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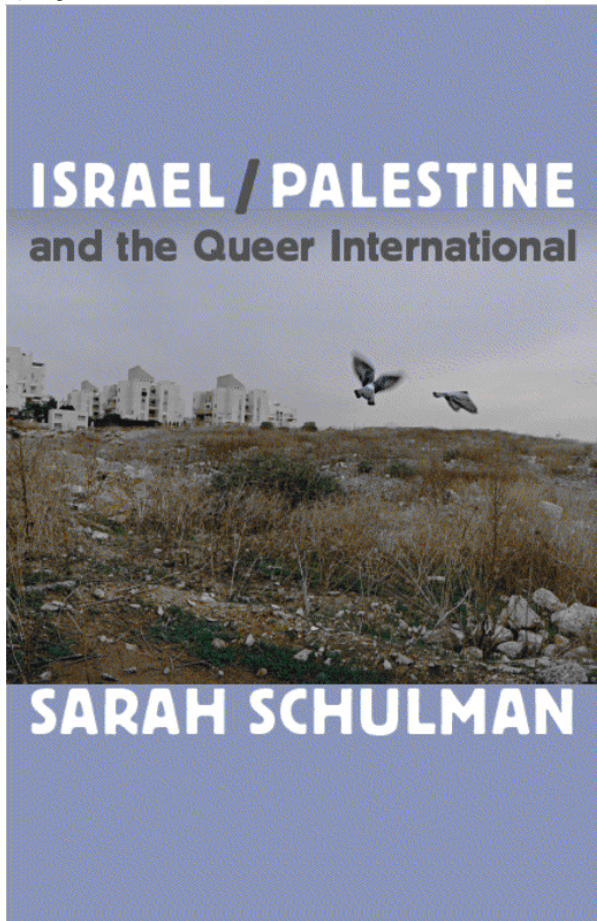
Art, Music & Culture

Limited solidarity with Palestine in Schulman's "Queer International"

Jack Irmas

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Sarah Schulman became well known among US Palestine solidarity activists following the publication of her 2011 opinion piece "Israel and Pinkwashing" in *The New York Times*.

In that article, Schulman criticizes Israel over its employment of a western gay rights discourse to cover for its oppression of the Palestinian underclass. In her recent book *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (2012), Schulman allows us to see how a well-known LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) activist and playwright became involved in Palestine solidarity activism by taking us on her journey to Palestine and back.

Schulman's story begins after she received an invitation to present the keynote address at Tel Aviv University's LGBT studies conference. After much consideration, however, she declined the offer in order to honor the academic boycott of Israel, choosing to embark upon a "solidarity visit" to Palestine instead.

After declining the invitation to speak at Tel Aviv University, Schulman resolves to learn more about the situation in Palestine and to define her role as an American LGBT activist interested in the issue. "Now that I have entered into a relationship with Palestine, I am a citizen of what I am thinking of as 'the queer international,' a play on history, words, and movements past and present," Schulman writes. She explains that she adapted this term in part from the gay international project first criticized by Palestinian academic Joseph Massad in "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World" (*Public Culture*, Volume 14, Number 2, Spring 2002).

Gay international

In his 2007 book *Desiring Arabs*, Massad writes that while colonialism and Western capital have "transformed most aspects of daily living" in Arab countries, they have "failed to impose a European heterosexual regime on all Arab men." He asserted that those who have accepted western notions of sexuality "remain a minuscule minority among those men who engage in same-sex relations and who do not identify as 'gay' nor express a need for gay politics," which the gay international works to change.

Yet the "universalization of 'gay rights,'" and therefore the label "gay" to describe all men who engage in same-sex relations, Massad argues, "insinuated itself into the prevailing US discourse on human rights," and was launched "on an international scale" primarily through "Western male white-dominated organizations."

"It is these missionary tasks, the discourse that produces them, and the organizations that represent them" — including the International Lesbian and Gay Association and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission — that together form what Massad has dubbed the "gay international."

While Schulman claims not to be part of the gay international, her thoughts and actions throughout the book make it difficult to see how the queer international differs from the gay one except in name.

For example, Schulman asserts that "in every country and every ethnicity group, the perception of heterosexuals as 'neutral, natural, objective, [and] value free' ... is a problem for queers." This belief exposes the gay international framework in which Schulman operates, given her insistence that heterosexuals (and thus homosexuals) exist universally, rather than derive from specifically western notions of sexuality.

Straight boycott?

From the outset, Schulman imposes a western sexual category on PACBI, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, by referring to it as the “straight boycott apparatus.” She even names and labels particular individuals she meets as “straight,” a category they presumably did not assign to themselves in her presence.

While Schulman does acknowledge that this misrecognition stems from entrenched orientalist imaginings, she does *not* recognize that such naming is itself an imperial imposition. Furthermore, far from offering solidarity to PACBI, Schulman attempts to pressure the campaign’s leadership into publicly acknowledging the universality of western norms of sexuality as compensation for her support. She terms this “mutual recognition.”

This limited backing of Palestinian decolonization alludes to the fact that Schulman is willing to allow Palestinians to resist physical and cultural imperialism but only on her terms and in a manner that does not upset her gay internationalist world view. Thus, it seems that the queer international will offer its support not only after resistance to *homoimperialism* is stricken from the agenda, but also following confirmation that those it is interested in supporting believe that this form of cultural imperialism does not even exist.

