

Queering Palestinian Solidarity Work

Israel/Palestine and the Queer International

by Sarah Schulman
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REVIEW BY WENDY ELISHEVA SOMERSON

BUT ISRAEL IS the only country in the Middle East with gay rights.” I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard this response to any criticism of Israeli policies over the last few years. Several years ago at a public discussion about a proposal to boycott Israeli products at the local co-op, an elderly and—from all appearances—straight gentleman awkwardly mumbled something about how “homosexuals” were being treated in the “rest of the Middle East.” At the time I recognized how disingenuous this concern seemed, but I didn’t recognize where it was coming from. Sarah Schulman’s new book provides an extended exploration about the origins of this reasoning, how to respond to it, and why queers should become involved in Palestinian solidarity by taking us through Schulman’s own journey to politicization around Israel and Palestine.

Uneasy about being invited to give the keynote address at the 2010 Israeli Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference at Tel Aviv University, Schulman strives to find out more about the academic and cultural boycott of Israel called for by Palestinian civil society. Her research into the boycott deepens her understanding of the Occupation and propels her to turn down the invitation to speak at an Israeli government-funded university.

Instead she goes on an alternative solidarity trip to Israel and Palestine where she meets with queer and straight Israeli and Palestinian activists and learns about the brutalities of the Occupation in person. Bringing with her a long history of queer

activism and a desire to bring together queer issues and the movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS), Schulman experiences Israel’s discriminatory policies, which include separate laws, roads, and water sources for Jews and Palestinians. Her deepening understanding of the Occupation and her meetings with queer activists motivate her to imagine a “variety of disenfranchised communities” around the world coming together to advocate against the Occupation and join the BDS movement.

Schulman returns from her trip excited and determined to organize a U.S. tour of queer Palestinian activists, including Ghadir of Aswat (a group for Palestinian gay women) as well as Haneen Maikey and Sami Shamali of alQaws (a group focused on sexual and gender diversity in Palestinian society). Creating a structure for understanding this tour, Schulman proposes the idea of a queer international “movement that brings queer liberation and feminism to the principles of international autonomy from occupation, colonization, and globalized capital.” The queer international movement combats Israeli “pinkwashing”—a term used to describe attempts to divert attention from the Occupation of Palestine by focusing on LGBT rights in Israel—by exposing pinkwashing for what it really is: Israeli government-sponsored propaganda.

The tour that Schulman organized introduced queer Palestinians to U.S. queers. Its speakers often challenged U.S. assumptions about what it means to be queer, calling into question the

supposedly universal importance of “coming out” as an international narrative. Folks in the United States also got to hear how queer Palestinians cannot separate their experiences of queerness from their experiences of living under the Occupation. Queer Palestinians spoke out against the notion that Israel serves as a savior for gay Palestinians: as Shamali neatly summarized, “there is no pink door leading to a secret pathway through the Wall for me.”

Anti-Pinkwashing Activism in Seattle

I am particularly interested in Schulman’s framing of queer involvement in international politics because of my own involvement in queer anti-pinkwashing actions in Seattle. Schulman’s book provides a useful framework to think about how lessons learned in Seattle can be applied to global resistance against pinkwashing and a queer critique of the Occupation of Palestine.



In the spring of 2012, I was part of a group of Jewish and Palestinian American queer activists who successfully lobbied Seattle's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Commission to cancel an Israeli pinkwashing event that was scheduled to take place at Seattle City Hall. StandWithUs and the Israeli Consulate had sponsored four leaders of Israeli lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) organizations to visit the Pacific Northwest in a speaking tour called "Rainbow Generations: Building New LGBTQ Pride and Inclusion in Israel," so that they could "share the innovative work they are doing in Israel, learn from counterparts in the U.S., and build relationships for future collaboration."

What could be wrong with inclusion, pride, and collaboration? The government backing of this tour indicates that it was actually part of the cynical government campaign called "Brand Israel," a public relations program launched in 2005 to combat the growing success of the BDS movement. To rebrand Israel in a positive light, the Israeli government positions Israel as the progressive center of culture in the Middle East. Pinkwashing refers to the arm of this campaign that portrays Israel as a sanctuary for LGBT folks surrounded by barbaric and homophobic Arabs, particularly Palestinians.

