

Resisting Genocide in Gaza: Is a New Political Imaginary Possible?

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Watching the protests opposing genocide in Gaza on college campuses across the US, and which are now spreading like wildfire to other Western countries, one is struck by the visual of a mass of people occupying a public space in a way that transforms its meaning. Most recently, the sight of protestors in the encampment at the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA), blocked by a line of police, and with an outer ring of sympathetic onlookers could not be a clearer sign that a major shift is occurring. It made literal the divisions within the body politic.^[1] They are beginning to produce a reckoning with the fundamental structures of imperialism and genocide in which universities—and by extension, their governments—are complicit.

Yet the current moment cannot be summarised in one image. If at all, we must maintain a dual perspective: one that can capture the related contradiction that threatens to extinguish youthful hope with suicidal conflict. The view of Iranian rockets streaking across the sky in response to Israel's fatal bombing of the Iranian consulate in Syria is the clearest demonstration yet. While Palestinians face an ongoing genocide, the region, and perhaps the entire world, remains on the precipice.

Nevertheless, to a trained eye, the campus protests reveal a shift that could facilitate a reordering of the global order. They echo the famous choice: "socialism or barbarism". The idea that the protests themselves are a harbinger of a new form of antisemitism fits into a neo-McCarthyite narrative, which seeks to squash any dissent with the existing order. The injustices it entails are materialised in the genocidal onslaught against the Palestinian people. But only in the fevered imagination of the far Right, which has gripped the Western establishment, does resistance become domination.

Instead, the very nature of the campus protests invokes a transnational dimension that unsettles the conjunction of the nation with the State. It is a political structure that forever contains the implicit potential

for genocide.^[2] Although there is an important debate to be had about the terms, slogans, and rhetoric of the protestors, dismissing the new political reality that their collective action brings into being represents a stunning misunderstanding. In fact, they have induced a tentative yet no less powerful rupture in our imagination.^[3] There may be no comparative political form that can compete with the hegemony of the nation State as it currently exists. But by their very nature, the protests opposing genocide in Gaza in the heart of Western imperialism call into question key assumptions behind State sovereignty. They challenge the logic of territorial power that is ramping up geopolitical antagonisms around the world.

The Rise of a New Form of Competitive Imperialism

At the same time, the logic immanent to the protests must be carefully juxtaposed with the tremendous scale of the forces that they confront. Specifically, what is the modern form of imperialism? Much of the mainstream commentary has focused on the ostensible new fault lines between geopolitical blocs represented by the collective West and 'emerging powers' such as China and Russia. But there has been far less analysis of the degree to which these divisions index changes in domestic relations between State and society. In this context, Trotsky's concept of "uneven and combined development" is useful for grasping the extent to which the 'spontaneous' campus protests are a direct response to the unravelling global order.

Despite apparently occupying opposing sides of the geopolitical spectrum, Benjamin Netanyahu's and Vladimir Putin's projects can be compared precisely because they represent an implicit, if not explicit, understanding that old arrangements under US hegemony have become unworkable. Even taking the risk of mobilising society for war may be necessary to stay ahead of emerging competitive trends in an increasingly anarchic world system. In this regard, they have staked their political survival on the logic of imperialism and genocide in the case of Putin and

Netanyahu, respectively. Their aim is to stymie regional competition, which otherwise threatens to undermine their aggressive national projects.

By framing imperialism in this way, we must acknowledge that we are modifying Lenin's analysis for our current conjuncture. From his early 20th century vantage point, imperialism divided the world into blocs in which predominantly Western metropolises had control over vast colonised zones. But the contemporary reality of imperialism requires us to grasp the extent to which this indifferent form of territorial conquest has been curtailed. It has been replaced by an anarchic system of individual States with regional and historical tendencies towards revanchism.

Despite the apparent absence of universalising ambitions among emerging powers, however, the situation is no less dangerous. It still implies dramatic suppression of domestic dissent along with the ever-present possibility of nuclear annihilation, depending on the countries involved. The recurring tendency towards crisis within capitalism exacerbates this tendency towards geopolitical conflict. Amid these divisions, there is fertile ground for exceptional States, including fascist regimes, to consolidate. Accordingly, any analysis of competitive imperialism today must take seriously the extent to which it anticipates fundamental changes in relations between State and society.

