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People's Power: Lessons from the First *Intifada*

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Colonialism denies human rights to human beings whom it has subdued by violence, and keeps them by force in a state of misery and ignorance that Marx would rightly call a subhuman condition. Racism is ingrained in actions, institutions, and in the nature of the colonialist methods of production and exchange. Political and social regulation reinforce one another. Since the native is subhuman...he is abandoned without protection to inhuman forces – brought in with the colonialist praxis, engendered every moment by the colonialist apparatus, and sustained by relations of production that define two sorts of individuals – one for whom privilege and humanity are one...and the other, for whom a denial of rights sanctions misery, chronic hunger...or, in general, “subhumanity” (Sartre, 1965: xxiv-xxv).

Introduction

Systems of domination, colonialism, racism and capitalism, transform subjects into objects of inhuman ends, exploiting and degrading individuals, or in the case of settler colonialism applying “spatial forms of sequestration” and strategies designed to slowly eliminate the unwanted native population (Wolfe, 2006). These systems of oppression require the perpetual submission of individuals to the structural forces, ideologies and modes of production that perpetuate domination. Neoliberalism and the “matrix” it has imposed on social, political life and our collective imagination (Munck, 2005) has restructured politics in a way that has made the exercise of domination smoother and more efficient, by depoliticising politics and trying to erode collectives that can resist domination.

However, today we are witnessing a shift in the global balance of forces in favour of people's struggles against overlapping systems of power and domination. The Arab uprisings, and the new political horizons they have opened up, have shattered the neoliberal concepts and framework that have colonised our imagination, restoring the concept of *al shab* “the people,” and with that notions like “people's power” and “people's democracy” long excised from our vocabulary.¹ In *Tahrir* square, a new form of people's power brought down a dictator and liberated the public square, which had been “depopulated” under Mubarak (Elshahed, 2011). In the liberated space, the people's movement not only symbolically restored the people to the “public,” but the revolutionary praxis in *Tahrir* enacted new radical democratic horizons, articulated demands for social justice and

¹ The Arab uprisings and ongoing revolutionary struggles are directed at both ruthless authoritarian regimes, the US's compliant imperial allies in the region, and predatory free market capitalism that has enriched the few and forced the majority in Egypt and elsewhere into “humiliating poverty” (Beydoun, 2011: 26).

restructuring economic and political power so as to make it accountable to the people. All of which reflect the potentiality of the revolutionary struggle now underway in Egypt.

Yet, long before the current Arab uprisings, the Palestinian people organised their own mass-based, popular anti-colonial movement that was centred on notions of “people’s power” (Gaza Communique, 1988) and building an alternative “people’s authority” which culminated in the first *intifada* of 1987. The first Palestinian uprising was a rich experience in building a popular people’s struggle for liberation that linked the struggle against national oppression to the struggles against capitalist and patriarchal domination. The *intifada* was the outcome of at least fourteen years of grassroots organising which created a framework for mass politicisation and mobilisation (Taraki, 1989) that tried to create a space to disengage from the colonial system, its modes of production and enable individuals to exercise power as a collective to liberate themselves from settler colonialism. At the same time, the whole idea of Palestinian people’s power centred on creating new structures that could provide an alternative to capitalist economic exploitation and patriarchal domination.

As the tide shifts towards global people’s struggles, and as Palestinians struggle to build a new framework to reconstitute the Palestinian national liberation movement (Sayigh, 2010) that re-links all of the Palestinian people in their struggle against Israeli settler colonialism,² it is necessary to look back at Palestinian popular organising in 1970-80’s. What lessons can be derived from this rich experiment in popular struggle against political domination and economic subordination? What does it reveal about the conditions and factors that enable a people to coalesce into a counter-power, *organise* and *sustain* a long-term struggle to transform structures of oppression? What does it tell us about the significance and the unique potentialities of a people’s movement as compared to other modes of struggle?

This inquiry is all the more important today as the same overlapping, interlocking forms of settler colonialist and capitalist domination, which were resisted in the first uprising, have become more integrated into an overlapping system of oppression, mediated by the compliant Palestinian Authority (PA). Dangerously accelerating Zionist settler colonial strategies to fragment and confine

² Zionist settler colonialism aims to pacify and control the Palestinian indigenous people in order to ultimately replace them, or permanently confine them to segregated ghettos as it colonises their land. One of the ways it tries to achieve this aim is by fragmenting and attempting break up the Palestinian people. The Oslo process institutionalised this colonial fragmentation by attempted to restrict “Palestine” and “Palestinian people” to the population and the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, excluding the Palestinians in 1948 occupied Palestine and the Palestinian refugees, thus fragmenting the Palestinian people.

the unwanted Palestinian natives in sequestered ghettos and Bantustans, while destroying their economic productive capacities, are being reinforced and exacerbated by neoliberal capitalism that promotes private capital enrichment for the few, while causing immiseration and insecurity for the majority. In the 1970's, Palestinians also faced similar colonial efforts to atomise, degrade and control the population, and subordinate their economy to serve Israeli capitalist and colonialist interests. At the time, the national movement and the political parties responded by organising society through popular committees, building self-reliance and modes of power outside of colonial structures in order to wage a struggle against colonialism. The popular organising that was initiated and led by the communists, regarded the people as the site of power. As Eileen Kuttab explains, the people were regarded as the *means* for exercising power, but they were also regarded as the ends and the *goals of the struggle* (1989: 137). Building on Kuttab's insights, one can suggest that this popular struggle was also about re-humanising the oppressed in the Paolo Freire sense of creating a new "human" beyond what is defined as possible by imperial colonialist, and capitalist worldviews and systems of domination. Moreover, the popular organising was rooted in a mode of *direct action* that territorialised its own alternative as part of its struggle against colonialism. That is to say, it created its own alternatives to the colonial order, constructing new non-dominating horizontal social relations, and ways of organising social, political and economic life, that were simultaneously part of the infrastructure used to resist colonialism.

