

## **Marx and the Question of Palestine**

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### **ABSTRACT**

May 15th is recognized by Palestinians around the world as *Nakba* Day (*Nakba* meaning ‘catastrophe’ in Arabic), marking the anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel on the same date in 1948, and the escalation of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Within 2 years (1947-1949), 15,000 Palestinians were killed, 40% of the Palestinian population became refugees, and Zionist forces had taken over 78% of historic Palestine. In 2025, 77 years later, we are witnessing the mass genocide of the Palestinian people and the destruction of Palestinian land by the Zionist state and their allies—the United States being one of the most prominent. In this paper, the history and current state of the Palestinian genocide and the pro-Palestinian movement will interact with Karl Marx’s theories on superstructure and infrastructure, class struggle, and class consciousness. Positioning Zionists as the oppressive, ruling class and Palestinians as the oppressed will explain the influence of class struggle and economic infrastructure on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and the pro-Palestinian movement that has followed.

### **HISTORY OF PALESTINE**

In the 1600s, poet and colonist, George Sandys spoke of Palestine as “a land that flowed of milk and honey . . . adorned with beautiful mountains and luxurious valleys; the rocks producing excellent waters; no part empty of delight or profit” (Said 1980:11). Said (1980) also notes that the native Palestinian population was composed of people who all spoke Arabic and were mainly Sunni Muslims, with a smaller sum of the population being Christians, Druzes, and Shiite Muslim. Native Palestinians were the prideful caretakers of their land and were responsible for the construction of the major cities in Palestine—Nablus, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Acre, Jaffa, Jericho, Ramallah, Hebron, and Haifa. Palestinian intellectuals and professionals organized social, economic, and cultural life around the issues of independence and anti-colonialism, which gave rise to a distinctly Palestinian and

pervasive form of resilience (Giacaman 2020; Said 1980). A Palestinian identity was created in opposition to the Ottoman Empire, British rule, and Jewish colonization. Despite the presence of native Palestinians and their efforts to maintain their land, outsiders viewed Palestine as empty land and deemed Palestinians as invisible (Embrick and Williams 2023).

World War I marked the beginning stages of serious Zionist planning for the colonization of Palestine (Amar-Dahl 2017; Said 1980). Zionism emerged because of the rise of antisemitism in Europe, to resolve the Jewish people's statelessness, and to preserve the collective existence of the Jewish people (Amar-Dahl 2017). This marked a shift in focus from religion toward nationalism amongst Zionists. Leaders of Zionist organizations (Tahhan 2018) believed it to be "the principle that Palestine should be reconstructed as the National Home for the Jewish People," (Said 1980:13) and through intensive Zionist lobbying, led British authorities to declare that the Jewish people were capable of giving Palestine "a place in the modern family of nations" (Said 1980:13). Other locations, such as South America and East Africa, were considered potential homes for the Jewish people; however, Palestine was selected because of Jewish connection to the Holy Land.

In November 1917, Arthur Balfour issued the Balfour Declaration which declared its aim to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine and was included in the terms of the British Mandate for Palestine after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, (Tahhan 2018). The initiation of the mandate expedited European Jews' immigration to Palestine. From 1914 to 1927, the Jewish population increased from 11% to 28% (Said 1980). The mandate made an apathetic attempt to protect the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish population in Palestine but refused to even acknowledge the native Palestinian population as anything other than non-Jewish (Said 1980; Tahhan 2018). Many speculate what influenced the Balfour Declaration (Tahhan 2018), and scholars debate that it was either to solve the Jewish problem, maintain British influence in the region, appease Zionist lobbying, and/or garner Jewish support in the war. The Balfour Declaration resulted in violent clashes between Jewish immigrants and native Palestinians and is cited as the precursor for the *Nakba* (or

‘catastrophe’). The Arab Revolt, which lasted from 1936 to 1939, destroyed more than 2,000 Palestinian homes, the placement of 9,000 Palestinians in concentration camps, and the deportation of 200 Palestinian nationalist leaders (Chomsky and Pappé 2015; Tahhan 2018).

