ON SOLIDARITY

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Now for some practical applications, for this book isn't intended simply for theoretical or historical interest. The study of anticolonial activity is never just theoretical, and can never be disembedded from its still-unfolding history.

The historical reference point for my exploration of anarchism and anticolonialism tends to be South Asia. But the reference point for current political activism relevant to this conjuncture tends to be Palestine. This jump would seem strange if the motivation was a particularist interest in an exceptional region, but not if it is the principle of anti-imperialism. Besides, whenever I ask myself—as I often do—what the historical subjects I admire would do if they were around today, it's not hard to speculate that they would be continuing their efforts at social and economic justice by fighting against neocolonialism and neoliberalism in India, defending civil rights and racial justice in the United States, supporting political prisoners, and lending their solidarity and aid to any anticolonial struggles extant

in the world—more or less exactly what they were doing fifty, seventy, or a hundred years ago.

In the memoir *Lucknow ki Panch Raaten* (Five Lucknow Nights), Ali Sardar Jafri paints a picture of himself and his Progressive Writers' Association comrades as young radicals in the 1930s, perpetually on fire with poetry and revolution. The fourth night is a dark and stormy one in 1941. Jafri and his friends have gathered at somebody's house after midnight, still on a collective high from a *mushaira* at All India Radio (a traditional high-culture form infused with new radical energy into something like an elevated spoken-word poetry slam). On the wall above the fireplace hangs a portrait of a *mujer libre* of Spain, below which is written "To Death." Jafri ardently describes the free woman's clenched fists, her heaven-raised face, her lips taut with fierce emotion, and the swelling breast that her warrior's garb could not conceal. (These are young guys, remember; amid the passions of global solidarity, they still had some work to do on the patriarchy front.)

"In a way," Jafri writes, "the picture was the translation of our romantic and our revolutionary emotions; we too wanted to be warriors unto death. We considered Spain to be our own country, because it was fighting against fascism for freedom and the beautiful dreams of humanity. Spain's freedom was our freedom, and on this night, the warrior woman was included in our party and advancing our courage in the intoxication of India's freedom."[1] (And possibly wine, he adds.) His buddy Faiz Ahmad Faiz offers up a poem he just heard, and they continue to trade couplets.[2] "This music was a new signal-bell in Faiz's soul, which in his later life would

bring him to the tents of the Palestinian mujahidin. This warrior woman of Spain, and Yasser Arafat of Palestine, are two names for the same united front."[3] So too their struggle against imperialism in India. (From there he segues into a story about a Ku Klux Klan riot at a Paul Robeson concert in Peekskill, New York, and the power of song and poetry.)

During the first half of the twentieth century, India was the most prominent front in the global struggle against imperialism. A strategic linchpin for British imperial power, it was also a focal point for Western activists involved in movements comparable to those that in a later era (after the 1955 Bandung conference) would be described as third world solidarity. Following World War II and South Asian decolonization this front shifted in the 1950s to Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam, joined throughout the 1960s by a wave of African decolonization struggles as well as New Afrikan, Puerto Rican, and Native American movements within the United States in the 1970s, and then by U.S. involvement in Central America in the 1980s. In the 1990s, Chiapas was most prominent; in the 2000s, the biggest flashpoint among extant anticolonial struggles and solidarity movements has probably been Palestine, along with indigenous movements throughout the Americas. (This, of course, is not an exhaustive list of all the sites of anticolonial resistance, which are legion, but just a quick sketch of a moving front line.)

Inevitably, questions about the ethics and effectiveness of solidarity work come up in any situation in which a relatively privileged outsider is coming into contact with a less privileged community, whether within or across political

struggle for any form of decolonization—including both neocolonialism (read neoliberal globalization) and the persistent legacies of previous colonization (read U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes).

You say you're an anarchist. Yet you're supporting X national liberation movement. How can you support a demand for statehood?

I don't support demands for statehood, per se. I do support people's struggle for self-determination and the space to determine the conditions of their own lives. It's not the task of an ally to decide what the best alternative is; in order to remain consistent with our own principles, anarchist allies of anticolonial struggles have to recognize that the people in question must decide for themselves.

But isn't that kind of a naive cop-out, knowing that they plan to create a state?

Well, the fact remains that they're forced to operate within a world of states. The reason anticolonial resistance struggles feel the need to institute sovereignty is because at any scale, a "liberated" area—whether an autonomous zone, *quilombo*, *caracole*, reservation, or any space run on decentralized and nonhierarchical principles—is still embedded in nonliberated space. It has boundaries inside of which these principles prevail, and outside of which they do not. It needs ways to mediate or transition between the two. That is, a zone in which its right to set the terms of how things will go is recognized and enforceable, where another law or power can't interfere.