A Pluralistic Vision and Its Tactics

The campus protests opposing active genocide in Gaza are relevant here not because they anticipate a 'multipolar' world. Rather, it is because they reveal the specific outlines of an alternative order within the historical centre of imperialism. The diversity of political and social forces involved in the opposition to genocide in Gaza in the West contain an implicit pluralism. It unsettles the far Right's exclusive discourse around nationhood. In this regard, diasporas, while intimately tied to nationalisms, can also provoke an intense reckoning with the legacy of Western imperialism that has produced specific forms of mass migration. Complex historical processes have created the core constituency behind the current protests. It is nothing less than haunting to see college students cite the annihilation of their own extended families as their reason for protesting.

It would be tempting to fold the resulting resistance epitomised by the Gaza protests into the teleological self-realisation of the US especially as a multiracial democracy. But the real work requires thinking through the ways in which the protests unsettle national

boundaries, including the lines demarcating a republic with universalising ambitions. As Kristin Ross (2015) put it, the historical choice has been between a universal republic or a republican universalism. Similarly, the current resistance invokes a global imagination of solidarity that has a historical parallel in the First International. The latter represented the material organisation designed to achieve the slogan "Workers of the world, unite!"

The analogy is further reinforced by the way in which the very tactics of the campus protestors recall the barricades exemplified by the Revolutions of 1848. Though not on the same scale, the mobile techniques of today's protestors compel us to question the assumption that the 'infrastructural power' of the State, to borrow Michael Mann's term, has increased to a totalising extent. Has it snuffed out any form of popular democratic resistance outside of carefully managed elections? Even Friedrich Engels, a veteran of 1848, eventually answered in the affirmative. He anticipated the barriers that would inhibit a direct path to the halls of State power.

Or as he put it in his prophetic 1895 introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France*, "The rebellion of the old style, the street fight behind barricades, which up to 1848 gave the final decision, has become antiquated". In contrast, the campus protests today remind us of the material conditions under which classical Marxism could envision revolution as an extension, rather than displacement, of democracy. Such a perspective depends on extra-constitutional struggles distinct from the style of compact armed resistance that precipitated the militarisation of 20th century revolutionary politics (Traverso 2016: 76).

Class and Nation

The question of State power that eventually captured the minds and imaginations of radical thinkers further involved a separation that became untenable. As the historian Robert Binkley (1963) put it:

When [the First International] began it was a stage set for the cooperation of almost any radical or labor leader, from Mazzini with his idea of nationalism and republicanism to the English trade unionists who wanted continental laborers to refuse supplies to strike-breaking English employers. Marx contested the leadership with Mazzini when it began, with Bakunin when it ended. This transit is a significant indication of the crystallising of European radicalism in a form that accepted the centralised state as a means of action, separated the conflict of labor and capital from other conflicts, and reconciled itself to a philosophy of conflict. (126)^[4]

We may question Binkley's assumption that "conflict" itself could be transcended through an alternative vision, such as a federative polity. Priscilla Robertson (1952), a pioneering historian of the Revolutions of 1848, argued that the protest wave and its suppression by the ruling class demonstrated a fundamental naivete in assuming that the emerging interests of the proletariat could be reconciled with the bourgeoisie (6).

Nevertheless, the idea that national struggles contain a class dimension, and vice versa, is useful for reviving an old problematic that posed these interconnections. The campus struggle today exists in an ambient context in which multiple forms of resistance to genocide, imperialism, climate change, and capitalism overlap. The mental world of 1848 may have disappeared. Diverse struggles for republican independence, against monarchies, and for the extension of democracy along class lines were suppressed by the 20th century nationalisation of politics. But the heterogeneous forms of resistance emerging today hearken back to a world that may find more useful reference points in the comparative pluralism of the 'long nineteenth century'.

Questions for the Periphery

At the same time, the paradox of class and nation engenders contradictions specific to the regions of the world we inhabit, especially the broad division of the world between core and periphery. Shifting from the current site of protests in the West to the global periphery raises different yet related questions. If we are to think about Sri Lanka's own place amid the current context of geopolitical antagonism, then we must be bold enough to produce an alternative imaginary; one in which struggles around the varying national questions of oppressed peoples intersect with hard economic questions such as self-sufficiency. The resulting convergence could contribute to a new compass to guide emancipatory politics on a global level.

For example, campus struggles in the West are raising complex questions around divestment and the underlying financial mechanisms through which universities are complicit in genocide. They have found parallels not only in the anti-apartheid movement, but also more recent calls to divest from fossil fuels. The resulting question of climate change posed by the latter intersects with debt distressed countries and their efforts to discover a new development model by challenging global financial capitalism.

