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Sociology Faces the Question of Palestine

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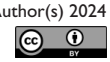

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The Question of Palestine has been a perennial issue within the Council of the American Sociological Association (ASA). But resolutions were always stymied by divisions. This has happened again. Undeterred, however, Sociologists for Palestine secured the necessary support for a member resolution calling for (a) academic freedom to criticize the Israeli state, (b) divestment from companies supporting military operations (an item arbitrarily struck from the official Resolution by Council), and (c) ceasefire in the war launched against the people of Gaza. For the ASA to have a member resolution on the question of Palestine is a historic move. I trace its significance in five steps.

- First, I review the history of such resolutions in the ASA.
- Second, I discuss how these resolutions, and this one in particular, are consistent with the ASA's policy of 'public engagement'.
- Third, I show how these resolutions, and this one in particular, not only follow the commitments of the ASA but also have their roots in the foundations of sociology.
- Fourth, I argue that Council's case for rejecting the Resolution is anti-sociological in its failure to address the issue at hand.
- Fifth, I argue that comparative sociology shows that a ceasefire would benefit all parties within and beyond Israel–Palestine.

So, to my first step. The ASA has a long history of Resolutions. Many have concerned national and international politics. To my knowledge, the first one was the resolution to end the war in Vietnam, *rejected* by Council and then also rejected by the membership. That was 1967. Council also rejected the 2003 Resolution against the war in Iraq, but it was then *passed* by the membership by a two-thirds majority. Among the Resolutions Council *endorsed* was one calling for divestment from South African companies in 1986 and most recently in 2022 with the public condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The point is this: voting on such political issues has been a long-standing practice of the ASA and it has often involved a clash between Council and the Members.

This brings me to my second step. The ASA has explicitly endorsed what it calls 'public engagement'—campaigning for government research funding, opposing threats to academic freedom as in Florida's recent legislation, preparing amicus briefs to the Supreme Court, concerning such

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questions as affirmative action, and openly supporting the practice of community engagement. In short, as an organization, the ASA not only defends the interests of sociology as an academic discipline but also regularly takes up positions of a broader political character.

This adds up to one thing: sociologists are actors in the society we study. We can no longer—if we ever could—retreat to a dispassionate objectivity within the walls of academia. If politicians can set in motion forces that remove leaders of major universities; if they can remove sociology as a basic education requirement within the university; if they can ban the books we teach and abolish Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs; then merely proclaiming our credentials as a science will not protect us. Retreat is no defense against the political encroachment on university autonomy and more broadly civil society.

Now is the time to stand up for the moral principles that brought so many of us to sociology: the commitment to egalitarianism and freedom that drove Marx; the commitment to solidarity and equality of opportunity that drove Durkheim; the commitment to liberal democracy and individual autonomy that drove Weber; the commitment to racial justice and socialism that drove Du Bois; the commitment to gender justice and reproductive rights that drove feminism and so on. Our moral science guides our research; it places a heavy burden on the truth it reveals leading, in turn, to the deepening or readjustment of our moral commitments. Moral commitment is not only NOT inimical to science; it is quite the opposite. It demands careful scientific interrogation of the world we inhabit supported by academic freedom as its sine qua non. As Max Weber wrote, it is the logical interconnection of science and politics that calls for their institutional separation.

How then does this idea of sociology as a moral science—a science built on moral principles—relate to the resolution before us? I now offer my third political step, which begins with a throwback to the critical sociology of the 1960s. There have always been sociologists who recognized the moral foundations of our science, but it was only in the 1960s, reflecting the social movements of the time, that US sociology *systematically* called into question the idea of value-free sociology. In his famous 1966 address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Howard Becker asks, 'Whose Side Are We On?' His answer is unequivocal—sociologists inevitably, unavoidably, whether for political or practical reasons, take sides and, for the most part, we take the side of the underdog. Even when we study overdogs, we do so from the standpoint of the underdog. Sociology redeems the humanity of underdogs by studying the way they adapt to subjugation—as for example, the way Palestinians respond to a century of violent dispossession, expulsion, and silencing but also the fear of a second holocaust on the side of Israeli Jews and their supporters. But the question—'Whose Side are you on?'—attractive though it may appear is too simple to offer any meaningful path forward.

In his fierce rebuttal, 'Sociologist as Partisan', Alvin Gouldner takes Becker to task. First, it is not always clear who is the underdog—underdogs create their own underdogs, just as overdogs have their own hierarchy of subordination. Accordingly, Gouldner accuses Becker of blaming particular overdogs, the proximate overdogs—the police, the social worker, and other street level bureaucrats—for regulating their wards. Becker thereby misses and obscures the real culprit, the overarching state that employs these caretakers to oversee and regulate the poor. Moreover, this same state frequently supports sociologists with funds and jobs for the social control of the indigent. In short, *sociologists are on their own side too*—they have real material interests in the domination that feeds them. In the Israeli case, sociologists, often indistinguishable from anthropologists, with diminishing exceptions, have become accomplices of the Israeli state. But more to the point, we too are accomplices—complicit with the US state's policy in the Middle East—in particular its continuous supply of arms to Israel, feeding the war in Gaza while starving its people. Speaking out and loudly is the first move to absolving our complicity.

