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Palestine

The Future of a Rebellion

Le Brise-Glace

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1988-89, Winter

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From *Le Brise-Glace*, No. 1, translated by Lorraine Perlman

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Catholic neighborhoods in Ulster, condemned to a vicious circle of pointless violence against ever-greater repression. But they could also turn out to be social powderkegs which, when they explode, will help undermine the global social order.

In any case, the young rebels in the Territories have shown that passivity today in no way insures passivity tomorrow. Their uprising may give some ideas to others who live penned-up lives, who have no future other than the wall of the slum facing them. If a social revolution someday topples one or several "modern" countries, this is surely the way it will begin; the same matter-of-factness with which the young Palestinians suddenly attacked the Zionist state, the same genius of finding the weak points in the social armor will distinguish it from violent acts grafted onto a passive social body.

This essay was translated by Lorraine Perlman from *Le Brise-Glace*, No. 1, B.P. 214, 75623 Paris Cedex 13, France.

The Subversion of Contemporary Social Relations

Indirectly, the Arab insurgents have also flaunted a cherished principle of revolutionaries who are obsessed with military considerations. The insurrection left the traditional organizations far behind, and it took them almost two weeks to jump on the bandwagon. Their tardiness attests to the vast difference between acts carried out by groups grafted onto the social movement and the social movement itself. It should be clear to the "Marxist" militants of the PLO as well as to those who, throughout the world, desire revolution that the stone throwers from Gaza and vicinity have corroborated the lesson taught by every social revolution: violence is revolutionary not because it has recourse to war when confronted with the violence of the state, but because it discards the warfare logic of the state. In their fight, the proletarians at the heart of the Intifada made use of their links with the community as well as the economic position held by some of them, demonstrating once again that the revolutionary weapon par excellence is social relations, namely the rebels' subversion of social relations established by tradition or imposed by capital. Starting from their conditions of existence in an attempt to transform them, the stone throwers succeeded in disarming an enemy which, in military terms, was infinitely more powerful than they were.

The Revolt's Future

Looking ahead, in the absence of a social crisis in the first world countries which would call into question the global social order, this order will endure; at best, the rebellion of stones promises to end with the creation of a number of Bantustans administered officially by Jordan and Israel, and unofficially by the PLO. These future Bantustans could easily become barbarous ghettos like the

However repressive it may have been from its very origins, Zionism represented a movement of emancipation for many oppressed Jews. Once Israel was established, Zionism—whether left or right—has been nothing more than a project to defend a state which, to survive, is condemned to practice a policy of apartheid internally and imperialism externally, where the constant recollection of past adversity serves as a justification for present coercion.

By subjecting Palestinians to the exclusionary laws and summary repression (dynamiting houses) that the British earlier practiced against Jewish colonists, the state of Israel furnishes a good example of the widespread phenomenon of yesterday's oppressed taking on the characteristics of their former oppressors. Zionism's fundamental contradiction was trying to save: the Jew as Jew, namely the communal links which long predate modern capitalism, by integrating him into the most modern world of capital. The price of this integration was twofold: it first required a uniformity which ultimately rules out any trace of community except an ideological one (as time passes, Israel will increasingly be considered a state like any other); secondly, it had to eliminate another community, destroying, for example, 285 of the 375 Arab villages in the region.

While still in Poland, Vladimir Jabotinsky, the theoretician of right-wing Zionism and founder of the Irgun had rejected the idea of emancipation for the individual Jew based on the rights of man, and insisted on the importance of the integrated community rather than the atomized individual. Once in Palestine, he took the opposite stance toward the Arabs. Thus the contemporary Israeli democratic regime is perfectly willing to consider the individual case of each Arab and to recognize his rights (in theory at least), but were it to acknowledge in practice the existence of a Palestinian community, the state's very foundation would be undermined.

