly be the amount of suffering inflicted—inasmuch as that can be meaningfully quantified—when almost 200,000 Israeli women are battered yearly. No. The question we should be asking instead is plain, and yet cuts deep: *cui bono?* Who benefits most from our accepting an armed, territorial conflict along ethnic, religious and national lines as the center of political gravity?

I assume most anarchists don't need the answer spelled out for them.

And still, somehow, the political prioritizing embodied in AAtW remains essentially the same as the prioritizing propagated by the Israeli state, its media, and their ilk. Very few Israeli anarchists in the last decade have rejected these priorities in favor of economic, feminist, migrant, environmental, gender, or nonhuman struggles, to name but a few divergent perspectives.

In the adrenaline rush to *become an opposition,* we should have taken greater care not to lose the characteristics that also make us a well-rounded alternative, as these two do not always

correlate. In many ways, circumstances and a lack of analysis have caused AAtW to become an inverted or cracked-glass reflection of the state's point of view, instead of reflecting something altogether different. This helps explain why it feels so natural for us to cooperate with even the most racist, misogynist, homophobic, intolerant religious zealots the Palestinian resistance has to offer. The philosopher was right in cautioning us about gazing into the abyss, and emphasizing that everything unconditional is a pathology—solidarity included.

I readily acknowledge that all this discussion of prioritizing struggles—in fact, even prioritizing struggles in and of itself—serves only to remind us what matters *least* in life: political reductionism. Also, since the need to prioritize issues exists in inverse proportion to the number of activists and resources available, anarchists in countries with wider movements may not relate to these problems.

What role has the rhetoric of nonviolence played in Anarchists Against the Wall, and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict generally?

Nonviolence rhetoric works, or rather *doesn't* work, the same the world over, so I'm guessing there's no need to elaborate on the universal flaws of the whole thing. In the case of Palestinian resistance and AAtW, however, there is a twist to the story: it is no longer simply a matter of nonviolence versus violence, but of nonviolence rhetoric employed, mainly by external forces, to muddy the waters and obfuscate the violent aspect of Palestinian popular resistance—not only its legitimacy or scope or accomplishments, but its very existence, its definition as such.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Although this question presumably refers to nonviolence as a tactical approach, rather than its absolutist, theosophical variety—i.e., pacifism—let's start with the second meaning, just to clarify things.

It will probably not be the shock of your life to learn that pacifists have played no significant role in this region since about the time of the Essenes. On the Palestinian side, Muslims who advocate pacifism come exclusively from a very specific Islamic context: the Sufi, or mystical, tradition (yes, like Hakim Bey). However, Sufism was pushed to the margins of Palestinian society long ago by Salafist/Wahhabi Islam, and during the 20th century its scope of influence here has been reduced to a few forgotten highland tombs and hilltop shrines dotting the landscape. Some Palestinian Christians, who make up about 3% of those living under occupation, have also been known to preach pacifism, but always heavily diluted with—and ultimately overshadowed by—tactical argumentation. More on that later.

As for the Israeli side, the last three decades, beginning with the 1982 Lebanon War, have seen hundreds of people jailed for refusing to perform military duty (standard sentence is 28 days), but to my knowledge, only *one person* has claimed bona fide pacifism as his motivation; somewhat unexpectedly, it was the nephew of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Generally speaking, conscientious objectors—or "Refusniks" as they're known here—belong to two distinct categories. The more conventional ones, characterized by the organizations Yesh Gvul and Courage to Refuse, are older reserve combat soldiers and officers who advocate a selective refusal to serve in the occupied territories, yet strongly identify with and perpetuate militarist and nationalist discourses; indeed, they believe it is precisely this ardent patriotism that legitimizes their critical voice. Younger activists, characterized by the organizations New Profile and Shministim (literally

"twelve-graders"), view *any* military position within the army as directly or indirectly perpetuating the occupation, and refuse out of a more radical and comprehensive critique of dominant Zionist narratives, militarism. and male-chauvinism. New Profile is explicitly feminist, in stark contrast to both Yesh Gvul and Courage to Refuse, the membership of which is practically all male. Neither category, however, has significant pacifist traits.