This paper returns to this period with the aim of identifying lessons and insights that can assist in reactivating the Palestinian liberation struggle today. Starting from an acknowledgement of the defeat of the Palestinian national liberation project and consciousness with the signing of the Oslo accords, and neoliberalism's role in further eroding this struggle, the paper asks; what conditions and determinants enabled the rise of this people's struggle for liberation? What is peoples' power, how is it invested in and transformed into a mass movement for liberation? How was the Palestinian popular movement of the 1970-80's organised and sustained? Finally, what key concepts, and theories, philosophies of resistance did it rely upon and ground itself within. How might these theories and this experience as a whole assist us today?

1. History of the Present: The Neoliberal Restructuring of the Political and the Assault on Collective Struggles

Before turning to the Palestinian first *intifada* it is necessary to begin this paper with a brief history of the present in order to identify the forces that are undermining collective movements in the present, supporting efforts to resist and look beyond these conditions. I will start by quickly surveying the transformations that have accompanied the rise of global neoliberal capitalism, focusing specifically on neoliberalism's restructuring of the political; its efforts to depoliticise politics, fragment and atomise societies, leaving them unable to exercise collective power and resistance. These transformations have radically altered the terrain in which the Palestinian liberation struggle is waged, and have reshaped the modes of organising, the horizon of change and understandings of oppression within and through which the Palestinian struggle is articulated. I will begin, therefore, by deepening the rupture caused by the Arab revolutionary struggles and critically discuss the neoliberal frameworks and hegemonies that are undermining collective struggles in the present, in order to be able identify ways to move beyond this by looking at the Palestinian popular anti-colonial movement of the first *intifada*.

The ascent of global neoliberal capitalism dates back to the 1970's. It began with the economic policies that were introduced by right-wing ruling forces in the UK and the US, backed by the transnational capital class, who responded to crisis in global capitalism by introducing a turn towards neoclassical liberal economics and its free market orthodoxy. The first phase of the push towards unregulated global capitalism started in the 1970's with efforts to dismantle the transformative role and regulative capacity of the state, privatise state industries, public resources and "deregulate" labour and market activity, that is allow the market to operate without social control or accountability to social goals (MacEwan, 2005). In the 1990's, the "neoliberal project extended to the social domain" targeting the "recalcitrant (social forces)...that needed to be brought under control" and promoting new regulative roles for the state, as needed to enhance free market capitalism (Munck, 2005: 63).

The logic underlying neoliberalism's expansion is best captured by what Karl Polanyi explains is a process that is disembedding the economy from social relations and *embedding social relations in the market* in order to produce a "market society" through which unregulated capitalism can function (ibid: 61). In other words, one can describe neoliberalism, therefore, as attempting to remake society,

politics and government *in the image of the market*, colonising these spheres with logic, relations and ultimately profit-driven motive that mirror the market and secure its dominance over society and political life.³

The collapse of the former Soviet Union in the 1990's, and the west's attempt to declare the global triumph of liberalism and free market capitalism and the failure of communist and socialist alternatives, embodied in Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis (1992), accelerated the above processes. Backed by the power and resources of the international financial institutions (IFIs), neoliberalism has become a ruling ideology that has gradually assailed our imagination and made it difficult to imagine an alternative to capitalism. Neoliberalism's pervasive reach is heightened by the way that it is territorialised, particularly in the global south through the apparatuses of the IFIs, through Foucauldian disciplinary forms of power that invasively reshape the self and produce new subjectivities (Barry et al, 1996), alongside efforts to reconfigure "the nature of economy-politics-society relationships" (Munck, 2005: 64).

In terms of the impact on political movements and struggles in the third world, and specifically the Palestinian liberation struggle against Zionist settler colonialism, I want to suggest that neoliberalism has not only undermined the idea and organised existence of collectives, but its matrix has colonised and usurped the terrain in which movements operate. In what follows, I will explain these claims further, and discuss the way neoliberalism has reorganised societies in way that not only attempts to depoliticise politics, but also attempts to replace progressive political worldviews, which name and oppose structures of oppression, with a micro, fragmented vision of society.