The enormous victory already won by the current "revolution of stones" consists of forcing Israel to choose between two equally unacceptable alternatives: either to let the Palestinian community

assert itself (along with its territorial rights) or eliminate it. In a matter of months, the stone-throwing rebels succeeded in shaking Israeli society to its foundations whereas the PLO, with all its weapons, the financial power of the Palestinian diaspora, its international connections and its offices at the UN, seemed condemned to play eternally the role of terrorist demon serving as Israel's justification for maintaining the status quo. Militarily, for nearly forty years, the PLO has worked hard rushing from defeat to defeat. Politically, it continued just as imperturbably to win the battle of representation; in spite of many Arab—especially Syrian—leaders' hatred for Arafat and in the face of Israel's and the United States' unwavering ostracism of the PLO, the popularity of the organization and its leader continues unabated on Palestinian soil. Why hasn't Arafat been assassinated? The idea surely must have occurred to politicians and generals in Israel and elsewhere. But for the moment the most bellicose factions have not imposed their outlook. Just as an enlightened boss always prefers to negotiate with union officials rather than shoot down wildcat strikers, the most lucid Western leaders much prefer dealing with an enlightened bourgeois rather than a band of ranters who are possibly antagonistic to modern reason. These leaders know that the PLO is the sole authority capable of restraining rebellious populations.

Nationalist Demands

For us, enemies of the State and of all nations, it might be tempting to focus on the profound differences between the uprising of the masses and the armed actions of the PLO, and, in a general sense, between the people (renamed "community" for the good of the cause) and the organizations that "racketeer" in their midst.

But one cannot deny that nationalist demands unequivocally occupy the minds and hearts of the rebels; there is also little doubt that the military actions had the effect—especially on the youth—

on a metaphorical level and is not complete: what profoundly shook up the soldiers, what aroused their rage, what disoriented them—and through them, the entire Israeli society—was that the stone throwers forced them to emerge from a century-long blindness and see at long last what it was they were repressing: not "populations" but a society and a people.

The Struggle as Part of Daily Life

In spite of journalistic filters, the rebellion in Palestine has aroused widespread interest; this is because a great many of the world's disinherited can see themselves in these unarmed youths abruptly liberated from their fears. The young rebels owe this achievement to the fact that they attacked the Zionist state by affirming what they are. The Israeli army suddenly found itself confronting people whose struggle had grown out of their everyday lives and remained firmly anchored there. The "zone" and the street fighting, the solidarity of neighborhood friends and the shelter provided by families, the help given to neighbors and the transmission of information, the Arab workers' extension of the struggle into the heart of the adversary's economy—all these comprised an unbroken unity.

Rebellious acts are now just one more aspect of daily life. Struggle becomes the very life of the community, and merely existing becomes an element of the struggle. What could be easily denied when dealing with acts of "armed propaganda" by attributing them to the diabolical "terrorist organizations" of a minority, is now all too evident to the Israeli soldiers: they are facing a community in revolt.

that the PLO has always taken great care in its military and terrorist actions to avoid the facile identification of the Jewish community with Zionism. It is Abu Nidal—or the organization using this name—that practiced this amalgam. *Le Monde's* title wonderfully illustrates the function of a certain type of magical discourse used in discussing anti-Semitism, reinforcing the terrorism of Israeli weapons with the terrorism of words so that every attack on, every dispute with Zionism and its nation-state, can be rejected as anti-Jewish racism.

A Community in Revolt

Striking out unexpectedly, the young rebels created a shock big enough to make the rest of the population suddenly feel that things could change and willing to offer their support to the stone throwers. The rebels' methods, too, strengthened the surprise factor: using means at their disposal (stones), the unarmed youth attacked soldiers reputed to be among the best equipped and best trained in the world. Their approach carried very real risks: by mid-June nearly three hundred individuals had already paid for their courage with their lives, not to mention the hundreds of wounded, beaten, arrested, interned, deported.