An area that has fought off colonial rule still exists within the interstate system. If a newly decolonizing area doesn't gain recognition by that system, it has to fear reconquest or incorporation into someone else's nation-state or empire. This has always been the case for places with fuzzy borders or in border marches. Independent statehood was at least a nominal guard against that, even if only to establish external boundaries by the terms of international law. The logical conclusion to this dilemma is that in order for a decolonizing area to truly adopt a "no-state solution," we would have to dismantle the interstate system as a whole and create anarchism everywhere. There can be no post-colonial anarchism in one country! No doctrine of peaceful coexistence, but continuous world revolution!

Whoa, you're freaking me out! For a while there I was thinking you sounded sort of like a Maoist, but now. . . . Are you some kind of Trot?

No. I'm putting you on—sort of. Maybe. At least about the Trot part.

Seriously, though, how do you feel about standing next to or under a national flag? In an era when media images are so powerful, you have to be aware of what it means to link yourself visually to an icon like that.

Yeah, I do pay attention to that—say, to where I'm standing during a rally. The same goes for some sectarian organizations back home. But since you brought up visual meanings: flags and such are powerful symbols for many groups, including nations and states. Still, the symbolism

of any given flag in a particular context is also layered with other complicated meanings and associations. We need to pay attention to the messages being communicated. Where is it shorthand for "freedom," "revolution," or "self-determination," and where is it read as an icon of state power?

Yeah, about that idea: your principle about respecting other people's self-determination raises more questions, and not just about states. What are the limits within which you can say, "This isn't my business; they can organize themselves as they want to," and beyond which you have to say, "This is abhorrent to my principles; I cannot stand with this struggle"?

Look, we all know that the enemies of our enemies aren't always our friends. Especially given the emphasis we place on the importance of means and process as a prefigurative path to the desired outcome, anarchists engaged in solidarity-based resistance can't postpone the problem or write it off as tactical. So one clue is whether someone else who's opposing a particular empire—the United States, let's say—is categorically anti-imperialist, or if they're just pulling for a rival power to get the advantage, supporting some unsavory character simply because they're anti-American. There are a lot of false binaries presented to us.

Well then, let's be more concrete. If you can't separate means and ends, the negative and positive fights, how can you support uncritically a group of people who are—oh, I don't know—reactionary, misogynistic, authoritarian, anti-Semitic, chauvinistic, or super religious?

I don't. For one thing, be careful not to equate a whole culture or society with any of those adjectives. But I take your point, and the thing is, relationships of solidarity should not be uncritical from either side. If practiced on a level ground of mutual respect and two-way dialogue, there should be neither romanticizing nor paternalism. Your partners are not saints, noble savages, or charity cases. If I hate imperialism, then it's in my own interest to work against it from any angle I can. I'm not doing it as a favor to anyone. If we have (at least some of) the same goals and enemies, agreement in the need for resistance is not a stretch. And along the way you're learning from and changing each other. Pay attention. You gain trust by showing integrity and commitment over time. Then maybe someday, you'll have earned the right to intervene as an insider.

Sure, be respectful, listen, learn. OK. Still, how can you remain committed to your own core anti-oppression principles regarding things like gender and sexuality, or animal rights, without perpetuating the subtle (or not-so-subtle) colonialism of trying to "improve" someone else's culture? Can you refrain from imposing your own ideas on someone whom you're supposed to be supporting, if that means condoning ideas that go against your convictions regarding pure anarchist principle?

You mean, why can't we just persuade the Arab world to go vegan?

Very funny. But I mean really: is this an insurmountable paradox? On the other hand, is "taking leadership" just another cop-out, an abdication of principles?

It's important to recognize the internal debates within any society and its dynamic changes through time. Nothing is monolithic. It's virtually guaranteed that not all members of the putative nation are in total agreement about their social visions. Chances are that among these elements, you'll recognize counterparts with whose principles, strategies, tactics, and methods you do feel affinity. That's who you "take leadership" from.

I guess I feel comfortable enough with all that. So let's say I'm ready to get involved. What do I do? What is the job of a relatively privileged, mobile activist from the global North in relation to those resisting oppression on their own behalf in the South?

There are two answers to that. First of all, have you been invited to do something, and if so, what? Has someone put out a call for action? Who? What sort of action? Are there resources and capacities that are available to you as a first world dweller or northern passport holder that you can usefully leverage? Great, use that.