By November 1947, the British government turned over control of Palestine to the United Nations, ending its colonial project, due to the violence of Zionist armed forces. The United Nations adopted Resolution 181 which recommended a two-state solution for Palestine. Before the adoption of the resolution, Jews made up less than one-third of the population in Palestine and owned about 6% of Palestinian land (Said 1980). The United Nations and Resolution 181 granted Zionists 55% of Palestinian land, depriving Palestinians of key agricultural lands, seaports from Haifa to Jaffa, and major cities (Chomsky and Pappé 2015; Said 1980). This resolution was a confirmation of the political and economic power of Zionism. Despite being granted 55% of Palestinian land, Zionist leaders recognized that the creation of a monoethnic, monocultural Jewish state would not be achieved by purchasing land and homes but by force (Chomsky and Pappé 2015). An idea that garnered fervent support amongst Israeli leaders. Therefore, the plans for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine were finalized on 10 March 1948, and on that same evening, Israeli military troops prepared for the systematic expulsion of Palestinians from large portions of the country (Chomsky and Pappé 2015). The order provided detailed instructions on how to utilize large-scale intimidation tactics, bombardment of villages, and explosives to remove Palestinians from their land and prevent them from returning (Said 2015; Chomsky and Pappé 2015). 15 May 1948 marked the official end of the British Mandate and the beginning of the Israeli state. Annually, May 15th is recognized amongst Palestinians as a National Day of Remembrance for the loss of their homeland; for Israelis, this day commemorates their independence. Within 6 months, 750,000 Palestinians had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and 11 neighborhoods were forcefully uninhabited (Chomsky and Pappé 2015).

In 1948, a Jewish homeland was achieved via violent attacks on Palestinian political leadership, financial supporters, means of sustenance (wells, mills, land, etc.), and vital means of

production (Chomsky and Pappé 2015). Regardless of their victory, the Zionist project continues. The *Naksa* (or ‘the set-back’ in Arabic), commonly referred to as the 1967 Arab-Israeli War or Six-Day War, increased Israeli control of Palestine from 55% to 85%. Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) gained control of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip and displaced 430,000 Palestinians. About 50% of those people who had been previously displaced by the “*Nakba*” were displaced again. Under Israeli occupation, Palestinians became either refugees by relinquishing their right to return to historic Palestine or Palestinian Citizens of Israel (Farsakh 2016).

### PALESTINE TODAY

In the 77 years since the *Naksa* and *Nakba*, Israel has controlled every aspect of Palestinian life, from where they can travel, to what they learn in school, to what services they can access, and to where they live. Life in occupied territories is characterized by its de jure discrimination, heavy surveillance, violent military, and constant threat of imprisonment or execution (Embrick and Williams 2023). Tensions between IOF and Palestinian resisters have persisted from 1947 to today, with thousands of bombs dropped and tens of thousands of lives lost in between. On October 7th, 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian resistance groups broke through a barrier around the Gaza Strip in response to decades of Israeli oppression. 1,139 people were killed and 250 were taken as hostages. Israel retaliated by exclaiming that they would eradicate Hamas, and since the October 7th attack, IOF have killed over 42,000 Palestinians and buried thousands under the rubble. An Amnesty International USA investigation (2024) has concluded that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.

Since October 2023, all efforts towards an Israeli-Hamas ceasefire have failed repeatedly. 2.2 million Gazans have been displaced, some of whom are being displaced for a second or third time. The IOF have destroyed Gaza’s infrastructure (housing, schools, healthcare facilities, water and sanitation services, and the electricity grid). The United Nations Population Fund states that the genocide has worsened Gaza’s already severe poverty and that its socio-economic outlook is dire. Additionally, all economic

sectors have ceased production and sales, restricting access to humanitarian relief. The Amnesty International USA (2024:1) report finds that Israel is aware of the “irreparable damage it is inflicting on Palestinians in Gaza,” regardless of their claims that their actions to eliminate Hamas are justified.