But this approach had the advantage of being doubly disarming. First, because it cut short the criticisms of the faint-hearted by showing that it was unnecessary to be armed to the teeth in order to overcome fear; then because it showed the enemy that its adversary was courageous enough to take incredible risks. In this particular case, the unarmed attacks were all the more disarming because the Israeli soldiers, reputed to be the best in the world, suddenly found themselves confronting street kids. For men accustomed to winning wars, this paltry skirmish was unworthy of the victorious tradition they were maintaining and profoundly unsettling. But this purely verbal formulation remains

of cultivating a martyr mystique, and that this helped unify people, giving them the fervor and the courage displayed in their actions. The existence of such a mystique clearly indicates the limits of this nationalist revolution with a social program.

Currently, the entire Arab population of Jordan, Gaza and Israel is organized to resist the occupier. But the rebels unleashing the Intifada (the uprising) and who constitute its shock troops, are the young stone throwers. First the 1948 generation which had centered its hopes on the Arab nationalist movements, and then the 1967 generation which had counted on the fedayin movements were, in turn, defeated. It is no surprise that a new generation which hasn't known defeat takes the offensive. But the stone throwers are not only young people, they are also proletarians, members of a society still characterized to a large extent by traditional communal relations.

Mizrahi's beautiful film, *Do Prickly-pears have a Soul?*, shows us Palestinian peasants returning to the sites of their villages destroyed by the Israelis in 1948. We can't help sharing the grief of these old people when they see their village ("We had been here for 1400 years!") transformed into "Canada Park"! We can't help sympathizing wholeheartedly with the old woman who clings to her house which is surrounded by the Israeli colonizer's new housing developments. But we also can't help seeing that in her determination, this woman reminds us of all the "old eccentrics" featured in newspaper articles who refuse to abandon their dwelling to urban sprawl. Even the film's poignant nostalgia, the splendor of the confiscated countryside and the ugliness of the new satellite towns, can't dispel the impression that these neglected rural landscapes as well as the areas subjected to industrial agriculture resemble our own country's. The wind also blows through grasses growing on former cultivated terraces in certain regions of southern France and in the Cevennes mountains.

What the Israelis have accomplished by armed force and massive investment, a modern Arab state would also eventually accomplish.

An ambiguity of Palestinian nationalism is that the will to reconquer land is based on nostalgia for a society that will never return. The persons shown in the film are all former notables, former owners. But in the camps, both in Gaza and elsewhere, a large population has grown up, and the majority could expect to find themselves, even if Israel should miraculously disappear, cooped up in the slums surrounding the big cities, just where all the rejects from the rural exodus assemble! In Gaza, just as on the outskirts of all big cities in Black Africa and Latin America, there are innumerable young people who never will be offered jobs.

So the stone throwers are proletarians whether they be a permanently unemployed, stateless proletariat rejected by the global economy or exploited workers in Israel. In either case they are members of a many-layered traditional community, a village, tribal, family-oriented community, a community of Palestinian people who have a quasi-mystical bond with the soil and are supported by an ancient and still vigorous civilization. Traditional communities have at their heart a configuration of practices, ways of acting and thinking which, though distinctive, nonetheless all embody a "way of being together which no money can buy." Mingling the positive aspects of communities with the situation of the contemporary proletariat could result in clashes which "reveal in a flash the form of a new world." The camp population, consisting of both workers and unemployed whose traditional loyalties are still strong, is at the juncture of old and new social relations which provide a critique of modern capitalist society embodied by Israel. But for the moment, it's best to have no illusions: if the old and new aspects remain more or less compatible, it is because they mingle within the nationalist demands. Shared communal qualities attenuate and muffle the contradictions between social groups, between notables and disinherited. The community assists and supports those who make up its spearhead—the young proletarians.

righteousness and bloated with its clear conscience. Israel is the ultimate democracy. Impossible to be more democratic than Israel!

It did not take long for the Western media to adopt the deadly blindness which permitted Israel to put on the Palestinian breeches without "seeing" that there was already someone inside. Look at the headlines chosen by French newspapers at the height of the revolution of stones: "Israel's Tragic Drama" (*L'Événement du Jeudi*), "The Silence of the Jewish Intellectuals" (*Le Monde* and *Libération*). It wasn't the terror perpetrated by the Zionist state that was horrible, but the mental anguish of the assailants! Evoking yet again the Israeli inhabitants' past victimization, André Fontaine, *Le Monde's* prestigious journalist, now its mavnager, titled his editorial: "David vs. David"! And voila, this colonial power equipped with by far the most powerful army in the Middle East, a power solidly supported by the U.S. and possessing atomic weapons, comes to be compared to a gentle youth with slingshot!