Working through these intersections, we can conceive efforts to achieve self-sufficiency as a necessary means for containing not only the depredations of global capitalism, especially dispossession, but also the

militaristic tendencies that produce the landscape of competitive imperialism with which Sri Lanka must also reckon. The genocide in Gaza entails unexpected connections both in the form of domination and the resistance it inspires.^[5] In general, they require us to ask, what is the popular democratic basis on which people mobilise across the global divide between centre and periphery? In this regard, like resistance to genocidal imperialism, self-sufficiency cannot easily be incorporated into a 'multipolar' imagination. The latter leaves untouched the capitalist parameters of the relations between State and society. Any serious effort to achieve self-sufficiency would in fact require their transformation.

Similarly, domestic resistance to imperialism and genocide in the West calls to mind other forms of horizontal solidarity between struggles, from Palestine to Kashmir, and from Kurdistan to Xinjiang. In our own Asian context, these imply an alternative political imagination capable of distinguishing working people of diverse character and background from the repressive regimes that they resist. The opposition of oppressed groups implies a countertendency that aims to expand freedoms, above and beyond the question of the concrete political forms that resistance may acquire. Of course, when engaging with the latter—especially the historical unfolding of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka—we must be cautious about the parallels that we construct between genocide in Gaza and other forms of State violence. We recognise that the former takes shape within a complex historical project (Zionism) and global conjuncture. Still, in broadly asserting the manifold interconnections between the struggles of oppressed peoples, we can articulate a Left position on Sri Lanka's relationship to the global resistance to genocide in Gaza.

What the 'Freedom of Peoples' Means Today

In parallel, this resistance is producing a broader reckoning with the establishment in the West. It is likely to have dramatic implications for how declining hegemonic powers relate to the rest of the world, as much as it involves the transformation of relations between State and society in the core countries themselves. In time, the logic of solidarity may put pressure on the governments of creditor countries to increase the room for manoeuvre of debt distressed countries such as Sri Lanka to pursue the interests of their own working people.

Currently, of course, it may be difficult to conceive the inter-connections between war and debt, insofar as the genocide in Gaza demands urgent attention.

Nevertheless, looming geopolitical antagonism sets the stage for harsher treatment of debtor countries such as Sri Lanka under radicalised regimes of austerity. In this context, denting the insulation of the Western ruling class by forcing it to reckon with genocide in Gaza would have no less a profound effect on its dealings with other countries. It would present a fundamental challenge to its enduring neocolonial attitudes on other issues such as debt restructuring.

Rosa Luxemburg (2003) long ago recognised the connections. As she put it, the incorporation of non-capitalist parts of the globe through the imposition of an ‘extraverted’ form of accumulation is “determined by factors such as oppressive taxation, war, or squandering and monopolisation of the nation’s land, and thus belongs to the spheres of political power and criminal law no less than with economics.” (376) To an extent, these issues have been decoupled. The genocide in Gaza expresses a violent form of colonialism that is orders of magnitude worse than the economic pressure now applied to many other countries.

But the universal questions it contains also reveal multiple trends in the unravelling of the global order that may be pertinent to other places. In this regard, insight into the contours of universalism represented by struggles cutting across national boundaries can strengthen the ideological horizon of popular democratic forces. Drawing out their many strands can produce new forms of solidarity. Only the latter can restrain the excesses of powerful States in the core, while creating space for movements in the periphery to demand more from their own States, especially in terms of welfare and redistribution.

From Sri Lanka’s own viewpoint, participating under this common horizon may paradoxically require the language of national liberation struggle to resist the depredations of global financial capitalism. But if the fateful separation entailed by delinking class from the national question after 1848 tells us anything, it is that only the conjuncture determines the progressive or reactionary character of a struggle. *National liberation only has meaning insofar as it remains a question of practice applied to a concrete conjuncture.* The Left must internalise the realisation that the nation is not its *telos*. Instead, as the fate of Kibbutz-style socialism in Israel shows us, what once appeared as an emancipatory dream can become a nightmare. In other words, even as we recognise the need to enlarge the scope for policy autonomy, we must simultaneously resist the rigid conceptual boundaries of the nation. They acquire their most oppressive shape in the horrors occurring in Gaza.

