

Why and How Should Sociologists Speak Out on Palestine?

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Abstract:

The essay begins with the question of neutrality: why might sociologists keep silent on the question of Palestine? On the other hand, if they are to speak out, then why specifically support the Palestinian cause and what could be the distinctive sociological stance? The essay claims an historical approach is necessary to understand competing narratives and the linkage between twists in the past and possibilities in the future. Any historical analysis requires a standpoint and, for sociologists, standpoints are embedded in sociological theory. In examining Israel/Palestine the essay turns from the analogy of apartheid to a theory of settler colonialism based on a comparison of the histories of South Africa and Israel/Palestine, asking why the former ends up with a negotiated transition and the latter in a violent territorial expansionism. To answer this question the essay distinguishes two ideal types of settler colonialism, one based on labor exploitation and the other on land expropriation. Each type has its own political consequences and conditions of possibility, illuminating the past, present and future divergences between South Africa and Israel/Palestine, with implications for speaking out on Palestine.

I will begin by turning the question around: why should sociologists *not* speak out on Palestine? And if we do speak out, what should our contribution be? To speak out about Palestine requires a minimal knowledge of its history: the struggle for Palestine is fought on a physical battlefield but also on the battlefield of history, over the interpretation and suppression of history. To make sense of the past and to link the past to the present and to the future, we need an orienting conceptual/theoretical framework. Like others I have chosen “settler colonialism” as my frame. This is the standpoint of this essay, a standpoint from which I elaborate the history of Palestine/Israel through the lens of another very different settler colonialism – Apartheid South Africa. In that way 21st century sociology does what it has to do – offer a sense of possibilities out of a bleak situation.

The Question of Neutrality

So why should we *not* speak out about Palestine? A common answer is that as social scientists we should remain “neutral” with regard to political questions. To take sides or adopt a particular value position is to distort our explanations, “bias” our understandings, contaminate our science. Yet, as Max Weber (1949) maintained – contrary to faulty interpretations – social scientists cannot conduct their investigations without taking a standpoint. To study the “infinite manifold” that is the world we need to select in order to interpret. Moreover, social scientists are no different to anyone else, their actions as researchers are guided by the values they adopt. To refuse to take a stance is a stance itself, a stance in favor of the status quo, in favor of Israel’s asymmetrical massacre of Palestinians in Gaza and beyond.

If we have to take a stance, then what stance shall it be? Which side are we on? Each side has its own justification, its own narrative. On the Zionist¹ side, the Palestinians, whipped on by Hamas, started the present war with their murderous invasion on October 7th, 2023. In this view, Hamas stands in for all Palestinians – “animals” who deserve to be exterminated. On the Palestinian side, history didn’t start on October 7th., the present cannot be understood without returning to the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1947-48 – the ethnic cleansing which expelled 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland. The Zionist replies: 1947-48 was the liberation struggle of the Jewish people, displaced by the Holocaust that exterminated six million Jews. The Palestinian responds: why should we be the victims of victims? Who decided that? The Zionist replies that with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Balfour Declaration announced Palestine to be a homeland for the Jews – “a land without people for a people without land.” Palestinians counter: who authorized the British to make such a promise? This was our land under the Ottoman Empire and before. The assured Zionist retorts: you are wrong, this is our ancestral land, vouchsafed by biblical tradition. Starting with the Jewish immigration at the end of the 19th century, this is a debate that continues to this day. On both sides ideology is not skin-deep, it is psychologically immovable, sociologically intractable, historically entrenched; each side is armed with a capacity to absorb or hide multiple anomalies and contradictions.