Conscientious and pacifist moralisms aside, things get a little more complicated when it comes to nonviolence as a strategy. Again, I'll start with the Palestinian side.

Like most other national liberation struggles, Palestinians have used a wide range of nonviolent tactics against the encroaching Zionist movement—even prior to Israel's statehood, while everyone was still under Ottoman and British rule. For example, the 1930s saw local commerce grind to a halt for six whole months due to general strikes against the British mandatory government.

The first Intifada encompassed some of the most memorable examples of Palestinian nonviolence. For example, in the Palestinian Christian city of Beit Sahour, a tax revolt against Israeli occupation led to the entire city being placed under siege for 44 days, ending with Israeli soldiers going in and "confiscating" (looting) two million dollars in goods from businesses. But even the second Intifada, an overwhelmingly more violent and militarized uprising remembered for its Qassam rockets and suicide bombings, still saw plenty of boycotts, pickets, vigils, hunger strikes, mass demonstrations, protests, and marches—many following the nearly daily funeral processions—all examples of nonviolent resistance which went largely undetected in Israel and the West. Undetected, that is, until the popular struggle against the Apartheid Wall began taking shape and welcoming Western as well as Israeli activists into its fold.

However, and I can't stress enough how crucial this is to understand, Palestinians' definition of nonviolence—often framed within the wider and uniquely Palestinian concept of *sumoud* (steadfast perseverance)—bears only a fleeting resemblance to the nonviolence fetishized by the liberal "Peace Police" types you encounter in the West. The two definitions are as removed from each other as the everyday realities the two groups live and struggle in.

First and foremost, Palestinian nonviolence is completely devoid of "moral high ground" and "stooping to their level" parlance, which for Western anarchists should be a breath of fresh air. Simply put, it is not as concerned with spit-shining its own reflection as it is with achieving its goals. Also, it has been decades since Palestinians have let concerns of negative media coverage lead them by the nose. Past experience has shown quite clearly that sticking to nonviolent resistance did not gain them the support of the so-called international community—even *before* War on Terror hysteria.

The famed "Arab Gandhi," Mubarak Awad, a Christian Palestinian-American and the main advocate of Palestinian nonviolent resistance, founded the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence in the '80s. He was quite honest about this being a practical rather than Gandhian matter (although he is still politically savvy enough to conflate the two occasionally):

"For the Palestinians who are living in the West Bank and Gaza during this period, the most effective strategy is one of non-violence. This does not […] constitute a rejection of the concept of armed struggle. Simply put, the thesis is that during this particular historical period, and with regard only to the 1.3 million Palestinians living under the Israeli occupation, non-violence is the most effective method to obstruct the policy of 'Judaization.'"

His disciple, Nafez Assaily, who operates his own small nonviolence project in the city of Hebron today, makes this equally clear. Referring to Yasser Arafat's speech at the UN—delivered

while holding a gun in one hand and an olive branch in the other—Assaily points out that "neither hand cancels the other."

It has been my experience that, in the Palestinian political vocabulary, "nonviolent" means "unarmed"—and even then, only if by *arms* you mean guns, not bottles filled with petrol and motor oil. Nonviolence is used as a term to describe broad popular resistance, actions everyone can participate in, as opposed to armed struggle, which is conducted by the few.

Note how, unlike liberals, the Palestinian nonviolence advocates I quoted do not juxtapose nonviolence with, say, rock throwing or window breaking, but only with picking up the gun. In his open letter to Chris Hedges, David Graeber mentions meeting an Egyptian activist who, speaking of last year's popular uprising, expressed a similar point of view: "Of course we were non-violent. No one ever used firearms, or anything like that. We never did anything more militant than throwing rocks!"

If I may reach back once more to the American New Left for comparison, the '60s antiwar organization SDS defined itself as "not violent, but not nonviolent," which although a bit tongue-twisting is much more accurate, not to mention honest. This definition is what Palestinians have in mind when they speak of a nonviolent struggle, especially in the context of the ongoing demonstrations against the Apartheid Wall.