Meanwhile, the repressive apparatus in the US may have temporarily dispersed frontline campus protests opposing genocide. Still, by engaging the memory of their very existence, we can draw other lessons capable of resisting the tendency to nationalise politics. That process engenders a zero-sum battle between the competing great powers; a conflict under which dependent authoritarian States draw a similar impetus. In contrast, the embedded universalism of the campus struggles reminds us that freedom and justice are entwined in the connections that we articulate between multiple axes of oppression, from class to gender to nation. There is much organising work to be done. But like lightning in the sky, however ephemeral, the recent protests have illuminated a collective imaginary; one that can strengthen resistance to the deadly tendency towards anarchic geopolitical conflict amid the unravelling of Western hegemony.

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Notes

[1] This essay can also be seen as an extension and modification of my previous one on “Gaza: Into the Abyss” in *Polity* Volume 11, Issue Number 2 (December 2023): 9-10. In that piece I argued, “We are far from the world of the Battle of Algiers”. I maintain that the global conjuncture of the anticolonial struggles of the long 1960s is not necessarily as revealing an analogy for today as that of the 1930s or even the run up to World War I. Nevertheless, considering the campus protests and the surprising depth and extent of the broader opposition to genocide in Gaza, we must always be mindful of the subterranean trend of resistance. It has erupted with dramatic force, compelling us to rethink the global trajectory.

[2] For a theoretical explanation of the darker implications of the homogenising tendencies of the Nation-State, see Poulantzas’ (2014) chapter on “The Nation” in his final work, *State, Power, Socialism*. Or as he puts it:

This becomes still clearer if we bear in mind that the State establishes the peculiar relationship between *history* and *territory*, between the spatial and the temporal matrix. In fact, the modern nation makes possible the intersection of these matrices and thus serves as their point of junction; the capitalist State marks out the frontiers when it constitutes what is within (the people-

nation) by homogenizing the before and the after of the content of this enclosure. National unity or the modern unity thereby becomes *historicity of a territory and territorialization of a history*—in short, a territorial national tradition concretized in the nation-State; the markings of a territory become indicators of history that are written into the State. The enclosures implicit in the constitution of the modern people-nation are only so awesome because they are also fragments of a history that is totalized and capitalized by the State. Genocide is the elimination of what become ‘foreign bodies’ of the national history and territory: it expels them beyond space and time. (Poulantzas 2014: 114)

[3] For an elegant explication of the way in which principle can be raised through practice, see Kristin Ross (2015) on the meaning of the 1871 Commune in Paris:

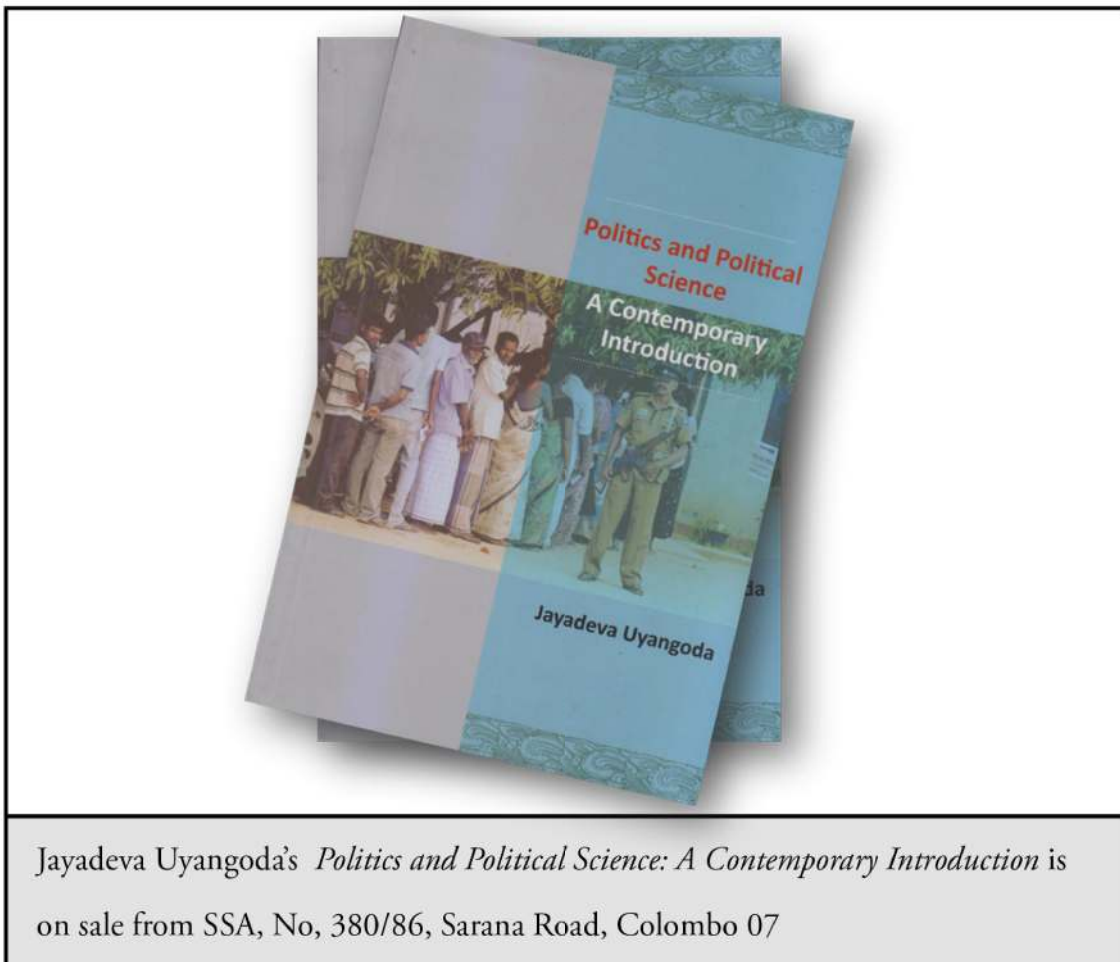
The French word *survie* evokes this nicely: a life beyond life. Not the memory of the event or its legacy, although some form of these are surely already in the making, but its prolongation, every bit as vital to the event’s logic as the initial acts of insurrection in the streets of the city. It is a continuation of the combat by other

