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Extended book review

British labour and the challenge of Israel-Palestine

Paul Kelemen

The British Left and Zionism: History of a Divorce, Manchester University Press: Manchester 2012; 225pp.: 978071908813 £15.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by John McIlroy, *Middlesex University*, UK

The prospects of progress over the Israel-Palestine conflict remain remote. 'The peace process' and 'the Quartet' of great powers' 'two states' solution have been reduced to rhetoric. It seems clear that unless it is forced to do so Israel will not tolerate an autonomous state of Palestine. Negotiations about negotiations function as a time-buying smokescreen for creating facts on the ground through further colonisation of the West Bank and undermining of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Iran and Syria, like Iraq before them, are utilized to procrastinate and distract attention from the problem. At best the Israelis are prepared to concede, and then as a *pis aller* if unforeseen pressure mounted, subaltern self-government in a cantonized Palestinian 'entity', a statelet licensed by and dependent on Israel.

The only leverage on a state where Zionism is stronger than ever, where the political class and electorate have moved right, and where all mainstream parties are committed to militarism, regional hegemony and piecemeal expansion is the lavish economic and military aid from its American patron on which Israel depends. In a situation where America voted against the recent U.N. decision to grant Palestine token 'non member observer status' the second Obama administration seems less likely to pressurise its favourite client than the first. Of course the divisions between the Palestinians, the fragility and timidity of the Palestinian Authority, the fundamentalism, and the West's delegitimation, of Hamas, the Arab states' fear of Israel and collaboration with it, constitute obstacles to advance. They are exacerbated and exploited by the major actor, the regional super power. For forty years Israel has been an intransigent occupier and overlord brutally crushing resistance, breaching international law and violating U.N. resolutions.

Left-wing alternatives take us deeper into utopia. From the 1960s socialists discovered the truth beyond pseudo-history and mythology. They saw Zionism for what it is: a successful ideology with an expansionist dynamic that asserts all Jews globally constitute a nation from which flows a right to colonize an imagined, amorphous 'Land of Israel', bounded for some only by the Nile and Euphrates, and in the process dispossess or oppress its indigenous population. Over the last 30 years socialists have increasingly rejected earlier aspirations to a unitary secular state embracing

Israelis and Palestinians which would entail dismantling Israel and almost inevitably institutionalise new oppressions. Instead they have advocated the right of the Israeli-Hebrew nation that has cohered in the colonial settler state since 1948 to national self determination and argued for two states, with full rights for minorities in each. The current correlation of forces confirms meaningful movement towards radical versions of 'two states' is also off the agenda. In response some have looked to the Arab Spring, particularly change in Egypt, for the beginnings of a solution arising from geographical unity beyond Israel-Palestine and the development of the Arab working class as an independent force. It appears at best an embryonic scenario.

Without diminishing oppression elsewhere in the world, the sustained injustice meted out to the Palestinians and the inertia in resolving it, makes them today's great cause. That should hold particularly true for socialists in Britain whose rulers, but also sections of the left, were complicit in the making and maintenance of the current catastrophe. More than ever the present impasse demands prioritising solidarity work based on withdrawal of Israel to its 1967 boundaries and the creation of an autonomous sovereign Palestine. Solidarity should not preclude criticism. Unlike those who enliven demonstrations, the present writer is neither Hezbollah nor Hamas. I am not a supporter, not even a critical supporter, of opponents of Israel and America such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – my sympathies lie with his opponents in Iran. My enemy's enemy is not necessarily my friend. Socialists should never countenance despotism and reactionary anti-imperialism in the interests of alliances and expediency.

We need rather an independent solidarity movement which does not suppress criticism of some of Israel's assailants, a movement dedicated to deepening and disseminating understanding of the roots of today's tragedy in the face of systematic pro-Israel bias in politics and the media (Philo and Berry 2011). Countervailing pedagogy has been enriched by a number of recent publications which excavate Zionism's irrational foundations (Sand 2009, 2013) and anatomise its contemporary history (Machover 2012, Pappé 2011). *The British Left and Zionism* is a welcome addition to this literature which painstakingly documents the role of the British labour movement in nurturing Zionism and, later, recoiling from its consequences.