Centering Queer Palestinian Voices

Schulman's motivation for her tour and our success in getting the Seattle event cancelled relied on the same strategy: centering the voices of queer Palestinians, which disrupt and reveal the racism behind pinkwashing. Our coalition of activists succeeded in getting the LGBT Commission to cancel its event by attending its public meeting the night before the event was scheduled to take place. Two of us Jewish Voice for Peace activists

explained the concept of pinkwashing and that we were not opposed to hearing from individual Israelis, but that we could not support a tour backed by the Israeli government. We also differentiated between valid criticisms of Israeli government propaganda and actual instances of anti-Semitism that discriminate against Jewish people.

By addressing objections to cancelling the event, we created space for our Palestinian American friends, Selma Al Aswad and Laila Assal, to tell their stories. Al Aswad described how her family history is linked to her current identity as a queer Palestinian American living in Seattle: her family relocated to Washington state after her father became a refugee in 1948 when he was expelled from his home in Palestine. She explained, "My queer identity is steeped in and inextricably linked to the dispossession of my family and community by the state of Israel." She then described how pinkwashing seeks to cover up the crimes Israel continues to commit against her family and community. Assal, a queer Palestinian American whose family has Israeli citizenship, explained that her family members are treated as "fourth-class citizens" within Israel. She described how her visits to Israel are accompanied by government harassment simply because of her ancestry. Explaining that Palestinians with Israeli citizenship represent 20 percent of Israel's population, Assal pointed out how they were not being represented on the Rainbow Generations tour.

With tears in his eyes and a voice shaking with emotion, one of the commissioners said he felt he and his colleagues had made a huge mistake because they had no idea that holding this event meant marginalizing Palestinian LGBTQ folks. Other commissioners joined in, voicing their own concerns, and when they voted to cancel the event, it was because something unusual had happened that night: queer Palestinian American stories

had been placed at the center of the room. The commissioners, hearing Al Aswad and Assal's moving testimonies about their painful experiences and incredible resilience as queer Palestinian American activists, were compelled to change their minds.

Backlash: Pitting Queer Issues Against Palestine

Schulman describes some of the backlash that occurred after the Queer Palestinian tour, which included the New York LGBT Community Center's refusal to let a Palestine solidarity group meet at the center to plan activities for Israeli Apartheid Week. While the circumstances leading to the cancellation were not made public, there were accusations of anti-Semitism, and the community center's board claimed that Jewish folks wouldn't feel "safe" at the center if the Palestinian solidarity group met there. In a public statement, the center announced a moratorium on renting space to groups organizing around Israel/Palestine because "we must keep our focus squarely on providing life-changing and life-saving programs and services to the LGBTQ community in New York City."

Similarly, in Seattle, an enormous backlash was set in motion after the commissioners decided to cancel the Israeli speaking tour. Again the supposed "safety" of the Jewish community was used to separate queer issues from Israel/Palestine and render queer Palestinians invisible. StandWithUs, a pro-Occupation organization, released a response to the cancellation, claiming that anti-pinkwashing activists' goal was to shut down conversation and deny "Israelis the right to speak here in the U.S." They included a statement from the Israeli delegation about their disappointment that the commission "eliminated" the opportunity for dialogue and their sadness that the "commission, representing a minority that continues to face discrimination, also practices that same discrimination."

Accusations of anti-Semitism were couched in claims that the Israeli speakers were discriminated against based on their nationality, even though we had specifically explained that we opposed the event based on its sponsorship by the Israeli consulate. By ignoring the event's government backing, the delegation was able to use the language of "dialogue" to reverse power dynamics and position themselves as victims of discrimination. As Schulman writes, the idea of dialogue often functions as "a false equation, a nonexistent 'equality,' a substitute for political change" that erases the actual facts of the Occupation.

Under enormous pressure from the city council and Jewish institutions, the commissioners issued a written apology for "the pain, offense and embarrassment that we caused by canceling our scheduled event." They claimed that their vote did not represent "a stand for either side," but recognition "that we could not facilitate a neutral space for dialog and learning and keep the conversation focused on LGBTQ issues *versus* the larger issues of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship" (emphasis mine).

This idea that LGBTQ issues can and should be separated from Israel's Occupation of Palestine echoes the New York City LGBT's center's claim to keep its focus on LGBTQ community in opposition to "Middle East Conflict." This separation and isolation of gay identity from other identities (such as Palestinian identity) and the idea of a space for neutral dialogue capable of erasing power differences have been made possible by the mainstreaming of the LGBTQ movement and its links to homonationalism.