Seeing the world from both sides is important but it can also be its own justification for neutrality. A plague on both your houses, each with your own narratives; we outsiders need not take sides. After all, *we* are “civilized;” we would never partake in such a war. But are we really outside the war? Those of us in the US are deep inside the belly of the beast, complicit in military aid to the tune of \$22 billion in the first year after October 7th (Bilmes, Hartung, and Semler 2024) – arms deployed to slaughter Palestinians, indiscriminate killing and maiming,

reducing the landscape to rubble, creating a living death, and the terror of annihilation not just in Gaza but also in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Lebanon. As Avi Shlaim (2009), the Israeli historian, has noted, the Israeli rogue state has never believed in an “eye for an eye” but rather an “eye for an eyelash.” Call it revenge, call it “escalation domination,” by any measure the Israeli response since October 7th has been disproportional. This is not a symmetrical war, so how can one be neutral?

There’s a third reason for neutrality: fear. The war has broken into our fortress; we are no longer able to deliberate dispassionately on Palestine. In taking sides, in daring to defend those who fear for their lives, we may fear for our careers. We are on our own side. The university is increasingly a terrain of struggle. At the commanding heights, are the university’s board of governors pressured by government edicts, by Israeli lobbies, by donors threatening to withdraw their donations, by the thought police patrolling syllabi, extending tentacles into the classroom, and trolling pro-Palestinian faculty on social media. Those who dare to join the student protestors, whose encampments identify with Palestinian refugees, are liable to be stigmatized or cancelled as “antisemitic.” On the other side, those who openly oppose the protests risk condemnation as heartless Zionists. Academic freedom is fragile, evaporating before our very eyes. Better steer clear of the third rail, better stay neutral.

But this attack on the university – and you can be sure sociology if it is doing its job will be an early target – should be a reason in itself to defend peaceful protest. Even before President Trump was elected, the conservative Heritage Foundation (2024) had already promoted Operation Esther to combat “the scourge of antisemitism” in the United States, and to weed out “the global Hamas Support Network,” spawned in our lecture halls. In their view the encampments were seething with “vermin.” In the US, but elsewhere too, the assault on pro-

Palestinian protest is the thin edge of the broader war against the professional-expert class and their accomplices born and bred in universities. We can hide behind the claim of “neutrality,” but even so we will be mowed down. If we don’t take a stand for university autonomy, we are likely to end up with no place to stand.

Apart from repelling the broader offensive against the university, is there not something special that warrants our support for the Palestinian cause? Do moral and humanitarian reasons, emphatically displayed in the accompanying Solidarity statement, “privilege” sympathy for Palestinians above those suffering in Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine, Syria, and Haiti? Perhaps they do. Perhaps, the ongoing massacre of Palestinians is the most egregious, the most barbaric atrocity of all. It takes place live on our screens; it is in our face; it is inescapable. The unconditional support of Western powers on the side of Israel gives it world historical significance.

For a sociologist it is not enough to declare whose side you are on and then move on; as sociologists we embed our political commitments within a theoretical framework. In a period of “postcoloniality” the systematic and transparent repression of Palestinians by the Israeli state makes it unique, compelling us to re-examine our own past, giving new salience to “settler colonialism,” as the debris of decaying Empires.

Comparative History: From Apartheid to Settler Colonialism

If sociology can establish Palestine as the struggle of our time, how can sociology contribute to that struggle? Do we have a distinctive method? To answer this question, the tool kit of comparative history can be especially useful. Some may resist the method of comparing the history of two countries, especially if the two are Apartheid South Africa or Israel/Palestine.

They are the proverbial apples and oranges. But that's precisely the point – sociology is the art of converting “apples” and “oranges” into two species of fruit, thereby comparing the apparently incomparable. After 1967, it became increasingly popular among critics of Israel to compare it to the South African regime of Apartheid. Today it is commonplace to refer to Israel as an “apartheid” state (Pappe ed. 2015). The United Nations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have condemned Israeli “apartheid,” but in the process “apartheid” loses its specific South African meaning, reducing it to an institutionalized form of racial domination.²

Some scholars have pursued the analogy by focusing on parallel institutions, comparing, for example, the Occupied Territories to Bantustans (Farsakh 2005). Both institutions are a mockery of self-government, but in the Israeli case they are the result of territorial expansion whereas in South Africa they are carved out within a pre-existing national territory. Important though they are such comparisons detach specific political and economic arrangements from the totality. Recognizing basic differences between the regimes – that South African Apartheid never developed anything like the second-class citizenship of Palestinians within the Green line nor the wholesale extermination of heavily populated geographical regions such as Gaza – other scholars argue that Israel/Palestine is *becoming* more like South African Apartheid (Zreik and Darkwar 2020, Dubow 2024).