Israel sells weapons to Iran, furnishes advisors to the secret services of South African and various Latin American dictatorships, negotiates weapons contracts with Peking, indulges in piracy on the Mediterranean, practices state terrorism, but this is not just any ordinary state: it is the very emblem of democracy. After all, this country permits everything to be filmed Doesn't it prove that Israel is an "open society" when we can watch the club- and gun-wielders in action? No matter if journalists no longer have access to the camps, if they have never been allowed to verify what goes on in the prisons. No matter that weariness comes to be the end result, that the sensationalism serves to blunt our outrage and that we become accustomed to seeing news fragments announcing new deaths, new reprisals.

The grand prize for tactical brilliance in the ideological battle goes to this headline which appeared in *Le Monde* following the assassination of Abu Jihad by Israeli goons: "Yasser Arafat is hesitant to resume anti-Semitic attacks." It matters little whether the adjective was chosen by intent or through oversight. Everyone knows

installations, their cities, villages, culture and particularly their national aspirations, was for the Zionists a very unpleasant surprise.”³

At the end of World War II, with the failure of the Nazi’s genocidal program, the Zionists successfully transmitted their schizophrenic view of Palestine to the Western democracies by playing on the bad conscience of the ruling classes and populations, especially those in France and Germany, who had seriously compromised themselves with anti-Semitism. From that time on, a large part of the dominant ideology in the Western democracies has been mobilized to turn the anti-Zionist into an anti-Semite. For this reason, it is vitally important for those who want to fight Zionism to oppose this reductive tactic and to denounce any accommodation with anti-Semitism (see comment at end of footnotes), in particular, the fantastic absurdities of Guillaume and Faurisson.⁴

Acknowledged by Western democracies as the representative of the supreme victim of supreme anti-democratic horror, Israel is the proprietor of a symbolic capital which is all the more powerful as the states surrounding it are dictatorships which, when the need arises, do not hesitate to resort to massacring their own inhabitants.

If one looks only at the Zionist state’s citizens and not its helots, the carefully cultivated resemblance to ancient Greece permits Israel to be acclaimed regional representative of democracy and Western reason which is confronting Islamic obscurantism. Accordingly, Israel can terrorize its neighbors, secure in its self-

³ Simone Bitton, “David, Goliath et Gulliver: les Israéliens face à l’évidence palestinienne,” *Revue d’études palestiniennes*, Spring 1988.

⁴ Those who showed themselves sympathetic toward Pierre Guillaume, specifically by welcoming him to their *Guerre Sociale* can read *Annales d’Histoires Révisionnistes* and see where this path ends up: in the enemy camp, racist version.

For our [*Le Brise-Glace*] position on the Guillaume-Faurisson issue, see *La Banquise*, No. 2, pp. 39-53. Also see the excellent article by Ilan Halevi, “Hypocrisies: du bon usage du révisionnisme,” in the *Revue d’études palestiniennes*, Winter 1988.

Contradictory Aspects of the PLO

The PLO, whose structure is both proto-statist and community-oriented, derives its power from its ambiguous nature. It is an embryo and a caricature of a State, with all that this implies in the way of sordid appetites, rivalries between bureaucrats and, in the zones under PLO administration, direct oppression of proletarians and fierce repression of dissidents. But it is also the organization of a community not yet established as a nation-state, in which human relations retain the imprint of earlier loyalties. A leader of such an organization who, at the center of a future Palestinian state, would be nothing more than a power-hungry political hack, today still retains some human qualities and direct contacts with the insurgents who identify with him. If this is the case with PLO leaders, it is even more true for local organizations set up by the population. Cadres of the local committees are usually militants from various parties or tendencies within the PLO, but all the tasks (surveillance of the army’s movements, supplying food, medical first aid) are handled by everyone, old and young, men and women, the mystique of death in combat serving as the ultimate bond.

