



Reading Che in Colonized Palestine

On analyzing and drawing inspiration from revolutionary Latin American texts

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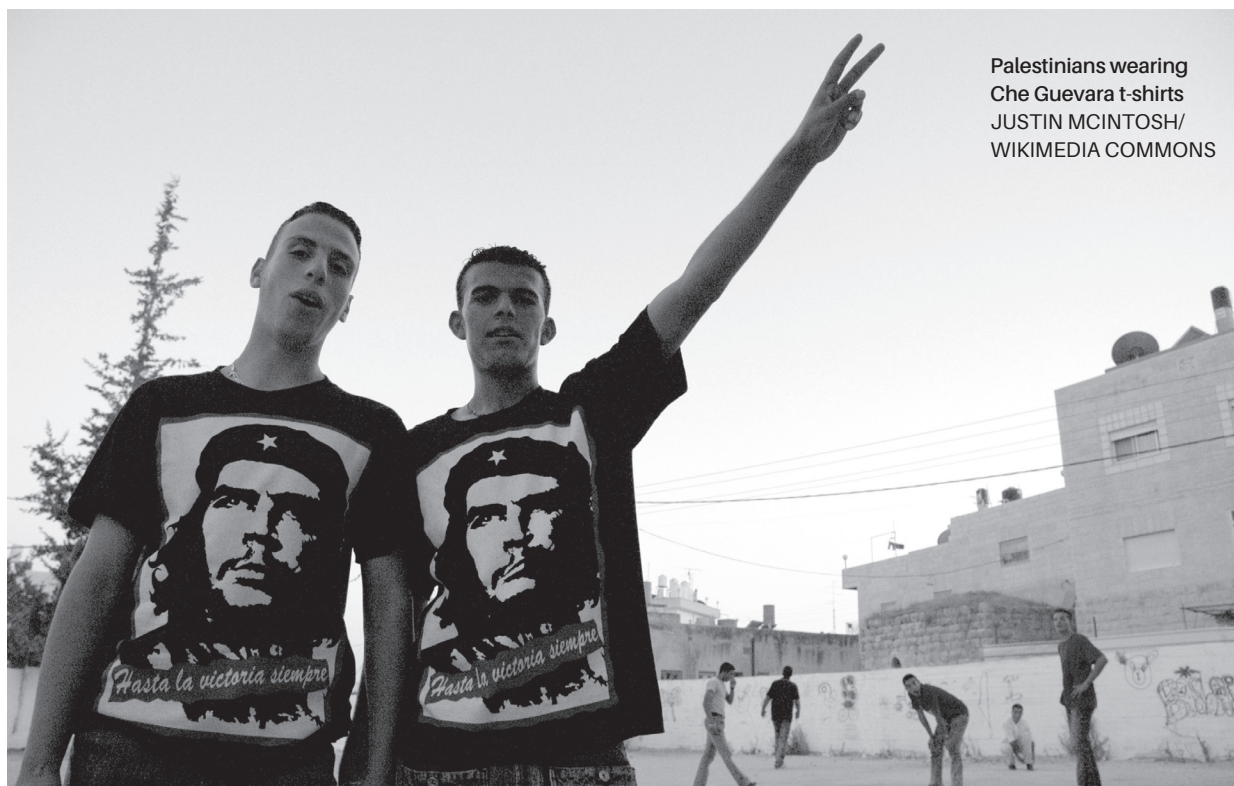
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Palestinians wearing
Che Guevara t-shirts
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“Reading these texts relocated me from the present days’ political reality to another political space with distinct logic, affections, solidity, and hope.”

“The texts opened for us a new political horizon, one that constitutes a radical divergence from the confines of current formal Palestinian political discourse and practice.”

The above quotes are extracts from reflection papers by two Palestinian students at Birzeit University in an anthropology course on revolutionary movements that I developed in the 2016-2017 school year. The papers closed a module in the course on Latin American revolutionary movements—the

syllabus included texts on revolutionary theories and testimonies of revolutionaries from Asia and Africa as well as from Latin America. As the quotes above suggest, the cumulative effect of reading and discussing revolutionary texts from the three continents was a unique experience for my students and for myself.

