

# Thoughts on the Dialectics of Revolution and Palestinian Nationalism

Monday 21 February 2011, by [QAMAR Miriam](#) (Date first published: 16 February 2010).

**A student active in the support movement for Palestine discusses the dialectics of revolution and of national liberation in Marx, Lenin, and Luxemburg based upon a reading of Dunayevskaya's work. This is connected to a critical assessment of the Palestinian national liberation movement since the First Intifada of 1987. Gender, globalization, fundamentalism, and the brutal Israeli occupation are discussed.**

Contents

- [I. Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg \(...\)](#)
- [II. Some Contradictions of \(...\)](#)
- [III. The Challenge of Globaliz](#)
- [IV. Persistence of a National](#)

---

## I. Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg and National Liberation

Marx along with Lenin made a distinction between the dual visions of nationalism: the chauvinistic, racist nationalism and the progressive, self-critical nationalism, with the former usually adopted by imperialist powers and the latter - at least in some instances — being the nationalism of oppressed nations. Discussion of the “National Question” opened debate on whether nationalism is a productive force in defeating the ultimate oppressor: capitalism. Marx supported opposition movements that arose from the imperialist suppressions of nationalities, but emphasized that a progressive and effective movement must be aware of its own contradictions and its reactionary potential. Although the Paris Commune held an exemplary significance for Marx's model of proletarian revolution, the Polish and Irish uprisings also produced the successful and destructive elements of Marx's dialectics of revolution. Before the intricacies of a revolution can be dissected however, the pressures and influences which spark the masses to organize must first be considered. In Lenin's comments on monopoly capitalism- “imperialism arose, not out of capitalism in general, but out of capitalism at a specific stage,” he described the oppressive tendency of capitalism but nonetheless recognized the reciprocal process of imperialism breeding both capitalism and nationalism (Dunayevskaya 2000: 170). Through the dialectical lens of Raya Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 until Today* (hereafter Dunayevskaya 2000), this essay attempts to follow the progression of colonialism in relationship to capitalism, nationalism, and revolution in the context of Israel/Palestine.

With the First World War ushering in “The Great Divide in Marxism” (Dunayevskaya 2000: 165) — the collapse of the Socialist Second International — Europe witnessed the danger of nationalist rhetoric for the solidarity of the masses and the workers. Many European societies were now at the

point of proletarian organization Marxists believed necessary in order to restructure into a socialist society. But by August 1914, the mass labor parties “hurled masses of workers across national boundaries to slaughter each other ‘in defense of the Fatherland’” (Dunayevskaya 2000: 167). Although Raya Dunayevskaya refers here to Germany, the question of nationalism and internationalism becomes fundamental in Marx’s discussion of the “revolutionary potential” of the masses in general. Marx suggested this transformation from class struggle to nationalism transformed reality into an abstraction. However, his opposition to nationalism was not absolute, as he also saw that national liberation movements as those in Poland or Ireland still carried the necessary means for social revolution. Rosa Luxemburg disagreed with Marx’s analyses of “the National Question” and in her Fifth Thesis under the pseudonym of Junius, she stated “National interests can serve only as a means of deception of betraying the working masses of the people to their deadly enemy, imperialism...” (cited in Dunayevskaya 1982: 55). Lenin criticized Luxemburg’s opposition to Poland’s independence struggle and her fervent dismissal of Ireland’s Easter uprising. Lenin embraced Marx’s global vision and considered Luxemburg’s opposition to national liberation proof of her “half-way dialectic” (Dunayevskaya 1982: 51). Where Luxemburg disregarded national liberation movements with her staunch internationalism, Marxism came to the Third World to a great extent via the impact of Lenin and the Russian Revolution.

As the events of World War I escalated, Lenin began reading Hegel’s *Science of Logic* as he was forced to reformulate his philosophy after the collapse of the Second International. With his realization of the “counter-revolution” within the “revolution” as manifested in the Socialist parties’ embrace of war, Lenin grasped Hegel’s dialectic of “movement” and “self-movement” and the presence of contradictions as a force of progress. In his published work *Imperialism*, Lenin discussed the “dialectic as the unity of opposites” and explored the historical processes of imperialism producing both a stronger capitalism and oppositional national-liberation movements. Dunayevskaya follows the shift in Marxism as the up-to-then only theoretical support for national liberation struggles (in which all Bolsheviks had previously agreed “in principle”) materialized under the impact of World War I. Lenin came to the understanding that “capitalism in general and imperialism in particular transforms democracy into an illusion... [but] at the same time generates democratic tendencies among the masses” (cited in Dunayevskaya 1982: 54). Among these “democratic tendencies” are national liberation movements.