Even a journalist sympathetic to the PLO reports: “the *qiyadah mouwwahadah* (unified command), which publishes a weekly communique defining the lines of the struggle, is a poor reflection of the movement; it is primarily a sort of bridge between the exiled PLO leadership and the Intifada.”¹ The young Intifada activists do not shrink from criticizing the PLO: “In private, they denounce the corruption of some of its cadre—the ‘five-star PLO’ as they laughingly call them—its lack of success and even its irresponsibility, as in the attack on the Dimona bus last March 7th.”² Nevertheless, for the rank-and-file as for the young cadre without stars, the PLO continues to provide the principal reference point for their self-identity.

¹ Alain Gresh, “La Génération de l’intifada,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 1988.

² Ibid.

There is a definite line of fracture between the potential for rebellion against the totality of a world responsible for the Palestinians' unbearable conditions of life and the attempts at accommodation (growing out of the rebellion) in order to create a niche within this world (a Palestinian state). But it is a shifting line, one which winds through the various local organizations, through the social groupings and the rebellious actions; this line traverses even individuals, their thoughts, emotions and activities. At present, and for the foreseeable future, the line of fracture will not break. Without other social movements to take part in and, in particular, without a common struggle with Israeli proletarian Jews, our party (those of us fighting against the world-wide organization of life), has no chance of appearing in broad daylight. Given the absence of other movements of comparable depth and extent, the rebellion of stones can only aid in reinforcing Palestinian nationalism; the hostile fanaticism of its opponents leaves less and less room for solutions other than a bloodbath.

For our part, in order to affirm our solidarity with the rebels of Gaza and elsewhere, we need to point out what can be universalized in their movement, and we should oppose, wherever we might be, anything that supports their enemies—beginning with the quasi-totality of the modern spectacle, while avoiding, in our desire to emerge from mere passive support, the trap of sinking into an aggressive activism too easily transformable into "terrorism." This course of action, which concentrates on the things we have in common with the rebels in Palestine (as well as those in Kanaky [in New Caledonia]) and which attempts to oppose the common enemy and to universalize whatever we can, is certainly more difficult than giving uncritical support to the PLO (or to the Kanak Liberation movement). But it is the only way to avoid finding ourselves at some time in the future in solidarity with former victims become executioners, with a national capitalism that oppresses workers, with warmly human Intifada militants who, transformed into bureaucrats, exploit and torture others; it is the only

way to avoid supporting a Palestinian nation-state in which the constant recollection of past adversity would serve as justification for present coercion.

The Spectacular Inversion

From its beginning, Zionism was viewed by the oppressed Jews of Europe and elsewhere as a movement of emancipation, but in reality, in the territory in which it operated—in Palestine—it was a classic movement of colonization, complete with its train of plunder, violence and horror. One feature which distinguishes the Zionist enterprise from all others is the extraordinary good conscience with which it was carried out, the myth of the return to the promised land mingling its lavish panegyrics with the more classic ones of colonizer as civilizing agent. This incredible blindness which has afflicted generations of colonizers was the price exacted for the ultra-enthusiastic birth of Israel with its kibbutzim and its pioneer spirit. For a hundred years the Zionists have resorted to every variety of denial, mystification and lie to avoid seeing what stared them in the face from the very first day: the place they were moving into already had people.

The colonizers from Central Europe who arrived at the beginning of this century to begin building Israel availed themselves of a fundamental myth: the desert. Their slogan was "A people without land for a land without people." "This does not necessarily mean that the Zionists arrived in Palestine expecting to find it unpopulated, but that they were the product of an era and a culture which saw only emptiness wherever there were non-Europeans, saw a desert they could make blossom wherever there were Bedouins, saw land to liberate wherever there were recalcitrant villages. Finding the Palestinian inhabitants, their agricultural and commercial