Through immersing ourselves in revolutionary theoretical and testimonial texts, we cultivated a space for discussing liberational forms of politics with radical conceptions and possibilities. One of the assigned texts in the Latin America module was Che Guevara’s testimony on the Cuban Revolution. Although most students were familiar with Che Guevara through the wide circulation of his pictures on t-shirts, key chains, and walls, most students were unfamiliar



“Long Live Palestinian-Cuban solidarity!” Reads a PFLP poster in Arabic and Spanish PFLP.ORG

with the details of his revolutionary praxis. The fact that most students were familiar with the mythology of Che’s portrait but knew nothing of his revolutionary essence says volumes about how his memory, and the memories of other revolutionaries, have been flattened, shifted into empty signs.

Reading Latin American revolutionary testimonies, including Che’s testimony on the detailed proceedings of the Cuban revolution—the obstacles, comradeship, sacrifices, and collective victory—was eye opening for many of the students. Immersion in these revolutionary texts in some ways liberated its readers’ political imagination from the confines of present-day individualistic liberal logics, opening up a new political horizon characterized by other logics, affections, and collective hope.

The participants in the course were born in the post-Oslo era, characterized by the transformation of the Palestinian struggle from a revolutionary anti-colonial liberation struggle into a state-building project bound by legal and administrative liberal logic and neoliberal economic and political rationality [see Tariq Dana’s piece in this issue.] Within this project, the Palestinian Authority (PA), established in 1994 after the Oslo Accords, monopolized political legitimacy, turning the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) into an empty structure, and transforming Palestinian politics from a revolutionary mass politics that challenged local, regional, and world colonial power structures, into a politics aimed at the international recognition of a Palestinian nation-state within the confines of those same colonial geopolitical power structures.

The post-Oslo Palestinian political praxis of the PA in the West Bank has been unable to confront ongoing violent Zionist settlements.¹ This form of politics has alienated many Palestinians, including Palestinian youth who perceive its accommodationism as complicit

to the Zionist settler colonial project backed by the world’s superpowers.

In this context, reading revolutionary texts constituted a radical alternative to hegemonic liberal political frames and practices, equipping some students with frames of reference, concepts, and terminology to express their perceptions of contemporary realities outside of it. For other students, reading these texts fostered a perception of the Palestinian struggle as united with anti-colonial, anti-imperial struggles for liberation and justice in Palestine and in Latin America.

Very few students in the course were aware that Latin American revolutionary texts were widely circulated among Palestinians from the late ‘60s to the ‘80s, not only in academic settings but also among the activists of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), particularly those affiliated with leftist organizations and within prison walls. Further, the majority of students were not aware of the Palestinian-Latin American connections that went far beyond the circulation of texts, and involved the passage of revolutionaries between Latin American and Palestinian movements.

My experience teaching the course provoked my investigation into the history of the circulation of Latin American revolutionary texts in Palestine, its place and relevance in Palestinian politics, and its potential for instigating a revolutionary Palestinian political imagination and practice. This exploration aims to enlighten present day Palestinian political imagination and reopen a horizon for the revolutionary Palestinian liberation struggle.

Comrades in the War for Liberation: The Passage of Revolutionaries

“The Palestinian cause is not a cause for Palestinians only, but a cause for every revolutionary, wherever he is, as a cause for the exploited and oppressed masses in our era.” –Ghassan Kanafani

“The Palestinian liberation movement is a progressive national movement against the forces of aggression and imperialism. The link between the interests of imperialism and the continued existence of Israel will make our war against the latter basically a war against imperialism.” –Leila Khaled