One observes these processes at work in what Pierre Bourdieu calls the neoliberal utopia of a "pure, perfect market" (1998: 96). This neoliberal utopia masks the exploitation of the market, and the actual misery, impoverishment and despair working class people and others have been subjected to by unregulated capitalism. Neoliberal market absolutism rests upon and is enacted through two associated offensives. The first is the neoliberal campaign to de-legitimate the state as the "main locus of national aspirations" and site of resistance to transnational imperial and capitalist

³ The invasion of market relations into social life is evident in advanced forms of the consumer society (Bauman, 2007) as well as in the privatisation of public goods water, utilities. Here, the market logic of pure economic exchange and the "profit-driven" decision of the market (MacEwan, 2005: 172) begins to erode and replace the notion of public goods, social rights, principles, and even the fabric of social relations.

subordination (Beckman, 1993: 21-23). The second is the attempt to collapse the notion of freedom into the narrow liberal conception of the individual pursuing her own self interests. Individualism is thus promoted at the expense of “national liberation ideas of socialism and the collective good” (Prashad, 2012: 47), and the concept of the citizen and the rights associated with it, is gradually replaced with consumerism (Munck, 2005: 65-66).

If neo-classical economics only recognises individuals, then the neoliberal utopia of a perfect, self-regulating market proceeds through what Bourdieu calls “a programme of methodological destruction of collectives” (1998: 96). He directs our attention to range of measures, including multilateral trade agreements, repression of unions, aimed at calling “into question all the collective structures capable of obstructing the logic of the pure market,” the state, unions, cooperatives, political parties, even the family (ibid: 96). If neoliberalism promotes liberal individualism and free market capitalism as “the *one true path*,” it does so by radically precluding and foreclosing other horizons and possibilities (Munck, 2005: 64). As privatisation and deregulation have concentrated power in the hands of private corporations and removed their actions from social oversight and democratic accountability (MacEwan, 2005), the neoliberal assault on collectives has heightened the weakness and disarray of movements and struggles in the face of these forces, and predatory forms of capitalism.

These transformations have debilitated liberation struggles and movements against imperialist and capitalist domination in the global south at a number of levels. They have created a powerful hegemony that undermines our ability to see ourselves as collectives and has attacked this organising framework. Neoliberal market orthodoxy has contributed to delegitimising and marginalising collective structures (unions, parties) in the global south, particularly in the Palestinian settler colonial context where IFI’s have contributed to breaking up movements. At the same time, new invasive forms of consumption and consumerism have been promoted, which encourage the individual to seek fulfilment through an endless cycle of consuming and discarding goods, replacing collective goals and struggles.

The Arab uprisings radically and powerfully ruptured these forces and dealt a blow to the neoliberal imaginary, for the uprisings reclaimed the category of the “people” and thus the collective as site of agency and resistance. Yet, the neoliberal assault on collectives has not just happened at the level

ideas and the imaginary. It operates through with two disciplinary frameworks that have altered the very grounds in which movements organise; these frameworks are the depoliticisation of politics, on the one hand, and attempts to replace progressive political worldviews with a fragmented vision of society, on the other. A discussion of each will illuminate these constraints.

Depoliticising Politics and Replacing Radical Political Visions

The neoliberal project fundamentally recast the relationships within society in a way that has “depoliticised politics” (Munck, 2005: 64). The most obvious way this has happened is through the imposition of a new classificatory grid that divides and collapses society into two domains “state” and “civil society” (Traboulsi, 2011), flattening out society into “civic associations,” and therefore erasing classes, political forces, and movements. Amal Khreisheh, former PFLP activist, argues that the term “civil society” entered Palestinian national movement in the early 1990’s at the time when the Oslo agreements were signed. She suggests that this discursive category arrived as part of a broader global trend in which political movements were marginalised and transformed into civil society; NGOs and civic organisations were promoted at the expense of political parties and movements, and began to replace the latter.⁴ Fadwa Labadi, former DFLP activist, sheds light on how this happened, explaining that grants and donor funding contributed to breaking up the Palestinian women’s committees’ relationship to the grassroots. Instead of collective work with women, ties to the grassroots became individualised, organised through paid employees, as opposed to volunteers, militant activists and leaders: *individualised relationships to the grassroots, replaced collectivism* and direct involvement in both feminist and nationalist political struggles.⁵

These feminist leaders’ observations direct our attention to a process whereby “civil society” was elevated as *the sphere of action* not only at the expense of politics and political struggles, but where the notion of political action, as well as democratic and once radical notions like “empowerment” were co-opted and colonised. The very *concept of action* was transformed and became “individualised and depoliticised” (Cleaver, 2001: 37). Thus, instead of civil society becoming a sphere to contest power and hegemony as in the Gramscian theorisation of the term, “civil society” *appropriated the political*, and institutionalised a depoliticised politics that has redefined our imagination, and eroded

⁴ She also maintains that the weakness of the Palestinian political parties on the left and the absence of strong democratic structures within the parties hastened their downfall and led a series of transformation whereby party leaders and activists became heads of NGOs. Interview with Amal Khreisheh, former PFLP activist and Director of the Palestinian Working Women’s Society for Development, April 5, 2012.

⁵ Interview with Dr Fadwa Labadi, former DFLP activist and Professor of Women’s and Development Studies, Al Quds University, April 16, 2012.

possibility of peoples' struggles. Through the hegemonic praxis of civil society organisations, class and women's struggles have been displaced from the political field onto a bureaucratic realm where they are repackaged through terms like "poverty" and addressed by finding the "right policy." This separates political questions from power, distribution of resources and structures of domination. The depoliticisation of politics has made it harder for people to envision the tireless work involved in daily grassroots political organising, collective mass action, what Munir Fasheh describes as:

the time, tedious work, self-discipline, organising, feelings of solidarity that are (created and) needed for the transformation of self, and society, of consciousness of the structure (1989: 558).