In emphasizing the reactionary power of nationalism, Luxemburg ignored the creativity and organization of the masses within a self-determination struggle. Although Lenin suggested that the ‘liberation of nations’ is a partial task “within the realm of capitalist civilization, [and] means diverting of proletarian forces from the actual solution of the problem...”, his attentiveness to the Easter uprising in Ireland came to sustain his view that national liberation movements “play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real power against imperialism to come on the scene, namely the socialist proletariat” (Dunayevskaya 2000: 175).

Further, concerning the 1863 Polish uprising (to which Marx referred as not only self-determination movement but a noteworthy example of mass revolutionary potential [Dunayevskaya 1982: 54]), Rosa Luxemburg wrote, “capitalism annihilated Polish independence but at the same time created modern Polish national culture. This national culture is a product indispensable within the framework of bourgeois Poland; its existence and development are a historical necessity, connected with the capitalist development itself” (Dunayevskaya 1982: 54). This conceptualization of nationalism assumes that inevitably, nationalism will develop into a vehicle of capitalism (this can also be applied in the modern sense as we witness how, through the process of constantly reasserting a national identity, nationalism becomes an idealized notion composed of material and imagined symbols and fetishes). Luxemburg’s point that “so long as capitalist states exist, i.e. so long as imperialistic world policies determine and regulate the inner and the outer life of a nation,

there can be no ‘national self-determination’” was driven by her view of self-determination movements as “bourgeois” (Dunayevskaya 1982: 55). The self-activity of the proletariat is what Marx, Lenin and Luxemburg all agreed upon as the method to a revolutionary understanding. Yet the need for mass organizing for national liberation on a civil society level is something over which Luxemburg differed with Marx and Lenin.

At the same time, all three of these Marxist thinkers attacked those forms of nationalism that lacked emancipatory content as reactionary. For Luxemburg, this meant opposition to all forms of nationalism in the era of imperialism. For Marx and especially for Lenin, nationalism could be either progressive and liberatory, as found in some nationalist movements within societies under imperialist domination, or reactionary. The reactionary forms of nationalism almost always appeared in the nationalism of large, powerful capitalist nations. But the reactionary form of nationalism could manifest itself within the nationalism of oppressed nations as well. This would occur if more traditional, more religious, more elitist, and/or more authoritarian forms of nationalism became so dominant that they crowded out the more emancipatory forms within the oppressed nation. Progressive and emancipatory forms of nationalism targeted not only imperialism, but also tended toward a progressive stance on internal issues like class, gender, and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. Usually, these progressive types of nationalism also tried to make connections with the working classes and radical intellectuals of the oppressor nation. Many modern nationalist movements on the part of oppressed nations exhibited both progressive and reactionary features, in a contradictory fashion. Keeping all this in mind, I turn to the Palestinian movement, perhaps the most significant and sustained struggle by an oppressed nation in recent decades.

## **II. Some Contradictions of the Palestinian Movement, Especially on Gender**

In discussing the revolutionary potential of the masses, the imbedded contradiction of a “vanguard for the proletariat” exists. Marx dismissed Lassalle as a dialectician because of his dismissal of the masses. The limits of the working class or common citizen according to Lassalle (as well as Kautsky in his assertion that the “the vehicles of science were not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intellectual” [cited in Dunayevskaya 2000: 179]) were countered by the limits that Marx suggested must be placed on the “intellectual”. This dialogue is inevitable with the formation of any national consciousness and mass organization of a struggle. With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, two self-determination movements and the creation of nation states, the many forces of modernity came into play. The exclusivist nationalisms of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism (two-fold as secular and Islamic presentations of nationalism) developed with them the inherent contradictions of liberation and nationalist movements. Israel’s political trajectory went from quasi-socialist ideologies and an early rhetoric of “the religion of labor”, to Zionism’s later proclamation as a “modern nationalist movement” (LeVine 2009: 104). Likewise, the social and political makeup of the Palestinian self-determination movement fluctuated as it developed along the changing land and labor relations under Ottoman, British, and Israeli control. Today, when the Palestinian Authority lies in a state of unrepresentative leadership and increasingly unprogressive nationalism, Israeli political leaders have focused Israel intently along the track of a globalized world power.