## MARX, PALESTINE, AND THE PRO-PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT

Existing literature (Aronson 1980; Embrick 2023; Englert and Bhattacharyya 2024) focuses on the ethnic/racial, historical, theological, resource struggles, and/or geopolitical dimensions of Zionist’s ethnic cleansing of Palestine. The theological argument states that Jerusalem has been the spiritual, religious, and national center of the Jewish people for thousands of years (Englert and Bhattacharyya 2024). Jews were exiled from the Kingdom of Judah, but it remains an important aspect of Jewish life. Historical arguments state that the Jewish rule of Israel dates back to 1000 BCE and claims that Jerusalem was vital in shaping Jewish history, traditions, and cultural identity. The ethnic/racial perspective argues that Zionists use anti-Arab, anti-Muslim sentiments to garner the support of the West. Edward Said (1980) explains that Zionism is in complete correspondence with Western ideas about society and man. European Jews were expected to create “a civilization of sweetness and light out of the black Islamic sea” (Said 1980:25). This paper seeks to explain how capitalism and Israel’s interest in wealth accumulation have influenced the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and the current genocide. Karl Marx’s theories on infrastructure and class consciousness will provide an alternative perspective on the history and current state of Palestine.

### *Infrastructure and Superstructure*

Karl Marx’s law of development of human history states that people must fulfill their basic needs before they can pursue politics, science, art, religion, and beyond; therefore, those who have access to a surplus of capital and control the means of production determine prominent societal norms and culture (Adams and Sydnie 2001). Palestinians’ relationship to production, (in)access to wealth, and social structure are largely shaped by

historical, political, and economic contexts, specifically the impact of colonialism, occupation, displacement, and resistance. Before 1948 and the establishment of the state of Israel, 60% of the Palestinian population worked in agriculture (Said 1980). Land ownership and agricultural output were central to production, livelihood, and identity. Palestine was a feudal society, whose folklore, societal structure, cuisine, habits, customs, dialect, and culture were influenced by their connection to the land and were uniquely Palestinian (Said 1980).

After the *Nakba*, the shift toward alienated labor and the Israeli government's push for the privatization of Palestinian land transformed Palestine from a feudal, agricultural society to a capitalistic society with the Israeli bourgeois at the helm. The systematic destruction of Palestinian homes, villages, universities, cultural landmarks, religious institutions, and so forth, left tens of thousands of Palestinians displaced, jobless, and under Israeli occupation. The Israeli government had the power to seize the land of entire Palestinian villages and transfer ownership to the State of Israel (Falah 2004). Only a few Palestinians were fortunate enough to find jobs, afford housing, and reintegrate into the economy (Englert and Bhattacharyya 2024). This provided the Israeli government with a surplus of Palestinian labor. Employment opportunities for Palestinians consisted of construction or other labor-intensive jobs in Israeli-controlled areas; therefore, alienating Palestinians from the means of production, themselves, and their communities. Palestinians were forced to participate in the Israeli economy without reaping any of the financial benefits. Israel has ensured that Israeli Jews occupy the highest positions on the economic scale and that Indigenous Palestinians are excluded to maintain total control of Palestine (Embrick and Williams 2023; Marx and Engels 1978).

From a Marxist lens, Israel's ability to successfully carry-out and "justify" the continual expropriation of Palestine is due to their control of the means of production, alienation of labor, access to a surplus of labor, and "ownership" of private property. Now that the Israeli Occupation Forces have claimed Palestinian land as their own, the Israeli capitalist class attempts to eliminate Palestinian norms, traditions, society, practices, and more to replace them with Israeli culture. A primary target being

education. Said (1980) explains that education for Palestinians deteriorated drastically under Israeli occupation due to a lack of teachers, inferior schools, use of Hebrew language over Arabic, and a stark change in the curriculum. The Israeli government's education policies emphasize Palestinian decline, corruption, and violence, while simultaneously presenting Jewish history in the best possible light (Said 1980). An attack on Palestinian education is an attack on the promotion and preservation of Palestinian culture. However, the Palestinian people are at the mercy of the Israeli government. Their complete control over the economy places Palestinians in a vulnerable position where they are reliant on the State of Israel for survival. The Israel government, in turn, uses their power to ensure the subordination of Palestinians and their culture, while promoting Zionist ideology. Without the need for justification, Israeli Zionists have been able to carry out an ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. Their accumulation of wealth in combination with the continual cultural extermination has produced a state that does not need to rationalize their actions.