Our understanding of politics, struggles and grassroots organising has been colonised by the neoliberal reconfiguration of relations within society, where notions like "social capital," which once stood for grassroots community organising, have been codified "in neoliberal economic terms" (Munck, 2005: 66) and mobilised to serve and legitimate the market. This reflects the underlying way neoliberalism attempts to promote market enhancing or "market friendly" roles for civil society (Mohan and Stokke, 2000: 251).

The depoliticisation of politics has been accompanied by another disciplinary framework that attempts to replace holistic progressive political worldviews with a fragmented, micro vision of society. Fawwaz Traboulsi argues that this fragmented vision of society has proliferated through the discourse and conduct of NGOs "that have worked to separate society's sectors and issues from one another – typical of "post-modern" micro-narratives" (Traboulsi, 2011: 16). This fragmented vision has further atomised societies, fragmented and isolated class, gender, and national struggles from one another. At the same time, radical liberatory politics that seek to transform structures of oppression have been replaced by the NGO *modus operandi* – that integrates actors into the prevailing systems of power. Civil society's ascribed role is often to oversee state or worse legitimate market, replacing the radical impetus to overturn structures of oppression. This *modus operandi* be described as one in which depoliticised civil society organisations work within isolated "sectors" in line with a "new managerialism" (Desai and Imrie, 1998, quoted in Mohan and Stokke, 2000: 250). These organisations devise state policies and laws, or promote the inclusion of marginalised groups in prevailing structures and decision-making processes, integrating subordinated groups into the dominant economic and political order. The result is a hegemonic gaze and fragmented praxis where

“women,” “sustainable development,” “poverty,” “human rights” are conceptualised as separated sectors; they are not seen and understood as an integrated totality, located in structures of power and a system of domination (Traboulsi, 2011). This fragmented vision, therefore, separates these issues out from the macro structures and power relations at the national and international level that have determined and are responsible for deprivation and subordination along class, gender and national lines (Mohan and Stokke, 2000).

In the Palestinian settler colonial context this fragmented vision of society has had a devastating impact for it separates social and economic conditions out from the national level and the overarching settler colonial system of oppression. Donor civil society funding for Palestinian organisations has focused on internal social issues of “state-building” and has been completely severed from the national struggle. Moreover, this has contributed to severing the linkages between struggles for social and economic equality and the national liberation struggle, and contributed to delinking movements, such as the women’s movement, from the national movement (Hammami and Kuttab, 1999).

The neoliberal project, therefore, has severely undermined political movements and liberation struggles in the global south. Neoliberalism has not only undermined collectives that can resist the market but has worked to depoliticise politics and replace radical oppositional worldviews that seek to transform systems of domination.

2. Rebuilding People’s Power: Palestinian Popular Organising in 1970-80’s - Oppositional Liberation Consciousness

“a successful action is only as effective as the radical imagination that preceded it” (Rira, 2011).

What lessons can be learnt from the Palestinian popular organising in the 1970-80’s to rebuild a Palestinian people’s movements for liberation? As the above quote suggests, a struggle is only effective as the consciousness that preceded it. One of the first lessons from the Palestinian popular struggle is that one of the underlying conditions for a collective movement against oppression is the cohesion and vision offered by an oppositional political worldview, or what can be describe as a liberatory consciousness that understands how systems of domination work. By definition a

liberatory consciousness not only seeks to transform structures of domination, but it seeks to *replace* these structures with alternative relations, identities, and ways of organising society.⁶

In the aftermath of the neoliberal restructure of political life and its colonisation of the political, it is this holistic critical consciousness that needs to be reclaimed. In terms of the present, we need to learn from the radical emancipatory worldviews articulated by these third world liberation struggles, in order to reclaim a holistic critical conceptualisation of systems of oppression in order to be able to look beyond and define alternatives to systems of domination. In learning from the Palestinian popular struggle, it is clear that this oppositional political consciousness is predicated on a process whereby the colonised break away from the colonial worldview, its binary division of the world, reclaiming the power that resides in the colonised, and the creative potential modes of power that can be actualised through the people. However, it is clear that a liberatory consciousness on its own is not enough; it requires a structure and framework through which this critical consciousness can spread and can be translated into a daily praxis of resistance and modes of struggle, consolidating a people's mass movement.

In the 1970's, it was the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the broader third world anti-imperial liberation struggles that provided an emancipatory political worldview through which an oppositional liberation project consciousness was articulated. The Palestinian political parties, particularly the communists, were the carriers of this consciousness and began to organise Palestinians under Israeli colonial rule in the West Bank and Gaza, to create their own forms of power outside of colonial structures of control. The parties created a framework through which a people's struggle for national, economic and social liberation could be waged. In what follows, I will return to the 1970's and begin by examining the way the parties, specifically the left, created the conditions that enabled the formation of a mass people's movement, in order to learn from this experience.