On December 8, 1987, one of the Middle East’s most significant popular uprisings broke out in the Palestinian territories. An incident otherwise habitual under the by then 20+ year Israeli occupation sparked an uprising that spread like a forest fire across the Occupied Territories and into the very framework of Palestinian national consciousness. An Israeli military truck had swerved and hit four Palestinians: a doctor, an engineer, and two workers. Whether deliberate or not, the killing of these individuals inspired a unified revolt to “shake off” (literal translation of “intifada”) the occupation. Clandestine local branches of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the existing grassroots

organizations promptly mobilized to create a unified and deliberated approach that formed into the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). The first Intifada required an intensification of resistance, action, and planning from within Palestinian society. The importance and effectiveness of a strong civil society and informal networks in the Intifada contributed to the egalitarian participation that characterized the uprising. As the writer Sahar Khalifeh predicted, the social relations within Palestinian society would see a shift just as they have under the developing stages of the occupation: "The Intifada is a process of reorganizing [these] internal relationships as much as it is a form of resistance to occupation. If no new social relations emerge, then, unfortunately, we will have fought in vain. After all, the future homeland that we seek is not an abstract idea. It is a concept based on the relations that we aspire to have with one another" (cited in Sabbagh 1998: 136). A brief analysis of the First Intifada will detail the coexistence of progress and internal backlash as the revolution came into play.

Five years into the Intifada, the momentum to address social issues within the spirit of mass mobilization and solidarity saw a decline, but even more so transitioned into formalized approaches. A committee-to-party transition following the initial spontaneous phase of the Intifada fostered a divide as vertical political organizations moved in. For example, The Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (FPWAC) turned its allegiance to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the grassroots democratic atmosphere that had characterized the first part of the Intifada (which included the involvement of Unions, Work Committees, etc) was transformed into a vertical approach to organizing, which would eventually culminate in the hegemony of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). As issues of party representation threatened the spontaneous organizing of the revolution, a reinforcement of traditional roles and patriarchy undermined the space women had asserted for themselves publicly in the leadership of the movement. Women's activism and participation in the popular struggle would materialize and then be restricted with the increasing domination of the PLO. Women remained vigilant in retaining the advances made within the public and domestic arenas and equally cautious as to what would become of the women's movement after the fast-paced events of the Intifada settled. Nevertheless, social changes like the disappearance of the mahr (dowry), free choice concerning veiling within marriage contracts, and greater access to work outside the home, would be threatened by the impending "counter-revolution". As the Palestine Liberation Organization would prove to be a textbook case of the limitations of vanguardism, the impending Islamist surge and Israel's suppression of the uprising would also drive back the movement's progressive features, especially with respect to gender.

The Israeli government responded to the uprising by outlawing popular committees, holding tax raids, establishing curfews, travel restrictions, and arresting and deporting leaders. Also, the closing of universities, schools and some centers left no alternative to home for many youth, especially girls. Traditional social etiquette and the likely potential of a tarnished reputation turned many young women away from activism. The worsening economic situation also pushed women back into the home. Many families had lost members to death or to jail, and after the initial euphoria of the first phase of the Intifad the population was only further demoralized by the failing peace negotiations. The Israeli government encouraged factionalism and spread confusion, sometimes supporting Islamist factions, then seen by the Israelis as more conservative and less dangerous. As Islamist groups came to the fore, even Palestinian nationalist leaflets otherwise encouraging mass participation in the movement now began to call on women to wear traditional or religious dress. The tactics of the all-encompassing Israeli occupation thus provoked a reactionary sociopolitical climate within the nationalist movement that weakened the democratic structure of the Intifada.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the increasing sectarianism denotes a central contradiction existing within the Palestinian movement. By the end of the 1970s, when the PLO had virtually