The second answer is deeper. It's pretty simple to see solidarity as the expression of support, whether symbolic or directly material, to a current resistance movement. But there's a deeper recognition of systemic, structural, and historical interrelationships that goes beyond that. A guy in the West Bank once said to some members of an International Solidarity Movement delegation, "We appreciate you all being here. It means a lot. But really, the best thing you can do to help is to go back home and end U.S. imperialism. Liberating ourselves is *our* job. Ending

U.S. imperialism is *your* job. You're in the belly of the beast." He was right. We've got the corporations and command systems all here, so what are we waiting for? If we recognize colonialism as an interconnected global power system in which we're all differentially located, then we're all engaged in a multifronted battle to dismantle and replace that system. Each particular site of exploitation and oppression requires resistance appropriate to that location. The key is to consciously link these sites and their particular struggles up with each other.

So how do they link up?

I knew you were going to say that. Aside from the military and monetary (thank you, Gil Scott Heron), I think perhaps the most obvious point of connection for anticolonial solidarity activists in the North during the last century has been the domestic struggle against racism. Antiracism in the metropolis is always profoundly interconnected with anticolonialism in the global South, since both depend on the same logic and are effects of the same historical causes. In fact, you could even say they're mutually constitutive. Accordingly, an APOC perspective or tendency makes an important theoretical contribution to anarchist praxis by foregrounding colonialism as a primary category of analysis as well as primary structure of oppression. This works in two directions: emphasizing antiracism with regard to North American society, including within its countercultures, such as anarchist milieus, and second . . .

Wait, aren't anarchist milieus already antiracist by definition?

Of course. They're also antipatriarchal. Therefore there is no manifest racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, or other oppressive behavior within any anarchist space, project, collective, or community that I have ever seen. Nor is there any hegemonic orthodoxy about cultural practices and attitudes. That would be against our principles. So we're all set.

Now are you putting me on?
Yes.

And what was the second direction?
The second direction is emphasizing antiauthoritarian and nonnationalist modes of anticolonial struggle with regard to colonized peoples. This is what I meant before, about making decolonization a far more comprehensive liberation than the problematic concept of the nation-state can achieve. The meaning of freedom has to keep expanding to incorporate more categories of being, more dimensions of existence—I suspect I'm drawing that notion from Angela Davis.

Linking up these two dimensions, then, means viewing contemporary racial issues through the lens of colonial history and politics—not only in the ways we address native sovereignty claims and black civil rights, for example, but also in the ways we understand U.S. military doctrine and immigration policy. Occupying a hinge position, an APOC-oriented politics can create an intervention

concerning precisely the question of the relationship between anarchism and anticolonialism. It's a shift in emphasis, calling for large-scale contextualization in both space and time—an argument for the centrality of decolonization to emancipatory praxis.[4]

OK, OK, calm down, you're basically preaching to the choir here. But you've just said a whole lot of stuff. What do you really want me to take from this?

I'm glad you asked. To sum up, decolonizing anarchism means making anarchism a force for decolonization, and simultaneously dismantling colonial assumptions within our own understanding and practice of anarchism. That requires us to see anarchism as one locally contextualized, historically specific manifestation of a larger antiauthoritarian tradition.

This does two related things. For one, it enables us to recognize processes of decolonization and practices of anticolonial struggle as analogous or parallel to the anarchist tradition (or at least to its aspirations), but without seeing them as imitations of anarchism, and without trying to claim them or pressuring them to take on our mantle. Questions about power, industrialization, and alienation that have been at the heart of the struggle for a postcolonial future have the capacity to shed light on the similar dilemmas that have marked out some of the debates central to the Western anarchist tradition, and vice versa.

The second is that it makes colonialism—as a system constructed from state institutions, global capitalism, and profound racism—a primary component of all our analysis

and strategy. Much of this logic is common to the anti-imperialist politics of the 1970s' radical Left, but with the crucial amendment of antiauthoritarian means and ends. Efforts to facilitate nonstatist concepts of anticolonial liberation along with attempts to dismantle and discredit the racial inequities on which Western empires were built, and by which their resultant societies continue to function, are then two fronts in the same epic emancipatory struggle.

Meaning, in practical terms . . .

That if someone puts out a call that you have the capacity to answer, then go, but only if you're willing to be engaged consistently over the long term. And if you're able to do so with empathy and respect, without abandoning your critical awareness. Above all look to your own house; work at and from your own sites of resistance. While you do that, connect the dots; make the connections explicit. Fight racism. Undermine neoliberal capitalism. Interfere with war making. Resist gentrification and displacement. Subvert norms. Decolonize your mind.

Wait, didn't you forget one?

Oh yeah. Smash the state.