In all these instances, whether rhetorical or academic, “apartheid” is used to emphasize the *similarities* between Apartheid South Africa and Israel/Palestine whereas I will suggest that it is just as important to underline the *differences*. To that end I develop the concept of *settler colonialism* in which agents of a colonizing power become settlers whose interests eventually recoil against both a sponsoring metropolis and an indigenous population – two confrontations on two fronts.

Over the last two decades settler colonial studies have come into their own, casting new light on the imperial histories of Spain, Portugal, Britain and France. Palestine also exemplifies the category.³ With the collapse of the sprawling Ottoman Empire during World War I, it became an outpost of the British Empire settled by Jews, fleeing the pogroms of Russia and Eastern Europe and then the Holocaust. Treatises on the creation of Israel written by Palestinians, have long used the concept of “settler colonialism,” but it only became a critical perspective within Israeli sociology after the 1967 war and the creation of the Occupied Territories. Today settler colonialism has become a thriving comparative field with its own journal, *Settler Colonial Studies*.⁴

As a form of domination, “settler colonialism” is an inherently problematic concept, at least from the standpoint of the settlers (Kirsch, 2024; Greenstein, 2024). Zionists generally reject it outright: they consider Palestine as their ancient land and see the Palestinians as the illegitimate invaders – either they simply don’t exist as humans or they are regarded as a nomadic, backward people in need of tutelage (Brager 2021). If they resist the Zionist settlers, they are terrorists who deserve to be driven out of Palestine or otherwise eliminated. For Zionists, Jews being victims of genocide not only justifies the Zionist conquest but also makes it unique and incomparable.⁵

Zionists claim they were never sponsored by a colonizing power, but the World Zionist Organization is analogous, creating the Jewish National Fund in 1901 to buy up land for settlers from absentee landowners. Later Palestine became the responsibility of the British under the League of Nations Mandate (1922-1948), favoring the Jewish settlers at the expense of the Palestinians (Khalidi 2006). Today an umbilical cord connects Israel to the US – a relationship that became entrenched after the 1967 war.

From the standpoint of the 1980s and 1990s, the application of “apartheid” to Israel/Palestine had a novel theoretical and a political rationale, a form of institutionalized racial domination. But from the viewpoint of 2024 this does not go far enough. The two countries look very different: in the one case we have an expanding war within and without Israel/Palestine; in the second case we have an integrated society no longer at war with itself – notwithstanding xenophobic assaults on immigrants from Africa and the ongoing class struggle.

Nor should we forget that a few decades ago, South Africa faced its own Armageddon – intensifying protest that began in 1973 with Durban’s grassroots trade union strikes and in 1976 with the Soweto uprising against Bantu education, followed by the expanding anti-apartheid struggles that brought together the newly formed Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) with an insurgent civil society. In the 1980s the South African state became a terrorist state, bringing townships under military occupation, killing unarmed protestors, assassinating leaders, developing chemical warfare, imprisonment and detention without trial. An estimated 20,000 people, mostly Black, lost their lives in that decade’s civil war. Added to this are the estimated 1.5 million people killed in the civil wars fomented by the South African Defense Force in neighboring countries, especially Angola and Mozambique. And yet, peace talks began, first in secret and then more openly, between the exiled and underground African National Congress (ANC) and the Nationalist Government, culminating in the first free elections, majority rule and the dismantling of Apartheid (Cock 1991; Maharaj and Jordan 2021; Mandela 1994; Steinberg 2023).