Palestinians, like almost everybody except the domineering doctrinaires of nonviolence in the West, do not consider self-defense a form of violence; this broadens their definition of nonviolence significantly. And since they happen to live under military occupation, any damage they inflict on the occupiers—soldiers, bureaucrats, cops, machinery operators, border police or settlers—is essentially a form of self-defense. This is true even according to the conservative standards of international law—specifically, the 1960 UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples—not that we should give a damn about legalities. This broader, fluid definition might make it harder for the zealots of nonviolence to maintain their rigid and moralistic demarcations, but for the rest of us it's simply an affirmation of common sense. For all their stupidity, US Libertarians have a clearer, self-explanatory term for this: the Non-Aggression Principle. You don't start shit, but you reserve the right to respond.

Lastly, if one steps back to examine nonviolence rhetoric in Palestine from a wider socio-political perspective, it seems clear that a significant part of the reason it did not—indeed, *could not*—take root in the resistance movement lies in that fact that the concept was introduced to Palestine in the '80s. At that time, the Palestinian Liberation Organization—whose charter specifically listed armed struggle as the *sole* means of liberation—reigned supreme as the unchallenged representative. It was a time before religious organizations began speaking in nationalist terminology and entered the political arena, before Hamas turned Islam into a liberation theology. Proposing a means of resistance outside the PLO was taboo, tantamount to directly challenging the organization's authority—especially from an outsider, as Mubarak Awad was. Indeed, the PLO leadership exiled in Tunis at the time viewed nonviolence rhetoric as a potential threat to its power, and was extremely hostile to it. During the Beit Sahour tax revolt, for instance, the PLO denied logistical help to the participants, actively discouraged other communities from joining in, and refused financial aid to those persecuted for tax resistance—while offering it to the families of those killed or wounded in violent clashes.

Of course, violence was the dominant motif of Palestinian resistance for its obvious symbolic value as well: the empowerment it offers a people who—much like Israeli Jews!—carry within their national identity a strong historical sense of being powerless, almost ontological victims.

Come to think of it, this might be true for many anarchists, too. The PLO's largest faction, Fatah, included in its internal charter a telling affirmation that "armed struggle is a strategy and not a tactic" (Article 19), and one of its first pamphlets was a translation of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, which famously glorifies violence as restoring self-respect, freeing "the natives" from their inferiority complex, and even serving to "unite the people." All of this somewhat blurred the line between means and ends, rendering it highly unlikely that nonviolence rhetoric could gain a strong foothold in Palestinian resistance, even in its purest tactical form.

On the Israeli side, Anarchists Against the Wall and the International Solidarity Movement have been among the chief propagators of the myth of Palestinian nonviolence, knowing full well that to Western audiences—practically our *only* audience—the term is understood in a contextually different and significantly narrower way. This is accomplished not so much by outright lying as by omission, by silently taking advantage of ambiguity, or by clinging to technicalities, real or imagined but insignificant either way: for instance, the claim that the *shebab* slinging rocks are not technically part of the protest marches or demonstrations. This claim is disingenuous. First, because the popular committees that organize the protests in each village do, in fact, cooperate and coordinate crowd movement with the stone-throwing youth—perhaps not in advance, but in real time; perhaps not always, but often enough. Second, because the supposed categorical distinction between "stone-throwers" and "protesters" exists only in theory, without a trace of it on the ground. And finally, because even if it did exist, both groups form equal parts of the broader phenomenon we call the Palestinian popular struggle.

There are other reasons why the myth of Palestinian nonviolence is being disseminated ad nauseum, becoming truth by virtue of repetition. Where the more liberal or mainstream elements in Palestinian society are concerned, for example, it is largely a question of cold hard cash: 30% of the Palestinian GDP comes from foreign aid. Naturally, the various foundations, charities, and governments funding the hundreds of Palestinian NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are unanimous in their insistence on nonviolent politics, along with its accompanying rhetoric. With Palestinian NGOs pushing this line, activists in the West are all too happy to toe it, and facts be damned.