An extended first chapter traces the evolution of the Labour Party's infatuation with its own flawed version of Zionism from its endorsement of the Balfour Declaration, which chartered the 'Jewish National Home' in 1917, to the end of World War II. Kelemen locates Labour Zionism in the party's own nationalism and social imperialism. Sympathy derived partly from the religious non-conformism of sections of the party. This was combined with ignorance of, and disinterest in, the 'backward' Arabs. Labour's leaders accepted the Jewish immigrants' spurious Biblical genealogy and

endeavoured to assist refugees from tyranny at minimal cost to British interests. They envisioned the settlers as harbingers of economic progress, trade unionism and cooperation, civilising the Palestinians and bestowing on them the gift of European socialism. Poale Zion, a society federated to the party and linked to the settlers in the Middle East, assiduously asserted the essence of Zionism was realisation of a communitarian socialism cut from the same cloth as British Labourism.

By 1930 the minor differences within Labour's establishment were personified in Ramsay MacDonald's uncritical support for exclusionary colonialism and Sidney Webb's fastidious *carte blanche* to the colonists: 'we do not prevent the Jews from excluding Arab Labour. They can go on doing it but we do not approve of it' (p24). From Herbert Morrison to Richard Crossman many of the party's leading lights were passionate enthusiasts of the project. So were most of Labour's intellectuals, notably H.N. Brailsford and Harold Laski, although there were articulate critics such as the lesser known Norman Bentwich and Tom Reid. By 1944, in the shadow of the Holocaust, the Labour Party was refusing to permit substantial numbers of its victims to enter Britain and its conference was urging that in Palestine the Arabs should be encouraged to move out as more Jews moved in.

This book's strength lies in its integrated address of ideas, politics, policy and context. Kelemen continues by relating Zionism's colonisation of the Labour Party and Arab land to its conquest of Anglo-Jewry. He presents a nuanced, peopled picture of the complex interactions between the old Jewish establishment, Chaim Weitzmann and the official Zionist movement, Poale Zion and the Jewish bourgeoisie and working class. He brings out the belated success of Zionism. Before 1939 limited inroads into the middle class were constrained by the pull left-wing politics exercised on Jewish workers. The German refugee crisis of the late 1930s propelled Poale Zion into closer alignment with the Zionist mainstream. Both promoted Palestine as the necessary destination for Jews fleeing persecution, an emphasis that intensified in the immediate post-war years and blended with organised labour's desire to curb immigration to Britain. The Holocaust, the 1948 conflict, the establishment of the theocratic state, sociological change within Jewish communities and innovations in Jewish education consolidated new identities centred on Israel and cemented by the 1967 war.

Unlike Labour's policies, the positions of the Communist Party (CPGB) were finally formulated in Russia. Unlike Labour, the Comintern determined as early as 1922 that Jewish settlement constituted a counter-revolutionary diversion from the class struggle. In the ultra-left Third Period, 1928-34, it characterized the colonists as agents of imperialism, looked to Arab workers for advance towards socialism and opposed immigration, even after Hitler came to power. With the advent of the popular front, support for Arab demands was combined with continuing calls

for unity between Arab and Jewish workers. Kelemen explains how this well-intentioned but ineffectual mantra, was based on essentialist overestimation of the potential class consciousness of class fractions with different and immediately conflicting interests. Working class in a dilute sense, both groups were anchored in antagonistic structural situations. The Stalinized Comintern neglected material analysis of the active role Jewish workers and their trade union, the Histadrut played, in the mechanisms of colonial labour exclusion in favour of reiterating the divide-and-rule mission of British imperialism. As Kelemen argues the oscillations of Soviet foreign policy provided some space for British Communists to analyse the situation within the confines of Stalinist thought. As the onset of the Cold War illustrated, this was always at the mercy of Russian *raison d'état*. *The British Left and Zionism* provides a graphic account of the CPGB's 1947 turn to supporting the colonists against British imperialism in the interests of Russian imperialism. In the 1940s the CPGB welcomed the establishment of Israel while maintaining a relative silence on ethnic cleansing and the fate of the dispossessed Palestinians.