There are parallels here to the first Intifada (1987-1992), also an insurgent grassroots movement, which led to “negotiations” between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli government, supported by the US – negotiations that looked more like capitulation

(Khalidi 2020). The 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords divided up the West Bank into zones, protected the expansion of settlements and outsourced Israeli security to the newly created Palestinian Authority. Popular anger at the PLO sell-out, exploded into the Second Intifada (2000-2006), opposing the settlements in the West Bank, the bombardment of Gaza, the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. This was very different from South Africa's negotiated transition notwithstanding all its problems.

Palestine/Israel through a South African Lens

What explains these different outcomes?⁶ Many factors are at play, but underlying the divergence are two different projects of settler colonialism: one based on the *expropriation of land* and the other based on the *exploitation of labor*. The first involves a zero-sum conflict in which, what one side gains the other side loses. It is an interminable struggle driven by an ever-greater use of violence. Its resolution is elimination or partition. The second is a non-zero-sum conflict in which the expanding capitalist class depends on the labor of the colonized, giving the latter “structural power,” a potential leverage that is realized through the organizational capacity of the colonized, what we can call “associational power,” leading when successful to compromise.⁷ These two ideal typical forms of colonialism always exist in combination, with one dominant but never to the exclusion of the other. In the case of the Zionist colonization of Palestine the dominant mode became the expropriation of land and the escalation of unrestrained force; while in South Africa the dominant mode became labor exploitation in which structural power, bolstered by the “associational power” – developed through anti-colonial struggles, cemented by racial solidarity – brought Apartheid to its knees. The transition did involve violence, including the violent clash between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party led by

Zulu Chief Buthelezi, a clash that was sponsored by the Apartheid state. However brutal was this violence, it never reached the level of the Israeli devastation of Gaza.

These divergent roads of settler colonialism are not immutable. Thus, in South Africa settler colonialism began in the middle of the 17th century as an “Afrikaner” outpost of the Dutch East Indies Company. It was based primarily on *land expropriation* but with the exploration of diamonds and gold in the late 19th century, the British conquered the Afrikaner Republics and developed a new form of settler colonialism revolving around the *exploitation of labor* (Simons and Simons 1969; Burawoy 1981; Webster 1985). That transition was a painful one with two Boer wars (1880-1 and 1899-1902), leading to the Union of South Africa in 1910. This is not to deny there was land expropriation after 1910 but it was land expropriation in the service of labor exploitation.

In Palestine a parallel transformation took place, but in reverse. At the turn of the century Jewish immigrants settled on land purchased by the Jewish National Fund, leading to a struggle over the division of labor – who would exploit whom? As Gershon Shafir (1996) has shown, the resolution was a Jewish labor exclusivism at the heart of which was the cooperative movement of kibbutzim and later the labor organization, Histadrut, which became the foundation of the Israeli state and Labor Zionism. Land purchase became increasingly important as more Jews arrived. And when the British (1937) and then the United Nations (1947) proposed partitioning Palestine, a plan the Palestinians rejected out of hand, Zionists went to war not just against the British administration but also against Palestinians, expelling some 750,000 (without right of return), more than half the Palestinian population. During the war Jews increased their control of land from 7% to 78% of Palestine and a corresponding population increase from 32% to over 80%. After 1948, Palestinians were a minority of the Israeli labor force, a number fluctuating

with political circumstances, and concentrated in certain sectors, especially construction and services, thereby severely limiting their political leverage (Pappe 2006, Said 1979, Sabbagh-Khoury 2023, Younis 2000).

These underlying economic relations – land expropriation vs. labor exploitation – set the terms of the struggle between native and settler; the outcome was a matter of the balance of forces – national, regional and global. The South African Nationalist government that came to power in 1948, keen to advance its own economic project, moved in a liberal direction. Though, not without internal conflict, they were ultimately prepared to dismantle the structure of Apartheid in line with the strategy of capitalist development (O’Meara 1983). The Israeli regime that also came to power in 1948 has moved in the opposite direction – pursuing the conquest of Palestinian land, and the extermination of its inhabitants.