### *Class Consciousness and Resistance*

Marx's concept of class consciousness refers to the recognition of one's social position concerning larger economic systems, power dynamics, and inequality (Marx and Engels 1978). Amongst the working class, class consciousness allows for the realization of their exploitation and alienation for the benefit of the capitalist class. Working-class folks' humanity is discounted in pursuit of the accumulation of wealth. The proletariat and capitalist class are two sides of the same coin; the wealthy are compelled to preserve their wealth, while the proletariats seek to abolish it. Collective action, birthed from social awareness, seeks to eradicate exploitation and oppression (Marx and Engels 1978).

Class consciousness among Palestinians is shaped by the socio-political and economic conditions of Palestine. Class intersects with Palestinian national identity, geography, and external pressures to shape their class awareness and struggle (Englert and Bhattacharyya 2024). The Israeli occupation has created a heightened awareness of economic inequality and class struggle amongst Palestinians through their alienation from production (Embrick and Williams 2023; Englert and

Bhattacharyya 2024). Regardless of their alienation, class consciousness and a strong sense of identity remain powerful forces that are deeply ingrained in Palestinian culture. Said (1980) explains that Palestinians, since the Ottoman Empire, have consciously and consistently positioned themselves in collective opposition to colonial forces. He continues by stating that the idea of resistance gets content and muscle from Palestine (Said 1980). The preservation of Palestinian culture via poetry, literature, art, music, food, and so forth serves as a form of ideological resistance. Palestinian cultural and ideological resistance aims to transform material conditions.

### *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions Movement*

The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement employs non-violent punitive measures to put economic pressure on Israel to recognize Palestine's right to self-determination. Palestinian political parties, unions, associations, coalitions, and organizations have come together to represent the interests of Palestinian refugees, Palestinians under occupation, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. There is a recognition of shared struggles and the importance of solidarity across class and national lines. Given that all efforts to convince or force Israel to comply with humanitarian law and end its occupation of the people of Palestine have failed, representatives of the oppressed class are encouraging boycotts and divestment against Israel. They are calling upon international civil society to pressure their respective states to impose embargoes and sanctions against Israel.

The BDS movement is targeting the economic base that plays a vital role in funding and maintaining systems of oppression (Desai 2021). They have called for an escalation in boycott and divestment efforts, within the last year, in response to Israel's escalation of violence against Palestinians. Their social media campaigns have worked to educate people around the world about the Palestinian genocide and encourage them to participate in the BDS movement, making them allies in the Palestinian struggle. Academic associations and student unions in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and beyond have turned to their colleges and universities asking them to divest from Israeli businesses. The BDS movement is a clear example of class



consciousness because it recognizes Israel's economic exploitation, its promotion of solidarity among oppressed groups (Palestinians and allies), and its efforts to dismantle systems of power (Desai 2021). BDS aligns with the principles of class struggle and demonstrates how economic resistance can serve as a tool for broader liberation.

## CONCLUSION

An overview of the history of Palestine was included to provide context for its connection to Marx's theories on infrastructure and superstructure, class consciousness, and class struggle. Palestine was positioned as the oppressed, working class, and Israel was posited as the oppressive, ruling class. Israel's complete control of Palestinian land and means of production led to their complete control of Israeli-Palestinian society and culture, which promotes the oppression and dehumanization of Palestinians. Despite the efforts of the IOF and their Zionist allies, Palestinians continue to demonstrate unwavering resilience and faith that their land will be there once again.

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