The 1945 Labour government was more directly responsible. Pro-Arab inclinations, predominantly motivated by defence of Britain's interests and revulsion at settler terrorism, remained subordinate to the need to keep the Americans happy. Although it was the product of successful lobbying of elites at all levels of the party and top down direction, rather than grassroots conversion – Poale Zion was influential in a relatively small number of constituency parties – advocates for Israel were vocal, particularly on the left. The fourth chapter of the book documents how, despite wavering and apologetics, Labour turned a blind eye to U.N. resolutions on Palestinian self-determination, the Israeli violation of the UN's terms of partition and the Palestinians' purgatory in the refugee camps. Alternatively the victims were depicted as architects of their own misfortunes. Labour's left – more than its right, more than any other party – became a cheerleader for the new democratic socialist, civilised and civilising state of Israel.

Disillusion provides the text's second movement. Kelemen relates change to the trajectory from the 1960s of the New Left, which had coalesced in the wake of 1956. He examines the writings of Isaac Deutscher, Marcel Liebman, Ralph Miliband, John Saville and Maxime Rodinson, presented in *New Left Review* and the *Socialist Register* in the context of the 1967 and 1973 wars, and the left turn inside the Labour Party during the more radical 1970s. Attempts by successive leaders, Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan, to maintain Labour's traditional pro-Israel stance proved incapable of stemming pro-Palestinian sentiment fostered by the lengthening occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. Kelemen discusses the growth of an anti-Zionist left in the late 1970s and 1980s among MPs and activists and the appearance of organisations such as the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and the Trade Union Friends of Palestine against the background of Palestinian self-assertion, the

period of terrorism, the *Intifada* and the emergence of a discourse of anti-racism and human rights. Developments in the trade unions, somewhat neglected earlier in the volume, had a consequent impact on Labour Party conference. I would emphasise a little more than Kelemen does the limits of radicalization. Looking back in the 1990s, seven Labour governments had done hardly anything to advance justice in the Middle East and resistance to radicalisation remained, particularly from the Neil Kinnock leadership and subsequently from the New Labour Project.

The final chapter of the book sees a switch in focus. In a powerful essay 'A new anti-semitism?' Kelemen interrogates a variety of literature from the writings of Anthony Julius and Walter Laqueur to the report of a parliamentary inquiry into anti-semitism chaired by the disgraced Labour MP, Denis MacShane. He engages with the assertion that pro-Palestinian sentiment reflects and reinforces hostility to Jews and that in many cases anti-Zionism is equivalent to anti-semitism. His exposition of these arguments is patient and the critique measured. The evidence mustered to sustain a variety of allegations – that declining anti-semitism is a more pressing problem in Britain than rising Islamophobia, that the PSC exhibits the virus, that significant anti-semitism and enthusiasm for Fascism in the Arab world preceded the development of Israel and informs contemporary anti-Zionism – is probed. The verdict is that, 'In the growing literature on the "new anti-semitism" misrepresentation and exaggeration are the norm not the exception' (p192).

The British Left and Zionism is based on synthesis of a extensive range of existing research and an impressive array of archival sources. Its achievement is to compress an accessible, committed discussion of developments in both Britain and the Middle East over almost 80 years into little more than 200 pages – without sacrificing scholarship. The text provides an antidote to and supersedes previous studies (Gorny 1983). It will prove valuable to all readers of *Capital and Class* interested in both Israel-Palestine and the British labour movement. In that context I want to make two concluding points.