This inquiry is all the more important given the impact that the Oslo agreements have had on the Palestinian national movement. The signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 both signalled and brought with it the defeat of the liberation project and the oppositional radical consciousness that had

⁶ The notion of a liberatory consciousness and some of the theoretical concepts and discussion in this paper are based on a forthcoming study by Linda Tabar and Ala Al-Azzeh on popular resistance in Palestine which will be published by the Institute of Palestine Studies.

defined the Palestinian struggle for decades. By signing the Oslo agreements, the PLO agreed to confer legitimacy on the Zionist settler colony even as it continues to oppress the Palestinian indigenous population (Massad, 1994). The Israeli state became a “negotiating partner” as opposed to a racist settler colonial state established through the dispossession of the Palestinian people in 1948. The Palestinian liberation struggle’s interrogation of Zionist settler colonialism, its denial of the legitimate presence and rights of native Palestinians in the entirety of their homeland was displaced. Moreover, Palestinian progressive visions of liberation, such as a secular democratic state in all of Palestine, were fully excised from the official nationalist project.

The Oslo agreements were the outcome of the rise of “realist-pragmatic” wing of the PLO (Massad, 1997). Joseph Massad decodes the Palestinian leadership’s realism not only as “moderation” and but as willingness to accommodate to Palestinians “reality” (Massad, 1997: 24). Behind this realism, and the Palestinian leadership’s new desire to yield to colonial realities and the colonial terms of Oslo, is a bid for external western recognition. This points to a type of a defeated consciousness that has internalised the colonial worldview and seeks to assimilate itself to the western state project, discarding the anti-colonial struggle for the liberation of Palestine. This consciousness has therefore lost sight of anti-colonial agency and power available and can be actualised by the colonised.

2.1 The Palestinian People’s Movement and Its Conditions of Possibility

Turning to examine the 1970-80’s, I will begin by reviewing the role of the political parties in creating the foundation for a people’s movement for liberation. The leftist parties performed three important roles; the parties were the carriers of a political consciousness that had a vision for how to transform oppressive structures; they invested in building people’s power, and they created decentralised, fluid structures to translate resistance into a daily praxis and transform it into a movement. By reviewing each in turn I will identify important insights for the present and lessons for political organising and rebuilding a people’s liberation movement.

Looking back at the 1970-80’s, an activist from the PFLP in Dheisheh refugee camp summarises the nature of the Palestinian popular movement that culminated in the first *intifada* as follows:

We struggled to create the conditions for a dignified life and a humane existence in inhuman conditions. We did this through direct action and the collective ties and bonds that the movement created.⁷

The process of grassroots organising that led to the first uprising traces back to 1972, and began with the formation of the voluntary work movement that was established by the communists. Rooted in principles of collective solidarity, voluntarism and direct political action, the movement set out to provide a popular people's alternative to the services and institutions (i.e. such as the municipalities) that were linked to the colonial apparatus. The communists set up voluntary work committees, led by urban middle class activists, which began to perform "community work and mostly manual labour" in marginalised areas and in refugee camps (Taraki, 1989: 59). Voluntary work became a way of intervening and working in solidarity with peasants and other marginalised groups. This created a form of direct action that built popular alternatives to address people's needs, *delinking* from the colonial apparatus. These popular interventions ranged from working with farmers to reclaim and work the land, protecting it from colonisation, to paving roads, fixing sewage and improving conditions in marginalised peripheries and in the camps.⁸ The decentralised, democratic formations that were set up by the voluntary movement inspired and became the basis for the popular committees that led the first *intifada* (Bargouti, 1990: 108).⁹ Popular alternative formations expanded following the eruption of the *intifada* and ranged from alternative popular education, to a popular economy, neighbourhood committees, women committees and a range of other popular structures.

Scholars have described this moment in the Palestinian national struggle as one which marked a shift from the "military bureaucratic apparatus" of the PLO in exile to grassroots political mobilisation to meet "the needs of concrete social groups" (Tamari, 1991: 13). Yet, what is distinct about this moment, and marks it off as a rich example of an indigenous people's struggle, is the double way it sought to delink from the structures of direct colonial Israel rule – taxation, services, employment in

⁷ Focus group with activists from Bethlehem, Dheisheh refugee camp, April 27, 2012.

⁸ Interview with Muharram Barghouti, former leader of the voluntary movement and General Director of the Palestinian Youth Union, February 14, 2012.

⁹ A number of coalescing factors reinforced the grassroots organising, including the establishment of the Palestinian National Front in 1973, which was formally linked to the PLO and promoted popular mobilisation. This was followed by the elections of nationalist mayors in 1976, which introduced measures to support the voluntary work movement (Taraki, 1989: 58-59).

colonial civil administration etc – and create a popular alternative, an alternative power, what was described in the *baynat* (leaflets) of the uprising as a “people’s authority” (Ibid).

This directs our attention to a double process of resistance which, on the one hand, worked to disrupt and destroy colonial patterns and structures of control, and on the other, create popular alternatives, which could enable society to sustain a struggle to transform the structures that perpetuate national, as well as social and economic oppression. For instance as explained below, popular measures like the call to return to the land and the cooperative movement, were meant to replace economic subordination and dependency on the coloniser, and give Palestinians autonomy and therefore the power to confront colonial rule and directly resist the colonisation of land. The leaflets issued by the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU), which directed the first popular uprising are replete with evidence of this anti-colonial emancipatory vision and praxis. For instance, Leaflet No 16 salutes the popular committees for building “alternatives to the crumbling apparatus of the occupier,” leading the people in civil disobedience and creating the foundation for a “people’s authority” (UNLU Communique 16, 1988: 112).