Regionally, there are parallels and differences too. South Africa’s Apartheid regime, starting in 1966 under Prime Minister Vorster sought to develop diplomatic relations and economic cooperation with newly independent countries in Africa. But after 1974 when Mozambique and Angola became independent and hosted the ANC’s military camps, the Apartheid regime deployed its military machine in attempts to topple neighboring pro-ANC governments, fomenting civil war by supporting opposition parties and movements. Similarly, Israel has combined diplomatic and military means to subjugate surrounding countries – Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. After October 7, 2023, the Israeli state would abandon the 2020 Abraham Accords with neighboring Arab states in favor of military bombardment with territorial expansion. Israel’s land expropriation had consequences for the anti-colonial movements that found themselves dispersed across the region, inside and outside refugee camps, between the different Occupied Territories and Arab regimes. How different this was from the South African

anti-colonial movements that were focused on a single national terrain, largely under the hegemony of the ANC and its allies.

The other contrast is the role of the United States – backed by European powers – and their unconditional support for the expansionist tendencies of the Israeli state. US support began as a strategic move to protect its geopolitical and economic interests in the region, deepening when it became apparent how easily Israel was able to lay waste to the surrounding countries in the wars of 1967, 1973 and 1982. Over time, however, Israel's economy became embedded in the US military-industrial complex – a laboratory for developing, testing and then selling the latest military hardware (Loewenstein 2024). South Africa, even at the height of Afrikaner power, never developed such a close relation to the US or British state, even if Western corporations dominated its economy.

And there's also an ideological aspect to the international context. Israel has always presented itself as a Western outpost in a sea of infidels, an island of democracy surrounded by authoritarianism, a vision propagated by the Israeli lobby, funded by billionaire donors in the US (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007). The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) targets anyone who publicly expresses the slightest pro-Palestinian sentiments, whether Chancellors who did not do enough to close down pro-Palestinians encampments or pro-Palestinian congressional candidates. Enthusiastic support for Zionism also comes from evangelical Christians who are even more numerous than pro-Israeli Jews themselves.

By contrast the Apartheid state never had comparable global support. Instead, it was the anti-apartheid movement that gathered steam in the 1980s, eventually aided and abetted by Commonwealth states as well as the US. In 1986 the US congress passed a comprehensive anti-apartheid bill, over the veto of President Reagan, imposing economic and political sanctions on

South Africa. The African National Congress was reincarnated from a terrorist organization into liberation movement, analogous to the US civil rights movement. No such shift has occurred with regard to the Palestinians, even though they received global affirmation during 2023-24. All indicators are that like its predecessor the new Trump administration will provide steadfast support for Israel in its genocidal mission.

Sociological Lessons

What are the sociological lessons for speaking out on Palestine? As sociologists we need to develop our own distinctive voice, mobilizing the tools of our trade. One way of doing that is undertaking politically committed and theoretically grounded comparative analysis to get a handle on the key influences and processes that have brought us to the present and point to ways forward.

First, the perspective of settler colonialism shows how history can be disrupted from above and below and often by both – it has its points of inflection through wars and revolutions. If the past is not determinate then nor is the future. The US has pulled the plug on its wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan when they became too costly economically, politically and ideologically. So why not Israel? One reason is that Israel enthusiastically fights proxy wars on behalf of the US without involving US citizens as combatants or casualties although, as 9/11 demonstrated, the US is not immune from attack.

Second, the history of both Israel/Palestine and South Africa shows that armed struggle is part and parcel of settler colonialism. We can be horrified by the violence perpetrated between settler and native, but it is intrinsic to settler colonialism – although neither its form nor its result is pre-determined. In South Africa the balance of national, regional and international forces

avored the potentiality of labor exploitation to bring about compromise whereas the balance of forces in Israel/Palestine favored the potentiality of land expropriation for violence.

Third, recognizing the differences between two settler colonialisms, we can search for South African solutions within Israel/Palestine, such as the (non-violent) Unity Intifada of 2021 that organized a General Strike and mobilized across the Palestinian diaspora, stretching from the Occupied Territories to East Jerusalem, including refugee camps in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan (Sabbagh-Khoury forthcoming). Can this effervescence amount to an effective structural power? Are there other ways in which the Israeli state can become dependent upon Palestinian cooperation?