1. This article refers only to the West Bank experience with the PA, and not the developments in Gaza under Hamas.

The above quotes from the early 1970s by Ghassan Kanafani and Leila Khaled lay the ideological framework for the connection between the Palestinian liberation movement, Latin American revolutionary movements, and other Third World anti-imperial struggles. Kanafani, a Palestinian revolutionary, novelist, and PFLP leader who was assassinated by Israel's national intelligence agency in 1972, highlights the international significance of the Palestinian struggle, and positions the Palestinian cause at the heart of every struggle against exploitation and oppression. Khaled, a Palestinian revolutionary who joined the Arab Nationalist Movement, and later the PFLP, and was the first woman to hijack an airplane, emphasizes the intertwining of the anti-Zionist and anti-imperial struggles.

Though there were important divergences in the contexts of each, anti-imperialism was a node of connection among Palestinian and Latin American revolutionary struggles in the 1970s. Revolutionaries like Antoine Daoud and Patrick Argüello—who simultaneously engaged in the struggle within Palestinian and Latin American revolutionary movements—embodied these connections. Antoine Daoud was born in 1909 in Bogotá, Colombia, to an Arab family from Bethlehem, and is included in a section titled “record of the immortals” on the PFLP website. Daoud moved to Palestine from 1936 to 1948. He became involved in the resistance by providing Palestinian rebels with information he obtained through his work in the British colonial police force and later on in the American consulate. Daoud's resistance activities culminated in the 1948 bombing in Jerusalem of the Jewish Agency building—the executive body of the global Zionist movement, which played a major role in the colonization of Palestine by bringing Jewish settlers and controlling Palestinian native lands.

Following the *Nakba* (Arabic for “catastrophe”), when 500 Palestinian villages were destroyed and at least 700,000 Palestinians were dispossessed and expelled by Zionist forces during the 1948 War, Daoud moved to Cairo. In 1950 he returned to Bogotá. From there, he moved to Guatemala and joined Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in preparing the first group of revolutionaries to Cuba, where he soon moved with them. Daoud moved with Guevara to Bolivia, where he trained in guerrilla warfare. Upon his return to the Arab world in the mid-sixties after the onset of the Palestinian revolution, Daoud joined the PFLP. He died in 1969 in Kuwait. The life history and struggles of Antoine Daoud embody the entanglement of the

Latin American-Palestinian struggles.

Other revolutionaries also reflected these entanglements—like Shafik Jorge Handal, who was a high-ranking member of the communist party in El Salvador. Like Daoud, Handal's father had emigrated from Bethlehem to El Salvador in 1921. Handal traveled to Beirut in support of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) factions in the early eighties.

Patrick Argüello, meanwhile, was a Sandinista born in San Francisco, California, to a Nicaraguan father and North American mother. His story speaks to the depth of the Latin American-Palestinian joined struggle. Argüello participated in hijacking an Israeli El-Al plane in September 1970 along with Leila Khaled, to draw international awareness to the Palestinian cause. They intended to use the hostages they held as “prisoners of war” to pressure for the release of Arab and Palestinian detainees.

In her 1971 memoir, *My People Shall Live*, Leila Khaled, Argüello's partner in the plane hijacking, addresses him:

In joining our struggle for dignity and peoplehood, you have given us a lesson in international solidarity and brotherhood and cemented the bond of affection between the people of Latin America and the people of Palestine. You wrote history by shedding your blood for others; you united continents by your all-encompassing spirit; you ascended to the realm of Olympian gods by your life-inspiring commitment. You are at once a Lafayette, a Byron, a Norman Bethune, a Che Guevara—a Patrick Argüello, a martyr for Palestinian freedom. You are not dead. You live. You will live forever! You are the patron saint of Palestine.

Argüello's and others' engagement in the Palestinian struggle illustrates that for some, Palestine signified the struggle of all oppressed around the world. To understand this struggle further, we must turn to the history of the Zionist settler colonial project.