This double process of shaking off structures of oppression, and the militant “civil insurrection” that accompanied it, succeed in demonstrating that Palestinians “could not be governed by colonial rule” (Hammami and Tamari, 2001: 6). Yet it also did more than this, it created a framework for a progressive alternative to the colonial order. The mass resistance, in the first instance, opposed the Israel colonial political domination over Palestinian lives, and efforts to integrate and subordinate the economy to Israeli colonial interests. It was a mass revolt against these processes of domination and that sought to overthrow colonial rule. Yet, at same time, this people’s struggle also created the infrastructure for an alternative to capitalist exploitation and patriarchal subjugation. The popular people’s alternatives, the cooperative movement and the popular economy, were not only a basis for resistance, but they laid down the basis for a different order and organised social and economic life according to principles of social and economic equality (Abdul Hadi et al, 1992: 171).

The Palestinian people’s struggle of the 1970-80’s, therefore, typifies what Freire describes as a humanising struggle for liberation where the oppressed “rename the world” as defined and imagined by the oppressor – by colonial and imperial worldviews – in order “to change it” (quoted in Fasheh, 1989: 554). It reflects the revolutionary potentiality Fanon associates with national liberation

movements and their struggle to create “a new concept of man” (1963: 143), a “new form of consciousness and way of life” (Pieterse and Parekh, 1995: 3) that transcends the colonial and imperial worldviews, their racial hierarchies and eurocentric paradigms. Fanon also insisted that the third world project to build a new human requires a global “redistribution of wealth” and liberation from capitalism and imperialist forces that have caused the material deprivation and economic subordination of the third world (1963: 143). These overlapping notions of liberation underpinned and informed Palestinian popular organising in the 1970-80’s. The leftist parties worked to organise people against interlocking forces of oppression, national oppression, and economic exploitation, and patriarchal dominance and invest them with an understanding of their overlapping rights.¹⁰ Moreover, Eileen Kuttab suggests that at the time the understanding of these structures of domination and the relationship between them was much more sophisticated than today; unlike the present, at the time it was very clear for the popular movement that “economic liberation was necessary for national liberation.”¹¹

In order to learn from this rich experiment in building a people’s struggle for liberation it is crucial to understand that the popular organising of the 1970-80’s was a microcosm of a broader vision of liberation. As the agents organising the people, the parties, specifically left, were the carriers of an oppositional consciousness and a vision of liberation that guided grassroots organising. It is this holistic critique of systems of domination and the ability to offer an alternative vision which we need to reclaim today. In order to learn from this experience, it is important to look at the constitutive determinants of this liberation consciousness.

2.2 The PLO, Third World Liberation Movements and an Alternative Worldview

In contrast to the confines of the present, where neoliberal capitalism has eroded our ability to imagine alternatives, and the where Oslo process has defeated the liberation project and consciousness of the PLO, in the 1970’s the factions of the PLO articulated a progressive anti-colonial, anti-imperial and anti-racist vision of liberation that addressed the root causes of domination. The mainstream faction Fateh located the causes of national oppression in the Zionist settler colonial ideology, its colonial racism and its dehumanising denial of the presence and rights of the native Palestinians. The PLO’s programme to establish a secular democratic state in a liberated

¹⁰ Interview with Dr Fadwa Labadi, *ibid*.

¹¹ Interview with Eileen Kuttab, Professor Institute of Women’s Studies, Birzeit University, May 21, 2012.

Palestine, initially proposed by Fateh in 1968 (Gresh, 1988: 17), was meant to provide a framework for liberation and decolonisation where settler and native could live together in equality as conditioned on the decolonisation of Zionism. Locating the source of domination in Zionist settler colonial racist ideology, the PLO maintained that the secular democratic state was predicated on Jews renouncing Zionism, colonial racism and their colonial privileges (Abu Iyad, 1969). By critically diagnosing structures of oppression, the political parties were able to clearly define an alternative and invest people with a liberatory consciousness that understood both the causes of domination and could see beyond to a just order.

Surveying some of the new movements today, one can see why this is so important. Emerging new movements such as the youth movement are not rooted in the same holistic understand of systems of domination. These movements suffer at times from an inability to offer solutions, ways forward or a long-term strategic vision because these actors have lost sight of an understand of structures of oppression. They lack a liberatory consciousness that has a clear vision for how to transform structures of domination. This is not to deny that a critical consciousness is created in the course of praxis and struggle. Indeed, one of the most powerful ways in which consciousness shifts is during the course of struggle, as one directly confronts systems of domination and one begins to understand how they confine and restrict peoples' lives. That said, my aim here is to draw attention to the need to learn from this historical experience and underscore the need to reclaim a critical conceptualisation of systems of power and oppression. At the same time, other movements such the Palestinian movement for Boycott Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel are trying to restore and rebuild the oppositional political consciousness that was defeated by Oslo and transcend distorted political visions. The movement is reinvesting people with a critical understanding of the nature of the Israeli settler colonial oppression, and analyses it as a three tier system of oppression made up of a military occupation, apartheid and settler colonialism.¹²

In addition to the mainstream party's role in diagnosing national oppression, in the 1970's the leftist parties offered a broader comprehensive analysis of the interlocking and mutually reinforcing nature of the relationships between Zionist settler colonialism, western capitalism and imperialism. For the

¹² The Unified BDS Call asks movements and individuals throughout the world to impose boycotts and sanctions until Israel end its system of "colonialism, apartheid and occupation," and end its oppression of all of the Palestinian people, not just those in the occupied territories. <http://www.bdsmovement.net/apartheid-colonisation-occupation>.