Gouldner and Becker share one premise—sociologists must take a stand on issues pertaining to their expertise—but they differ in how to do so. Rather than constitute the underdog as *adapting* to domination, Gouldner views underdogs as *resisting* domination. Collectively the subjugated become agents of their own history. Of course, that can have its own dilemmas as the actions of the underdog can be as brutal as those of the overdog. So, taking a leaf from Weber, Gouldner goes on to say that we should not so much ask whose side we are on, but what moral values we stand for. For Gouldner, the fundamental value is to *minimize unnecessary suffering*. This raises difficult questions. Can one commensurate the suffering of Israeli Jews and Palestinians? Is the killing of 1200 Jews and taking more than 200 hostages equal to the indiscriminate slaughter of more than 35,000 Palestinians, their confinement in Gaza, the cumulative dispossession starting if not in 1917 then in 1948? Does the memory of one holocaust and the fear of a second justify the extermination of another race? If sociologists condemn the holocaust, how can they not condemn the Nakba of 75 years? Or is the suffering of the holocaust so unique, so transcendent that it cannot be compared to anything else?

Sociology as a moral science brings me to my fourth step—Council's explanation for opposing the Resolution. The abstract defense of academic freedom may appear innocent and well-meaning, but when placed alongside the Resolution, it becomes not only vacuous and callous but also decisively anti-sociological. It refuses to examine whose academic freedom is being violated. Long before 7 October, the academic freedom of Palestinian students and faculty was violated by controlling their geographical movement; now it is violated far more egregiously by the physical destruction of colleges and the killing of faculty. If sociology is the study of inequality, how can Council overlook the assassination of Palestinian academic freedom and, one might add, the growing erosion of academic freedom within Israel itself as its universities are weaponized by the state.

Let me take my fifth step—the question of ceasefire. In his biography of the militant abolitionist, John Brown, W.E.B. Du Bois concludes that the *price of liberty is less than the cost of repression*. That is to say, the pursuit of liberty will be costly but not as costly as continuing enslavement, especially as the latter intensified during the first half of the 19th century. John Brown's planned insurrection at Harpers Ferry in 1859 led to his execution but it was a catalyst and dress rehearsal for the Civil War 2 years later. Is 7 October the John Brown moment of today? If so, dress rehearsal for what? Total war in the Middle East? Détente with Iran and Hezbollah? A second Exodus to match the second Nakba? We are sociologists, it is our task, nay our responsibility to ask these questions. What tools do we have but comparative history? We must begin by refusing to treat Palestine–Israel as incomparable and unique.

There are distinct parallels in the histories of the United States, Australia, Algeria, and Northern Ireland. They have all been species of settler colonialism in which a conquering population appropriates, through force of arms, the land, labor, and resources of a subjugated population. Comparative sociology, I suggest, demonstrates that ceasefires between colonizers and colonized were necessary if not sufficient to bring about any reconciliation between parties to the struggle. In this regard, South Africa is an especially important case. The emergency period of the 1980s saw escalating violence between colonizer and colonized, yet both sides were still able to draw back from the brink in a negotiated transition. As sociologists, we should ask how and why this happened? Strikes and stay-aways were hurting business, the Soviet Union was not prepared to arm the African National Congress for a war of liberation, and, most crucially, the US Congress passed the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 (over Reagan's veto). There was a dramatic shift in the US perception of the African National Congress (ANC) from a terrorist organization to a liberation movement. But that shift did not come out of thin air or out of Congressional epiphany. It was a product of mobilizations in civil society, and most significantly mobilizations on university campuses, with sociologists at the forefront. Looking across

the campuses of today—in the United States and beyond—one cannot mistake the parallels. The jury is still out as to whether the outcome will be the same.

Let us not forget that the US state ended the wars of 1967 and 1973 early on, by signaling to the Israeli state enough was enough. Even Reagan put a stop the outlandish devastation of South Lebanon in 1982. So far, today, along with other Western powers, it has failed to impose serious sanctions on the Israeli state—a state blind to its own interests, a state trapped by its own arrogance, a suicidal state bent on demonstrating its supremacy in the Middle East and beyond. Here Pierre Bourdieu might say: the dominators, too, are dominated by their domination.

Sociology teaches us that immediate and permanent ceasefire if not sufficient is certainly necessary not just for the protection of Palestinian lives, but for the savior of Israel, and not just for Israel but for Jews everywhere who face ever greater antisemitism, precisely because of the barbaric cruelty conducted in their name. The megalomania of settler colonialism can be halted either by mutual destruction or external intervention. Apartheid South Africa understood this only too well and, perhaps, it was no accident that it was South Africa that charged Israel with genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Israeli state also knows it is a US proxy, surrounded by potentially hostile forces. So far, rather than retreating, it seeks the ultimate deterrence and deepens 'the cost of repression'. Settler colonialism, after all, is an anachronism inherited from the previous century. We are living in a post-colonial world—with all its problems and its legacies. Settler colonialism, the most transparent form of colonialism, cannot survive.

Against the charge of genocide in the ICJ, the significance of an ASA Resolution may appear miniscule. To those who conveniently opt out by saying 'who cares what sociologists think and do?', I say sociologists care what sociologists think and do; sociologists care about whose side they are on; sociologists care about minimizing unnecessary suffering. History shows that if sociology cares about the world, then the world may care about sociology. The golden years of sociology were, after all, the years of critical engagement. Are those years about to return? There are those who are, once again, saying this is the end of sociology, but more likely this could be a new dawn for sociology. Sociologists may be on their own side, but that does not mean we have to be introverted, inward looking. How can we not join the mounting chorus for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza?

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