Fourth, historical comparison not only explores future possibilities, it also delineates the limits of such possibilities. We can see that exiting settler colonialism is never easy and its legacy continues even after it has been dissolved. Labor exploitation may permit a non-violent solution to settler colonialism but exploitation does not miraculously cease with the dismantling of Apartheid – if anything it becomes even more intense (Bond 2004). As Marx taught in *On the Jewish Question* decolonization is not human emancipation; nor does it necessarily lead in the direction of human emancipation.

Finally, struggles against settler colonialism reverberate around the world: South African opposition to Apartheid once represented the universality of “indigenous” struggles but today South Africa, with its charge of genocide against the Israeli state, has passed the baton to Palestinians. In their struggle for survival at unimaginable cost, Palestinians may not only save themselves but in the process save Israel from itself and save the rest of the world from the fall out of settler imperialism. But Palestinians will not be able to do it alone. This will have to be a global struggle.

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Footnotes

¹ By “Zionist” I mean a follower of Zionism – originally a nationalist movement of the 19th century that aimed to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. It became an ideology (with multiple tendencies) of the Israeli state formed in 1948. It should be clear that not all Jews are Zionists and not all Zionists are Jewish.

² According to the Apartheid Convention adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1973 and the Roman Statute adopted by the ICC (International Criminal Court) in 1998, “apartheid” is “an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over another, with the intention to maintain that system.” However useful politically, this definition is so general as to be analytically limited for careful historical comparisons between South Africa and Israel/Palestine.

³ See Englert (2022) and Mamdani (2020) for the global significance of “settler colonialism” and Sabbagh-Khoury (2022) for a history of its application to Israel/Palestine. Settler colonialism has been criticized for its focus on the settler at the expense of the native. While that may have been true of the Israeli “new historiography,” it is by no means inherent to the concept. Moreover,

centering the idea of “settler” allows us to see the importance of different settler projects, practiced by the settler colonial state.

⁴ Patrick Wolfe (2006, 2012, 2016), the leading figure of contemporary settler colonial studies, focused on land expropriation, which he claimed leads to the “elimination” of the “native” whether through detribalization, assimilation, or genocide. His favorite cases were Australia, Canada, US, and Palestine but South Africa, not based on elimination but on exploitation, poses a serious challenge to his framework. Fayeze Sayegh (1965) had much earlier distinguished between Zionist settler colonialism rooted in territorial expansion and exclusion of the “native” and conventional European colonialism based on unequal incorporation of the “native.”

⁵ It is possible to embrace the idea of settler colonialism and claim that ethnic cleansing was necessary for the survival of Israel. Thus, the controversial historian, Benny Morris (2004), one of the original contributors to the Israeli “new historiography” that recognized Israel as a settler colony, declared, in a famous interview with Ari Shavit, that Ben Gurion should have done a better job of expelling Palestinians in 1948 as that would have stabilized Israel’s future. The adoption of settler colonialism is consistent with a defense of the Israeli state – one logical implication of the zero-sum conflict of settler colonialism based on land expropriation (see below) – often linked to Jabotinsky, the founder of 20th century Revisionist Zionism, inherited by the Likud Party.

⁶ There is a literature that goes beyond the analogy of “apartheid” to trace both the parallel and divergent histories of South Africa and Israel/Palestine. The classic studies are Greenstein (1995 and 2023) and Younis (2000). Both distinguish between the inclusion/incorporation (South Africa) and exclusion (Palestine) of the colonized populations. Clarno (2017) takes the story

beyond 1994, focusing on the security apparatuses in both countries as an expression of what he calls “neoliberal apartheid”.

⁷ For the distinction between “structural” power and “associational power” see Wright (2000) and Silver (2003). The comparison of the political effects of labor exploitation and land expropriation derives from Huntington (1968), Fanon (1963), Gramsci (1971), Paige (1975), and Przeworski (1985).

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