PFLP and the DFLP, the liberation of Palestine was tied a broader anti-imperial struggle for the political and economic liberation of the Arab periphery as a whole. The left, as Arab nationalists, were part of the broader third world project, its struggle against imperial political domination, and economic subordination of the third world by the core capitalist economies and western capital. The Palestinian left, therefore, defined the “national war of liberation [as] our starting point on the road to progress” (PFLP, 1969: 225-226) where progress was no longer predicated on non-western nations being subordinated to western capitalist interests. Instead, *progress was redefined as the right of third world peoples to control their own resources*, and use them to develop their societies on equalitarian lines, according to *socialist and democratic principles*.

This is why the Palestinian leftist factions that were leading the grassroots organising in the 1970-80’s regarded economic liberation as necessary for national liberation. Like other Marxists, third world liberation movements, they were conscious of the need to liberate the economy from the grip of western capitalist interests in *order to use it as an instrument for the betterment of their own people*. Moreover, the grassroots modes of organising and the critical modes of consciousness the left tried to invest in people were a reflection of this emancipatory worldview, and its critical conceptualisation of power. This once again underscores the need for movements in the present to reclaim such a critical holistic diagnosis of structures of domination in order to be able to provide a clear vision for how to transform structures of oppression. Khitam Saafin head of the women’s committee of the PFLP affirms this and explains that the party’s emancipatory worldview determined the forms that grassroots organising took. She explains that when the PFLP’s women’s committee was first established it studied other revolutionary experiences looking for a mode of organising which could strengthen people’s *sumud* and provide a framework to resist both national and economic domination in line with their critical understanding of these systems of power.¹³

2.3 People as Power

The second way that the political parties created the conditions for a popular people’s liberation struggle was by reclaiming the people as a site of power. In doing so, the parties threw off colonial ideologies designed to keep people in a state of passive submission, surrendering their power to the colonial system. The left took the lead in this process. As Fadwa Labadi explains, the left prioritised working with the grassroots, politicising them and supporting them in their daily struggles because

¹³ Interview with Khitam Saafin, Head Union of Palestinian Women’s Work Committee, April 19, 2012.

the left “recognises that *the people are a source of power*. Liberation needs mass mobilisation, collective action where peoples’ collective energies are channelled towards this goal.”¹⁴ Affirming the people as the *means* and the *goals* of the struggle, the movement “invested in people’s potential, abilities” and their belief in their own agency (Kuttab, 1989: 137). In doing so, the movement released peoples’ energies and tried to enable them to reclaim the power they had surrendered to the colonial system (Anteant, 2011). At one level, organising the people was strategic, as Lisa Taraki explains, for the mass organisations and popular committees that were set up by the parties in the 1970’s were harder for the Israeli coloniser to “target and destroy” and could protect political work because of their “informal and amorphous” character (1989: 61). Yet at another level, the left saw the people as a space in which to build autonomous forms of power that could buttress the struggle to create alternative realities.

The significance of this attempt to reclaim the people as the locus of power, and its relevance for today lies in the way it overturns the colonial hegemony through which the domination over the colonised is exercised. The colonial system seeks to justify its oppression by dehumanising the colonised indigenous society; it depicts the colonised as without values or agency, as a “corrosive element,” and tries to convince them that must be “saved” from themselves by the coloniser (Fanon, 1963: 6, 149). It locates power in the symbols of colonial authority, the police, the barracks, and the state. The colonial hegemony leaves one option for the oppressed to submit to domination and “adopt the ways of the master” (ibid: 7). This racist colonial worldview denies the agency, creative thought and potentiality of the colonised. As Aime Cesaire maintains this racist colonial discourse debases the colonised and propagates the view that “these negroes can’t even imagine what freedom is... It is the white agitators who put that into their heads” (1955: 60). This colonial discourse prevents colonised intellectuals and leaders from linking with own people and developing other creative forms of power that are not based on domination.

Today, it is precisely the internalisation of this colonial worldview which explains the conduct of the PA, its “realist” politics and its ongoing efforts to beseech the west and prove that Palestinians are “worthy” of a state. This colonised consciousness seeks to assimilate itself to the values and modes of power of the oppressor; it internalises the view that the oppressed are devoid of agency. In contrast to this, in the 1970’s the communists and the left as a whole radically rejected this colonial

¹⁴ Interview with Dr Fadwa Labadi, ibid.

worldview, its attempt to instil powerlessness in the colonised and associate power with colonial symbols and modes of domination. Popular organising sought to dislodge Palestinian from a state of submission, restore their power and their ability to build alternative democratic, equalitarian alternative formations of power. Salim Tamari reminds us of the total nature of the power that Israeli settler colonialism exercised over Palestinians at the time, through its efforts to integrate an all encompassing system of domination:

Every seam of Palestinian daily life has been embedded over the years with the consequences of this integration... Israeli rule should not be seen only as a system of control, but also as the totalitarian adaption of Palestinian life to the conditions of this control in every person's consciousness – or rather in the Palestinian unconscious (1991: 15).