Assimilation and Homonationalism

In the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, gay liberation movements grew out of other liberation struggles and were deeply intertwined with feminist

and anti-racist movements. Queer movements challenged capitalism, racism, and state power because gay lives were antithetical to mainstream society. However, over time, as LGBTQ folks gained acceptance and gay activism became institutionalized, the focus narrowed to accessing state-based rights. Operating from an assimilationist model, many LGBTQ groups have worked to gain inclusion into state institutions such as marriage and the military.

By making gay identity a distinct category aligned with the state, LGBTQ institutions have ended up separating gayness from all other aspects of our identities and aligning gay rights with state rights. Schulman describes how Jasbir Puar connects LGBT assimilation to racism through her coinage of the term homonationalism, which refers to how (mostly white) LGBT folks in the global North who have gained some legal rights adopt their country's patriotism and racism. They contrast their country's democratic culture with that of "the Other" (often Muslims) whose cultures are positioned as rabidly homophobic. These Western countries then showcase LGBT rights as symbols of their modern, progressive values.

The Israeli government has harnessed homonationalism by promoting its relatively decent positions on LGBT rights to justify its Occupation of Palestinian land and resources. Following the Israeli government's lead, pro-Occupation groups position Israel as an enlightened gay-friendly oasis in contrast to uncivilized and homophobic Palestine. These groups highlight the violence that some gay Palestinians face from their families and authorities in Palestine, but never acknowledge the violence *all* Palestinians, whatever their sexual orientation, face living under Occupation.

Civil Rights versus Human Rights

The pinkwashing discourse used in Seattle around the commissioner's decision builds on the mainstreaming of the LGBTQ movement by aligning gay civil rights with state interests and framing Palestinian human rights as a completely separate divisive, "political" issue. The Seattle City Council eventually met with the commissioners in a public meeting at City Hall to review the commissioners' decision to cancel the pinkwashing event. During the time for public commentary, representatives from Jewish and LGBTQ mainstream organizations spoke about how the cancellation caused deep pain in "the Jewish community." One person spoke about how outside groups "took a nonpolitical event and politicized what was a cultural and civil rights exchange." Many of the speakers argued that the cancellation meant "boycotting dialogue" and "squelching free speech."

These claims about harm done to the Jewish community echo the claims about Jews not feeling safe at the New York LGBT Community Center. These claims also rely on the same pro-Occupation tactic of positioning mainstream Jewish institutions as *the* Jewish community and excluding anti-Occupation Jews. Incredibly well-funded Jewish institutions such as the Jewish Federation are then able to position themselves as victims of censorship. In reality, the Jewish Federation practices censorship with its guidelines that forbid funding for any groups or events that advocate or endorse BDS or even have a sponsor that endorses BDS.

Furthermore, how did LGBTQ civil rights become cultural and "nonpolitical"? In the 1970s, it would have been impossible to position gay rights as apolitical, but since LGBTQ rights have lined up with state-based rights, pinkwashing discourse takes advantage of this alignment to separate gay rights from human rights. In an open

letter, several LGBTQ organizations expressed their disappointment over the “missed opportunity” to celebrate our community’s “diversity” with the cancellation of the event. The letter went on to say that “as we head into our own significant civil rights battle in Washington State, the trust and support of the Jewish community is even more pivotal.” Civil rights are now being conflated very specifically with gay marriage rights (which were up for a vote this fall in Washington) and are separated again from human rights.

Toward a Radical Queer Politic

In light of these debates about pinkwashing strategies, I am hopeful that Schulman’s book can help more queer folks understand the link between queer issues and Palestine solidarity,

as well as how to combat pinkwashing efforts. This book can help us learn how to respond to arguments that use the concepts of dialogue, discrimination, and diversity to promote a narrow vision of gay rights aligned with state rights. By insisting on a power analysis as part of her critique of global politics, Schulman demands that we consider who is being excluded when we focus on the “safety” and “rights” of some LGBT folks without linking these rights to anti-colonial struggle.

Schulman argues that the successful tour of queer Palestinians demonstrates that we can still mobilize “the huge progressive queer community in the United States that is disgusted by marriage and military and that longs to return to the radical social transformation implicit in a feminist

critique of gender and sex roles.” By centering and listening to queer Palestinian voices and decentering the state, queers can embrace Palestinian solidarity and refuse to let our identities be used to justify oppression anywhere—because true queer liberation can never come at the cost of denying someone else’s rights. ■

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