Among Israeli radicals, including AAtW, you'd be surprised how often everything boils down to unresolved liberal complexes, and a tendency to simplify things for politically correct crowds using banal syllogisms: a) good guys are not violent, b) Palestinians are the good guys in this conflict, c) ergo, the Palestinian popular struggle is nonviolent. To put it differently, since Israeli soldiers inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, Palestinians are expected to do the opposite.

Today, as hundreds, perhaps thousands of videos from ten years of weekly demonstrations are available online for anyone to watch, it is truly a testament to the power of cognitive dissonance that people can go on referring to this struggle as "nonviolent." But politically speaking, the most worrying aspect of all this is the delegitimization of Palestinian violent resistance, inherent in the perpetuation of the nonviolence myth. Rather than fool ourselves that Palestinians should be or are responding nonviolently to the violence inflicted on them, we should admit, embrace, and *wholeheartedly support* Palestinian violence against the far greater violence of Israeli Apartheid.

Furthermore, the prevalence of nonviolence rhetoric in reference to Palestinian resistance contrasts greatly with the general acceptance among radicals, even among the liberal left, of violence from Zapatista communities defending themselves against paramilitaries—or Naxalites in the forests of India resisting infrastructure companies with landmines and automatic rifles—or MEND rebels in the Niger Delta fighting Western corporations by attacking oil wells and

pipelines, killing workers, security guards, and soldiers in the process. It makes no sense at all. As some Palestinians themselves have asked recently, I strongly urge everyone to once and for all get treated for their nonviolence obsession wherever Palestinian resistance is concerned.

Now, regarding AAtW's *own* tactics, as Jewish citizens and unequal partners in the joint struggle, nonviolence has always been our default setting. Since the very beginning we have been careful to play a strictly supportive role, never leading or taking initiatives—which is usually what the vanguardist tendencies latent in political violence end up pushing one towards. Initially, we had decided not to adopt nonviolence as a collective guideline, leaving the question open for each individual to answer as she saw fit. After the first couple of years, however, certain key activists began pressing for a formal resolution in favor of nonviolence, and this actually became the primary bone of contention in AAtW.

On the surface, the reasons for this demand were purely practical, and they make sense. The first reason is that nonviolence enables us to offer a safer network for less militant activists, as well as mainstream members of the left, who wish to attend demonstrations in West Bank villages. This is an important function, since prior to the joint struggle many Israelis had not seen the reality of the occupation and the Apartheid Wall up close with their own eyes. The nonviolence tagline has contributed considerably to hundreds of Israelis witnessing the brutality of the Israeli army firsthand, something which AAtW would have never achieved without being perceived as nonviolent. The second reason has to do with our ability as Jewish citizens to prevent soldiers from using certain types of lethal force, for example live ammunition, by our presence in Palestinian demonstrations, given that soldiers have separate and stricter rules of engagement for Jews than they do for Palestinians. Basically, some within AAtW felt that if Israeli participants were to engage actively in violence against soldiers, it would gradually erode our ability to use our Jewish privilege as a deterrent, until eventually we lost it altogether.

These are valid concerns, yet I cannot help but feel that, not too far below the tactical surface, lie the usual liberal sensibilities and anxieties vis-á-vis the use of violence; and also that, beneath the political rationale for utilizing our Jewish privilege, lies an all-too-common personal fear of giving up one's privilege, period. Furthermore, regarding our role as a sort of "human shield," I think this is flat out wrong: it has been my experience that most soldiers already assume Israeli anarchists throw stones at them alongside Palestinians, or, if not, that they at least support and facilitate the stone-throwing, which is bad enough in their book. Israeli soldiers do not place such high importance on intricate, college-educated ethical distinctions between a person throwing rocks at them and another person standing nearby, defending the first one's right to do so. In other words, a soldier's desire to avoid the legal troubles associated with shooting a Jewish citizen plays a much more significant role in his reluctance to open fire on us than does his impression that Israeli anarchists "don't deserve it." I have no doubt combat soldiers think we deserve it, regardless of whether we actually join stone-throwers or just protect them.

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