The Palestinian Revolution as Anti-Colonial, Anti-Imperial Liberation Struggle

In 1897, the First Zionist Congress adopted the Basel Program, which aimed to create a home for the Jewish people in Palestine. The British colonial authority, which ruled Palestine under mandate from 1923 to 1948, facilitated this effort through the Balfour Declaration, a November 1917 public statement

announcing British support for the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. This would thereby create a colonial settlement for Jews and displace the native Arab Palestinians who lived there. The British supported the Zionist project so it could establish a colonial entity in the heart of the Arab world to protect its economic interests and extend its control of the area, disregarding the interests and aspirations of the Arab people.

In establishing itself as part of the European colonial enterprise, the Zionist movement, facilitated by British colonial authorities, dispossessed Palestinian lands, depopulated Palestinian villages and towns, and expelled more than 700,000 native Palestinians, who became refugees. Israel was officially established as the physical embodiment of the Zionist settler colonial project in 1948. Different from colonial projects that aim to exploit the raw materials and labor power of colonized native people, the Zionist settler colonial project aims to dispossess the land and expel its people to replace them with a new group.

This project of settlement and colonization continued to expand with the occupation of the remaining parts of Palestine in 1967 following the Arab-Israeli War, in addition to the occupation of Syrian and Egyptian territories. The same rationale led Zionist leadership to dispossess Palestinian lands, eliminate Palestinian presence, and build Jewish settlements in Palestinian lands following the Oslo peace process, signed in 1993 between the PLO and Israel.

Palestinians had resisted the settler colonial project since its inception. The 1936-1939 Palestinian peasants’ revolution, for example, opposed both the British colonial rule and the Zionist settler project. Following the Nakba in 1948, Palestinian resistance continued, culminating in the mid-1960s with the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which consisted of various Palestinian organizations with different ideologies. Yet, all had adopted armed struggle as the way to liberate Palestine and return the refugees to their land.

From the mid 1960s to the mid-1980s, a revolutionary political culture, thought, and practice characterized the Palestinian resistance. It had strong connections to other anti-colonial and anti-imperial liberation struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The era witnessed the engagement of Palestinians, Arabs, and international allies in the popular movements and armed struggles launched by the different factions of the PLO.

The leftist activists of the Palestinian revolution had a clear vision of who constituted the enemies and friends of the Palestinian people. The PFLP, writing in a journal in 1971, realized that “the enemy camp is not only Israel: it is Israel, and the Zionist movement, and global imperialism, and Arab reaction... The world Zionist movement has overlapping relationships and interests intertwined with world imperialism, and the latter benefits from the Zionist entity.”

The Cuban Revolution, Sandinistas, and Tupamaros: Linking Revolutionary Struggles

In the sixties, leftist revolutionary movements worldwide drew ideological affinities through their opposition to imperial American and Western projects—including between Latin America and Palestine. The Cuban Revolution in particular was a point of inspiration for the Palestinian one. As a former PFLP leader told me in November 2017:

The leftist Palestinian organizations emerged in a historical period characterized by the victory of the revolution in Cuba. As an emergent revolution, the Palestinian revolution needed ideological, material, and arms support. It needed the experience of revolutionary movements in order to be able to build its own specific experience. The Cuban revolutionary regime provided [to] these needs.

The Cuban revolutionary regime’s support of other revolutionary struggles is well-documented in academic literature. The 2017 book *Revolutionary Violence and the New Left: Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Alberto Álvarez and Eduardo Tristán, explains the transnational nature of leftist revolutionary violence, focusing on the ways that ideologies were disseminated and ideas were mobilized among revolutionary organizations in Latin America, Europe, and the United States. They cite the Cuban revolution and its material support of other revolutionary organizations that emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s as key to these processes.

Historian Robert Buzzanco, writing in 2017, points to the 1966 Cuban-sponsored Tri-Continental Conference in Havana as an important moment in the fight against global empires that linked anti-imperial movements and struggles across the Third World, socialist and nationalist alike. At the conference, the Palestinian cause became a major part of the political agenda of the entire Latin American left.