When asked by Israeli journalist Udi Aloni before her “solidarity visit” whether her plan to press PACBI to publicly support queers could be considered cultural imperialism, Schulman asserts that because a number of Palestinians have accepted western notions of sexuality, gay internationalism is no longer an imperial project.

Yet how is this the case if Schulman must twist the arms of those struggling against Israeli colonialism to publicly support gay internationalism? While her sincerity throughout the book is laudable, it is unfortunate that Schulman interacts with those resisting imperialism by attempting to limit what they can and cannot resist. This is especially so as she herself has called attention to the use of a western sexuality discourse to maintain colonial power relations in her famous *New York Times* op-ed.

Modified anti-colonial movement

The second part of *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* takes place in the aftermath of Schulman’s “solidarity visit” to Palestine, and focuses on the US tour that she organizes for Palestinian queers to speak to American LGBTQ audiences.

After the tour’s success in highlighting the commonality between Americans and Palestinians identifying as LGBTQ, Schulman writes about the creation of Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (PQBDs) and their desire to alter the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle to be “a more progressive, secular, feminist and pro-gay Palestinian movement.”

Schulman’s role in the creation of this organization seems to be substantial given the chronology that she provides and which leads to its establishment. Her vision for a modified Palestinian anti-colonial movement against Israel clearly derives from her experience in the US, where certain identities have

been mobilized to enact piecemeal social change. Just as in the US, however, without an interrogation of the foundations upon which these settler states rest, any social change will remain at a superficial level.

Israel/Palestine and the Queer International is an interesting read for those concerned with gay internationalism, the politics of transnational solidarity and the direction in which US discourse on the Palestine issue will turn following the eventual demise of the two-state solution's hegemony.

In recent years, there has been a rise in popularity of multiculturalism and neoliberal equality in the US, which has led to the decline of local — including indigenous — dissent even as the fundamentals of the power structure have remained in place.

In *The New Jim Crow*, for example, Michelle Alexander asserts that the US has been officially “color-blind” since the civil rights era. This “colorblind solution” to American racism, has sated the consciences of liberals who find overt racism abhorrent. Yet colorblindness without structural reform is far from praiseworthy given that its promotion both conceals and serves to reinforce the racial hierarchy characterized by mass incarceration, or what Alexander terms the “New Jim Crow.”

It would therefore not be surprising to see greater support among liberal Americans like Schulman for the adoption of multiculturalism and superficial equality to solve what is known in US liberal discourse as the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

And for that, those who are truly interested in decolonization in Palestine and elsewhere should take note.

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Israel/Palestine and the Queer International

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Comments

Jack Irmias offers an

Permalink Submitted by Pal Cine (not verified) on Thu, 08/01/2013 - 15:52

Jack Irmias offers an important critique of the Schulman project. Schulman has arrogated herself to

the status of a veritable "queer" movement leader in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli struggle after only having been involved, as it were, in that struggle for just a few short years. Her new book is evidence that Schulman's knowledge of that struggle's history, of Zionist philosophy and politics, and of Palestinian society and culture are really quite minimal. Who, then, is catapulting her into the spotlight, promoting her book, and suggesting we emulate the practical implications of her views? And why is this happening?

By the same token, Joseph Massad's views about sexuality and gender should not be taken at face value. They do in many respects reinforce patriarchal gender norms of which countless, quite solidly anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist Palestinians have been critical from perspectives that do not reproduce Schulman's fissiparous universalism. So, when we critique conservative multiculturalism and its opportunistic exploitation of gender and sexual oppression in Palestine/Israel, we mustn't throw out the feminist baby with the Western neoliberal bathwater. Gender and sexual positionings and identities are primally ingrained and historically longstanding; they predate capitalist imperialism and "Western" colonialism and, as Irmas avers regarding racial positionings and identities, must be challenged ALONG WITH the challenge to those overarching structural conditions, of which they have become integral parts.

Ironic that this critique

[Permalink](#) Submitted by palestinesolidarity (not verified) on Fri, 08/02/2013 - 04:14

Ironic that this critique from the left arrives at the same time as this critique from the right:

<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com...>

Sarah Schulman is one of the most principled and dedicated contributors to the Palestinian solidarity movement. What has Jack Irmas done for the struggle? It's very easy to point fingers from Columbia. Fortunately, Schulman will continue doing her great work and not fall for the cynicism and holier-than-though-more-radical-than-though syndrome.

ad hominem?

[Permalink](#) Submitted by Marc (not verified) on Sun, 08/04/2013 - 19:56

ad hominem?

Massad's conclusions echo a

[Permalink](#) Submitted by Wahdat al Hadaf (not verified) on Fri, 08/02/2013 - 13:13

Massad's conclusions echo a sentiment shared across post-Colonial Africa. When Robert Mugabe characterizes homosexuality as a "White Man's Disease" and that "Americans should keep their ... stupidity and foolish ways to themselves, out of Zimbabwe. Let them be gay in the US, Europe and elsewhere," he draws from the same well as Professor Massad. These views are widespread (shared even by Mugabe's political opponents), evolving as they do from Colonial-era attempts to maintain sexual behavioral norms for white settlers, which rightly associated such behaviors with Europeans in the minds of the autochthonous population. I imagine Sarah Schulman is rightly viewed no differently.

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