First, the origins of the pro-Palestinian current in the labour movement during the 1970s require further research and more oral testimony. Arguably the book makes too much of a continuous, if changing, post-1956 New Left, while the influence of Deutscher, Miliband, Saville and company on the activists of the 1970s and 1980s can be exaggerated. That activism owed much to 1967 and particularly the aftermath of 1973 but it may be more precisely related to the youth radicalisation, which had some repercussions in the labour movement, from the mid-1960s – conventionally designated '1968' – and the influence the growth of Trotskyist ideas had on it. There is always distance and dissonance between ideas and action. But I suspect that Tony Cliff's pamphlet *The Struggle in the Middle East* (1967) had rather more impact on activists in the following decade than the abstract, academic Marxism of *New Left Review*. Rodinson was certainly studied but

initially in an edition published by the American Trotskyists who also reprinted the work of Abram Leon.

These ideas reached beyond the membership of the left groups and were taken into the Labour Party by sympathisers and ex-members who were probably as numerous and became more embedded than the organised *entrists*. The influence an often vulgar Trotskyism had on the 'municipal socialist' supporters of Palestine was not always benign. The close relations Ted Knight and Ken Livingstone maintained with Gaddafi's client Gerry Healy and the Workers Revolutionary Party show that. Then as now, there was more than a little romanticism combined with 'anti-imperialist' solidarity with dictators, Arab chauvinism and reactionary Islam. The 'secular democratic state' demand with its effective denial of rights to the Israeli-Hebrew people was always problematic: it is still preached today by the Socialist Workers Party.

Second, there is good reason, at least in terms of rigorous historiography, for halting history in 1995. However Kelemen's abbreviated comment, 'once the New Labour project had gathered momentum it was the pro-Israeli orientation that again gained the upper hand in defining the party's stance' (p179) merits amplification two decades on. Tony Blair went on to reverse the real but restricted progress the party had made. He exploited its fragility and eclecticism by decisively debilitating the left that is the subject of this book. He championed a different, neoliberal variant of Labour Zionism which marginalised Israel as a communitarian social democracy and welcomed Israel as a regional imperialism inextricably aligned with exporting democracy, opening markets and Anglo-American financial and geopolitical interests, and their immunity to international law. Buttressed by the 'threat' of Iraq, Iran and by 7/11, Blair's espousal of America's global supremacy, and the doctrine of 'liberal interventionism', meshed with his uncritical support for a ruthless, crusading Fortress Israel, an Outremer for a new age (for an apologia, see Greene 2013). Neoliberal Zionism exemplified in Israeli attacks on Syria and the Sudan was personified in Blair's refusal as Prime Minister to even call for a ceasefire when Israel again invaded Lebanon. It marked his subsequent role as a partisan conduit for the Quartet's directives to the hapless Palestinian Authority while simultaneously contributing to Arab progress by brokering investment by the American bank which employed him and demanding a 'pre-emptive strike' on Iran.

The chances of the British left contributing successfully to advance towards an equitable Middle East settlement are slimmer than they were in 1995. It is difficult to envisage Labour's leadership around Ed Miliband transforming things. The left in and outside the party is weak and fragmented. Trade unions' pro-Palestinian policies represent a step forward. But the gap between resolutions and action still yawns. Kelemen quotes the Israeli Ambassador to Britain reflecting that from his perspective things are 'good' between governments but not in 'the basement' (p207). That

is where we need to start rebuilding and intellectuals have a role to play and a responsibility to exercise in that rebuilding. Matters have only marginally improved since the late Edward Said (1993: 74) observed twenty years ago: ‘fear of speaking out about one of the greatest injustices in modern history has hobbled, blinkered, muzzled many who know the truth and are in a position to serve it. For despite the abuse and vilification that any outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights and self-determination earns for him or herself, the truth deserves to be spoken, represented by an unafraid and compassionate intellectual’. A literary critic whose imagination, passion and commitment is sorely missed, Said might have reflected that dramatic tragedy ultimately affirms a morally ordered universe and reconnects with cosmic equity. We can do more than hope life emulates literature. We can speak truth to power and in doing so discharge our responsibility to help secure justice for the Palestinians.

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