Cuba was the first nation to recognize the



Fidel Castro with Yasser Arafat WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Palestinian Liberation Movement at its founding in 1964 and to aid leftist organizations such as the PFLP and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) with logistical and professional aid. In 1974, Fidel Castro hosted PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat on an internationally-covered visit to Cuba, and then established a Palestinian embassy in Cuba.

Palestinians were fascinated by the Cuban revolution in part due to how quickly it succeeded: According to the former PFLP leader, the Cuban revolution “succeeded in two years, supported by the charisma of Fidel Castro and his comrades. It was a guerrilla war that began in forests and rural areas and moved to the city, a revolution that relied on peasants. It was led by revolutionary democrats who turned into Marxists during the revolutionary praxis.” The relationship with Cuba developed in the late 1960s, he explained, and consisted of both military and academic training. “PFLP cadres had been trained in guerilla war, tens had participated in ideological and military courses that ranged between six to nine months to one year. There were academic fellowships that benefitted the youth and sometimes they received financial aid,” he said. “The head of the PFLP, George Habash, had visited Cuba several times during the eighties. There were commonalities between Habash and Castro. Both were petty bourgeoisie who turned into revolutionaries.” The PFLP also translated into Arabic several texts on the Cuban revolution, which were widely read and studied among the cadres of the organization.

Beyond the Cuban revolution, the PLO had ties with the Nicaraguan Sandinista movement. Researcher

Bruce Hoffman traced PLO-Sandinista ties (particularly with the PFLP) in the 1988 RAND Report, “The PLO and Israel in Central America: The geopolitical dimension.” One outcome of the Tri-Continental Conference in Havana, he writes, was a pact between the PLO and Sandinista guerillas signed in the late ‘60s that paved the way for Sandinista trainings on PLO bases in Lebanon.

PLO-Sandinista relations deepened after the Sandinista victory in 1979, after which Palestinian revolutionaries began being trained in Nicaragua. Hoffman analyzes the geopolitical dimension of PLO-Sandinista relations in the context of Israel’s relations with the Somoza regime in Nicaragua and other Latin American states such as Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. He reads PLO support and assistance to the Sandinistas as a counterbalance to Israel’s support and arms sales to Nicaragua’s neighbors.

There were other, less documented, relations between Palestinian leftist organizations and Latin American revolutionary organizations, such as the Tupamaros National Liberation Movement (MLN-T) in Uruguay. According to the former PFLP leader I interviewed, Palestinian leftist organizations closely studied these experiences. “The PFLP had printed and educated its members in the experiences of revolutionary movements like the Tupamaros, which was an urban movement particularly in Montevideo. PFLP cadres had benefited from the experience of the Tupamaros, particularly, its tactics concerning secrecy and underground activities,” he said.

Palestinian enchantment with Latin American



A Palestinian man in Ramallah holds a poster of Bolivian President Evo Morales during a 2014 rally in support of Latin American leaders. ZUMA PRESS, INC./ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

revolutionary movements was based on the premise that the Global South has the ability to fight and win—that guerilla warfare can succeed despite all limitations and pressures. “We had deeply studied the experiences of Latin American revolutionary movements on two levels—the ideological level, and the level of the detailed specificities of the experience in its context,” said the former PFLP leader. “We were fascinated with the Guevarian path and it affected our thinking. It constituted an inspiration—yet, we were aware of the limitations of its applicability in the Palestinian context. The Palestinian topography is limited, as we do not have mountains.” This suggests that the activists of the Palestinian leftist organizations drew ideological inspiration from Latin American revolutionary movements, but had analyzed the specificities of the Palestinian case and assessed which revolutionary practices fit the Palestinian context and which were less applicable.

