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Palestinians and the Queer Left

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Thursday 22 August 2013

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Life is hard for the Palestinians. It isn't a picnic for leftists in LGBT movements either. So a book that brings good news on both fronts is a definite reason for celebration.

Sarah Schulman, author of *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*, has decades of organizing experience under her belt in New York in groups like ACT UP. But she is even better known as the author of 17 books, most of them novels. It shows. She may not be a theorist, but she clearly knows how to tell a good story: entertaining, suspenseful, heartwarming and honest – sometimes painfully honest about her own naiveté.

Schulman's story begins on a personal note in 2009, when she's invited to speak at the University of Tel Aviv. At that point she's still what she calls PEP, a "Progressive Except Palestine." By her own account, she hasn't given Israel all that much thought. So she asks advice from people on the left she trusts: mostly other lesbians from the United States and Israel and – as she later notes with some discomfort – mostly Jewish. Nonetheless, the advice she gets – for example, from prominent queer theorist Judith Butler – is: If the Israeli state is paying for this, just say no.

So she says no. But she feels it's a shame to disappoint the Israeli queers who'd invited her; she's disappointed herself. So she investigates the possibility of making the trip in some other way. The attempt puts her in touch with the Palestinian committee that monitors the academic boycott of Israel, and through them with Palestinian LGBT activists.

This is the start of a close partnership between the Palestinians and "al-Schulman," as they nickname her. It leads in 2011 to the organization of "al-Tour:" a successful U.S. speaking tour of Palestinian Queers for BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions – not, as Schulman first thought, bondage, domination and submission). (23) In the process, the partnership grows into warm friendships.

Breakthrough

The rapid growth of the BDS movement has been the most hopeful development around Palestine in recent years, marked otherwise by the failure so far of the Arab Spring to break the Fatah-Hamas grip on Palestinian politics, the far right's hegemony in Israeli politics, the constant expansion of Israeli settlements, and the ever-more-farcical character of the "peace process."

At the same time, LGBT opposition to the "pinkwashing" of Israel – the state's conscious efforts to claim a progressive image by boasting about gay rights – and LGBT support for BDS may be the queer left's single most noteworthy accomplishment to date. Schulman has played a key role in this development.

Several factors equipped her to play this role: her name recognition, organizational skills and knowledge of progressive U.S. LGBT networks as well as cultural ones (film festivals are a major battleground in the fight against pinkwashing). She easily got director Sue Hyde of the annual NGLTF Creating Change conference to provide a launch pad for the tour, for example.

But Schulman had timing on her side too. Radical queers in the United States, in her words "disgusted by marriage

and military” (143), were ready for a serious solidarity campaign with queers they could wholeheartedly support. And she had the ideal Palestinian allies: sophisticated LGBT activists who were on the verge of an international breakthrough.

Still, Schulman’s book makes clear how quickly she learned everything she needed to give the tour wings. As late as 2010 she was still fixated on the importance of getting Palestinian BDS leader Omar Barghouti to give public political acknowledgment to the role of LGBTs in solidarity efforts. Despite her lack of understanding of what might lie behind Barghouti’s refusal, the reader is crushed along with her when he says no “and as elated as she is when, a year later, Barghouti defends Palestinian LGBT rights on the radio. Schulman’s admission at the moment of her triumph “Omar had changed. And I had changed” (173) is moving.

The book is also peppered with shrewd and telling political insights. Schulman’s feminism and anti-racism are constant sources of illumination. She notes for example how Muslim homophobia is used to justify racism. She describes how difficult life is for Israeli lesbians in a country where real women produce Jewish children “that is, soldiers.

Her politics are also informed by a Jewish identity that is instinctively allergic to nationalism. She pointedly cites Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Nobel acceptance speech praising Yiddish: a language “without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, [with] no words for weapons,” which “does not demand and command but muddles through.” (7)

“Jewish police, Jews in uniforms, Jewish governments, all these things bothered me,” she writes frankly. (67) She had spent her life as a Jew without ever joining a Jewish organization, until at last solidarity with Palestinians led her to join Jewish Voice for Peace.

Schulman’s own family history also provides food for thought, for example when she questions a single-minded focus on Zionism as the enemy. There are historical and theoretical reasons for this focus that she doesn’t fully discuss. An understanding of Israel as a colonial settler society clarifies many things, particularly the continuity of the program of “conquest of land, conquest of labor, conquest of the produce of labor” before 1948, before 1967 and since 1967. But Schulman does make a tactically and psychologically interesting point: that even U.S. Jews who wrongly defend Israel often use the word “Zionist” only in sentences like, “He became a Zionist and moved to Tel Aviv.” (141)

Startling Insights and Gaps

Schulman’s story mainly travels back and forth between the United States and Israel/Palestine. But it is also an international story, as queer anti-pinkwashing campaigns spread across Canada and Europe. Her title should be taken seriously: there really is something of a queer international by now. Anyone involved in queer Palestine solidarity, even peripherally like me, is bound to come across familiar names: not only Palestinians in the spotlight like Haneen Maikey of the Palestinian queer group Al-Qaws, but lesser-known activists in the Netherlands and Portugal.

At the same time, Schulman’s commentary illustrates how parochial the New York queer left can be. For someone like me, from the United States but always oriented toward the European left and now living in Europe for 20 years, the depth of Schulman’s lack of identification with or interest in European left history is startling.

Essentially, Europe is for her the place where the Holocaust happened. The history of the European internationalist

left” including “non-Jewish Jews” like Rosa Luxemburg, people who spent their lives working closely with non-Jews to create a world free of hate” doesn’t seem to be part of her mental baggage.

Even more of a jolt is that even after several years of doing Palestine solidarity work, she still agrees with Zionist movement founder Theodor Herzl on a key point: that “Jews would never be safe in Europe.” (3) She sees the recent rise of Islamophobia as simply one more manifestation of “Europeans’ historic paranoia and acting out.” (10) She concedes that there is Islamophobia in the United States too, but she shares a peculiarly American conviction that her country is somehow less complicit in Europe’s essential evil.

Schulman has spent years now working with ethnically diverse activists and teaching ethnically diverse students. By the end of the book she identifies even more closely with her new Palestinian lesbian friends than with a U.S. Jewish radical queer like Judith Butler. Yet she still believes that “most non-Jews are anti-Semitic.” (88) It seems odd in this light that she also thinks that “the best place in the world for Jews is New York” (19), where those (supposedly mostly anti-Semitic) non-Jews are in the majority.

So there are discussions remaining to be had about internationalism with queer internationalists like Schulman. Still, Israel/Palestine and the Queer International is a fun, moving and inspiring place to start.

[Against the Current July/August 2013, ATC 165](#)