means. In the dialectic of the lived and the conceived—the phrase is Henri Lefebvre’s—the thought of a movement is generated only with and after it: unleashed by the creative energies and excess of the movement itself. Actions produce dreams and ideas, and not the reverse. (17)

[4] Priscilla Robertson (1952) locates this tendency even earlier, in the suppression and transmutation of the Revolutions of 1848:

It was therefore often difficult for a man to decide whether his greatest loyalty should be to his class or to his nation, but whichever he decided, after 1848, his loyalty was buttressed by hatred of opposing groups. What was lost, in 1848, was the idea that classes and nations had anything to give to each other. (7)

[5] For example, the connection between the Adani Group in India and the Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit. Meanwhile the same multinational conglomerate is involved in efforts to compete over the fire sale of Sri Lanka’s strategic resources, including its electricity generation and transmission. In this sense, it reveals new forms of monopoly capital allied to the State amid the current period of competitive imperialism.



03rd May, 2024

H.E. Julie Chung
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US Government, stop the violent repression of students fighting for a Free Palestine!

The Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF) of Sri Lanka, unequivocally condemns the violent repression and arrests of hundreds of university students across America, who are calling for an end to the US-backed, Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people, and for their universities to divest from direct investments in companies doing business in, or with Israel. Some universities such as Yale, for example, are calling for the divestment from military weapons manufacturers that aid Israel's siege on Gaza. At the University of Columbia, students are targeting tech companies such as Google, which has a cloud computing deal with the Government of Israel.

Since the 17th of April, when students from the Ivy League, University of Columbia, set up Gaza Solidarity Encampments on their university lawn, students from several other universities across America have followed suit. Among them are other Ivy League universities like Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Cornell, UPenn, who have joined the fight to Free Palestine. Over 1000 students have been arrested from across the USA since April 17.

In a particularly violent crackdown, the Atlanta police used tear gas, tasers and allegedly rubber bullets, to break up the Gaza Encampment at Emory University, Georgia. The Police had even wrestled down an Emory Professor, pinned her to the ground, and arrested her. Another professor too was violently arrested, along with many students. Green Party Presidential Candidate, Jill Stein was also violently arrested from a protest at Washington University this week.

Protesting students in the US have vowed that they will continue protesting till their demands are met, and that arrests and violent repression will only help mobilise more students to the movement.

The IUSF calls on the American Government to stop the violent repression of protesting university students and faculty, now! We unconditionally stand alongside fellow university students and faculty in the US, in their fight to free Palestine. We reiterate their calls for their universities to divest from Israel, thereby stopping their supporting of the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people, and to ensure an amnesty to all students and faculty arrested, or facing disciplinary action in connection with these protests. Join the fight! Free Palestine!

In solidarity,
Madushan Chandrajith,
Convenor,
Inter University Students' Federation - Sri Lanka