monopolized the Intifada, a somewhat oppositional Islamist movement (an opposition to the PLO that the Israeli government initially encouraged) garnered influence by playing on the contradictions of the PLO leadership and focusing on societal concerns. In this way, the gains that a secular and gender-conscious self-determination movement seemed to have made in the first part of the Intifada were seriously compromised. Proponents of an Islamist movement, such as the traditional Muslim Brothers coming out of Egypt, looked first to strengthening community (mosques, universities, etc) as a prerequisite for national independence. The Muslim Brotherhood successfully marginalized the left and promoted inter-Palestinian conflict as they shifted alliances between Jordanian groups and Fateh, the leading group in the PLO. A slightly divergent movement had arisen in preparation of first the general uprising of December 1987, in which armed struggle was proposed. However, the call for national unity at the beginning of the First Intifada stopped this, as the PLO, the United National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU), and the Jihad Brigades (which led initial military operations against Israeli forces leading up the Intifada) renounced the use of weapons. Claiming to be a “coalition of combat”, the Jihad Brigade was composed of members from the PLO, Fateh, the Palestinian Communist Party, the PFLP, the DFLP, and other nationalist forces, committees, and institutions (Legrain 1990: 180). Up against Israeli repression, including deportation and assassination of the “coalition’s members, activists, and sympathizers”, the Jihad seemed to dissipate only to reemerge in the fall of 1988, announcing its break with the PLO and resumption of military activities (Legrain 1990: 180). Voicing their clear opposition to UN Resolution 242 and 338 and the PLO’s acceptance of just that in an international peace conference, the “Islamicist” contingent was again reorganized. At this point, the Islamic Resistance Movement (later to be known as Hamas) had only issued communiqués (i.e. asserting the voice of Islam as the voice of the Palestinian people) in its name. Not until June 1988 did the recognized acronym Hamas and a declared plan of mobilization appear (Legrain 1990: 182). However, as Hamas translated the Islamic fundamentalist fervor into a method of nationalist struggle in Gaza and the West Bank, it undermined the progressive movement.

### **III. The Challenge of Globalized Capitalism**

The consolidation of gender discrimination frameworks and of divide-and-conquer politics was also sustained with the 1993 Oslo Accords and an increase in international involvement. Foreign notions of conflict resolution (particularly focused on the transnational liberal feminist movement’s framework of woman-to-woman dialogue organizations) were now dominating the table and disregarding the creative organizing that had enabled the progressive first stage of the Intifada. The late 1970s had marked Israel’s transition into the neoliberal economy with the election of the Likud party.

Mark LeVine suggests this is definitively when “Israeli capitalism became realigned within the framework of globalized capital” (LeVine 2009: 104). He also suggests that this capitalist incentive is what created the basis for the political economy of Oslo. The occupation had already decimated thousands of olive orchards and annexed farmland that could have (literally) been the foundations for an autonomous Palestinian economy. The Palestinian fellahin—the peasant, the worker of the land, who had reaped olive and fig trees for his or her family and community — has since been co-opted into a surplus-producing labor force. This reality mirrors how Dunayevskaya describes production under capitalism: “It has ceased to be ‘the first necessity of living’ and has become a mere means to life” (2000: 104). Many Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza work illegally in Israel and because of the widespread poverty due to occupation, Palestinian labor has been intensively exploited. The epitome of this exploitation is seen in the numerous Palestinians who are left with no option but to work as laborers constructing the wall and illegal Israeli settlements — even driving the bulldozer that plunders their neighbor’s house. At this point, labor has reached its most alienated form. The end product for Palestinians working under these conditions is not merely

something the laborer does not see, as the product of labor vanishes into the world market; it is something the laborer abhors and sees, and is a constant reminder of his or her subjected and oppressed state.

The lack of development of the Palestinian “economy” during the time of Oslo should not come as a surprise — the economy under the Palestinian Authority had long since been designed by the policies of globalizing institutions. Just as international sanctions led by the US and the European Union were placed upon Gaza after Hamas called for an independent Palestinian economy and monetary system in their 2006 platform (a similar economic siege was also active with frequent closures of the Occupied Territories during Oslo), the World Bank perceived an independent Palestinian economy as in “contradiction” with the signed economic agreements during Oslo (LeVine 2009: 14). Through the Oslo process, Israeli business interests and profit incentives took precedent not only over Palestinian economic interests, but over the Israeli working class as well. Again, LeVine aptly summarizes this, writing “that globalization tends to favor the capitalist class over workers is not unique to Israel/Palestine, but its occurrence in the context of an ongoing occupation exacerbates the problems it causes because workers, and the colonized people more broadly, have much less power to resist and reshape the agenda than workers in a non-colonial setting” (LeVine 2009: 111).