Latin American Texts Seep into Colonial Prison Walls

From the mountains of Peru and El Salvador to Palestine, another setting that saw wide circulation of Latin American revolutionary texts was in prison. Following the 1967 Israeli occupation of the remaining parts of Palestine, mass incarceration became what I have interpreted as a tool of anti-insurgency for deterring the Palestinian struggle. Palestinian political prisoners had organized themselves throughout their struggle against the colonial prison authorities, forming what became the Palestinian prisoners’ movement. These prisoners confronted prison authorities, inverting Israeli prisons into revolutionary castles, resistance spaces, and popular universities. From within the walls of prisons and their harsh material conditions, the community of Palestinian prisoners developed an educational system, organizational structures, and communication networks within and beyond the prison walls.

Latin American revolutionary texts contributed to the indoctrination of Palestinian prisoners. In the words of a Palestinian ex-prisoner I interviewed, “the Palestinian prisoners engaged in reading, understanding and analyzing revolutionary experiences to draw lessons for their own experience,” he said. He continued:

In the face of oppression and elimination, the Palestinian prisoners engaged in building their organizational structures and fortifying their ideological front. They drew inspiration from global revolutionary movements including Latin American revolutionary movements, such as the Tupamaros’ experience. We read these experiences and memorized the names of sites and locations. Often, this was at the expense of studying Palestinian, past and present, experiences.

The prisoners and their political organizations developed and organized the educational curricula taught in prisons themselves, explained another ex-prisoner. The PFLP curriculum included a unit titled “Revolutionary Experiences,” the ex-prisoner told me. In this unit, prisoners read and discussed various revolutionary experiences, including ones from Latin America. “The aim of reading these experiences was twofold: to learn from these experiences and discuss their applicability in the Palestinian context; as well as to mobilize the revolutionary imagination of the prisoners through knowing that people around the world are engaged in revolutionary struggles,” he said.

Palestinian prisoners read Latin American revolutionary experiences from the perspective of the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle. One of the texts on the syllabus in the late 1970s was the memoir of Bolivian mine union leader Domitila Barrios de Chungara—*Let Me Speak*, which was translated into Arabic and circulated widely within and outside prison walls. As another ex-Palestinian prisoner I spoke with explained: “In our reading and discussion of Domitila’s *testimonio*, we focused on her principles and strength. We discussed class struggle through her *testimonio*. Additionally, we drew inspiration from her firmness in interrogation, an issue that is important for our struggle.”

Reading de Chungara’s text was a way to link feminism and women’s issues with broader liberation and socioeconomic justice struggles, beyond the framework of liberalism.

The Relevance of Revolutionary Texts to Current Palestinian Politics

The Palestinian struggle and its alliances with anti-colonial and anti-imperial revolutionary movements emerged in opposition to the colonial project and its functional imperial role. The expansion of Israeli settlements, and their dispossession of Palestinian lands draws power from U.S. support, the compliance of most Arab regimes, and the post-Oslo Palestinian Authority’s policies and its commitment to security cooperation with the colonizer.

The post-Oslo Palestinian formal political, economic and social policies, supported by U.S. and European funding agencies, engages a politics within the frame of globalized human rights and developmental neoliberal discourses that compartmentalize and coopt liberation struggles. The Palestinian revolutionary struggle cultivated in the 1960s and ‘70s through participation in trans-Arab and trans-national revolutionary armed struggle has been replaced by the PA post-Oslo project, in which Palestinians are confined to a colonized and divided geography, in need of saving by international and local human rights activists, and reliant on humanitarian aid.

In modern-day Palestinian society, the domination of colonial, imperial, and economic-exploitative power structures have left no referential frame for radical revolutionary conceptions and subjectivities to develop. Through reading testimonies about Latin American and other regional and global revolutions, my students were in some ways able to find such a frame. The invocation of the Palestinian liberation movement’s revolutionary past and its clear vision, serves to widen Palestinians’ political imaginative space and cultivate revolutionary sensibilities and practices. Reading and discussing Palestinian and Latin American revolutionary texts, it seems, has the potential to carve a politics of revolutionary hope and conviction that liberation is possible—a conviction that is dormant, but not dead in the mindset of Palestinian strugglers. ■

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