Furthermore, the globalization of the Israeli economy into a high-tech military-security complex and the increasing transnational migration to Israel — especially the new supply of cheap labor (from Ethiopia, the Philippines, etc) has undermined the need for Palestinian labor. Thus, Palestinians become a marginalized surplus humanity, or what Marx refers to as “relative surplus labor”. The inability of a Palestinian economy to develop has been detrimental to sustaining a self-determination movement. Even a 2002 World Bank paper suggested that Palestinian growth under Israeli occupation was “transitional rather than sustainable, mostly driven by factor accumulation and resulting from ‘asymmetric market relations, regulatory restrictions, institutional underdevelopment, and restricted access to natural resources’” (cited in LeVine 2009: 118). A shift in labor relations cannot be addressed before the occupation is first targeted. In this sense, the capitalist fervor now molded into the contemporary Zionist nationalist ideology has enforced the tactics of a longstanding colonial nation. LeVine’s description of the historical existence of labor extracting tactics suggests just that: “The establishment of maquiladora-like industrial estates on the borders of 1949 Israel would allow Israeli businesses to reap the benefits of having a captive, malleable foreign workforce located only miles from its main cities” (LeVine 2009: 110).

Therefore, it is essential to reconceptualize and renegotiate the geopolitical state of affairs in Israel/Palestine today, rather than seeing the problem as a result of solely religious and historic misunderstandings. Through the lens of shifting concerning landownership and a planned economy, the persistence of an ongoing conflict — typically viewed as independent of the forces of globalization and capitalism — begins to make sense.

#### **IV. Persistence of a National Liberation Movement**

Colonialism as well as liberation struggles bear within them the potential emergence of liberatory ideals. Palestinians’ existence is their resistance. The masses’ knowledge of their revolutionary potential cannot be ignored, but should be considered in light of the all-encompassing occupation. Hamas’s largely unfavorable reputation and its autocratic tendencies have evoked an increased civil participation and mobilization that defines Palestinian society within the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. There is an unquestionable social responsibility that exists. Development in a prison is hard, but Palestinians continue doing so. The friends and acquaintances I made while working in the

region led me to the belief that Palestinians are amongst the most educated individuals I have ever met. Palestinian university students usually speak fluent English and a sizeable portion of them have lost up to four scholarships to study or work in the US due to Israeli/Egyptian/US as an observer border stipulations. But a profound understanding of international involvement and strategic alienation is not limited to those with the privilege of college education. Quite the opposite in fact—from the old woman who was forced from her home village in 1948 to the young boy salvaging a play toy from the rubble of his bulldozed home—politics is not something Palestinians have to learn or theorize, it is their life. When the snap on my notebook broke, two friends inexhaustibly tried to fix it, melting the plastic, restructuring the binding, etc. This is a simple example of the ingenuity and resourceful tenacity Palestinians develop when resources are limited to nothing living under a siege. Other examples range from creating a new form of flatbread cooked without a gas oven, to melting down Israeli shekels to make bolts, and doing everything in their power to protect a children's library from Israeli F-16 shrapnel. This innovation is necessary for survival under the conditions Palestinians are subject to, and works through various approaches—some more progressive than others. Although outside of Gaza we hear more about Islamist recruitment sessions than Community Based Organizations (CBOs), these opposing forces thrive within the same community and the dialectic of Palestinian day-to-day life is built on these contradictions.

The inherent contradictions of a national liberation movement play out in the aftermath as history has told the story of lost momentum and state tyranny many times. Through the example of the first Intifada, I have discussed why the movement hit a snag and experienced the all-too-familiar recourse to repression against individual freedom. The first phase of the Intifada was characterized by spontaneous demonstrations and innovative forms of resistance. The 'whatever it takes' atmosphere provided an unprecedented flexibility in traditional spaces. But despite the massive mobilization and increased awareness of their rights, the ultimate social, economic and political position of Palestinians made no permanent shift. A fundamental critique of capitalism and the state, and an analysis of the coexistence of resistance with the commodification of labor (as well as natural resources) becomes essential to an understanding of the Israel/Palestine conflict. The transient labor roles for Palestinians under a globalized Israeli economy has fueled what is today the violent and non-violent resistance movements, but it has also fractured a unified nationalism and undermined effective resistance to the occupation.

**Miriam Qamar,**  
August 16, 2010

*Works Cited:*

Dunayevskaya, Raya. *Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 until Today*. Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2000.

Dunayevskaya, Raya. *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*. New Jersey: Humanities Press Inc., 1982.

Legrain, Jean-Francois. "The Islamic Movement and the Intifada." In *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroad*, by Roger Heacoc and Jamal R. Nassar, 180-182. New York: Praeger, 1990.

LeVine, Mark. *Impossible Peace: Israel/Palestine since 1989*. Nova Scotia, Canada: Fernwood Publishing Ltd., 2009.

Sabbagh, Suha. *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998.

---

---

**P.S.**

\* From Marxist Humanists:

<http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/thoughts-on-the-dialectics-of-revolution-and-palestinian-nationalism/>