In opposition to this system, this left tried to take back people's power and build autonomous counter formations of power in two ways. Firstly, the parties did this by organising people through the popular committees and the mass organisations which mobilised youth, women and workers. Through these structures the left "spread Marxist thinking" and worked with the oppressed in their daily struggles to make them aware of how national oppression, economic exploitation and patriarchal domination work and repress people in their daily lives.¹⁵ They were trying to build the consciousness of the oppressed and create militant subjects who could reclaim their power and use it to confront overlapping systems of domination. Labadi explains how this worked in practice, recounting how the DFLP worked with teachers in the late 1970's to organise a series of strike to struggle against these overlapping forces. She explains that strikes were used to demand an increase in wages for Palestinian teachers, comparable to what Israeli teachers were receiving at the time, and at the same time fight for a national curriculum.¹⁶ Likewise, the women's committees worked with women to help them understand the nature of patriarchal domination and "challenge patriarchal structures and male control over their lives,"¹⁷ while mobilising women to resist Israeli settler colonialism. In other words, the committees worked with the grassroots to shift peoples' consciousness and empower them in the sense of enabling them to shake off structures of oppression (Fasheh, 1989: 557-560).

¹⁵ Interview with Dr Fadwa Labadi, *ibid*; Interview with Eileen Kuttub, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Interview with Dr Fadwa Labadi, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Interview with Khitam Saafin, *ibid*.

The committees' attempts to restore power to the people sought to actualise individuals as agents in an ongoing struggle for liberation, which would bring with it forms of emancipation on way, reclamation of dignity, new forms of social equality and workers rights and a more human economic order. This all encompassing form of people struggle casts critical light on the present and makes clear how narrow and confined our conception of struggle, and ability to see our own power, has become. Unlike today therefore, where neoliberal hegemony has succeeded in depoliticising action, where people have become separated from power and struggle, people's power was about recognising that each system of domination perpetuates itself by virtue of the power we surrender to it. It was about realising the possibility of people creating alternative humane, non-dominating egalitarian forms of power, *by first and foremost restoring power to themselves*. Today we have lost sight of the various manifold forms of power the colonised can reclaim – that begin firstly by refusing to give legitimacy to a system of oppression by engaging with it. The wide calls today for boycotting and therefore disengaging with the Israeli colonial system in all its forms, from the BDS movement to similar calls made by Marwan Barghouti (Abu Saada, 2012), are about reclaiming our power from this system, disengaging again from colonial apparatus and stripping it of legitimacy. Yet, as I shall now turn to explain, the Palestinian movement people's power went further than this. It was also buttressed by a theorisation of resistance that sought to build modes of autonomy that could enable and sustain a collective long term struggle.

The second way the parties invested in the power of the people was by trying to build autonomous forms of power, pillars that could help sustain a long-term struggle for liberation. Much of this was grounded in local theorisations of resistance by intellectuals and activists in the occupied territories, particularly the notion of *sumud muqawim* developed by Ibrahim Dakkak and the *Arab Thought Forum*. This locally articulated concept, which reflected wider local theories of popular struggle, such as Adel Samara's notion of strengthening *sumud* by building a popular, protected economy (2005), represents the underlying philosophy that informed the work of the popular committees.

Dakkak and others developed the concept *sumud muqawim* as a critique of the PLO's vision of "passive *sumud*". This latter informed the work of Palestinian-Jordanian Joint Committee, which distributed funds for static *sumud* that just sustained the "physical existence of the Palestinians"

(Dakkak, 1988: 288-289).¹⁸ Dakkak critiqued passive *sumud* as highly detrimental for the Palestinian struggle, and regarded it as promoting pacification and accommodation to oppression by replacing resistance to colonialism with dependence on the funds distributed by the Joint Committee. Recognising the nature of Zionist settler colonialism as bent on colonising the land and permanently subjugating the Palestinian natives or replacing them altogether, he theorised the need to link *sumud* (steadfastness) and *muqawami* (resistance) together into a single praxis. He envisaged the single praxis of *sumud muqawim* as giving people autonomy through independent power, such as economic self-reliance, which would enable them to resist oppressive conditions and engage in a long-term struggle for liberation (ibid: 306-307). Dakkak applauded the way the voluntary movement sought to create what the Higher Committee for Voluntary Work described as “a new human” and “a new ethics” (quoted in ibid: 305) rooted in independence, self-reliance from the colonial system, where the together the colonised would reclaim their collective power and redirect it towards struggle.

Thus *sumud muqawim* was about moving from defensive forms of survival to offensive modes of struggle: a continues process of confrontation and resistance that meant not only confronting the colonial political apparatus, but expanding agriculture, reclaiming resources and creating a resisting economy that could sustain people and enable daily conquests in a cumulative struggle for liberation (de Carvalho, 2006). The whole idea of giving people autonomy and independent power to sustain a continuous process of struggle was rooted in a theory of the economy and its relationship to the political, which I will explain below. In terms of lessons for today, this reminds us that struggle is a holistic process. Today our conception of political struggle has become radical diminished and reduced to the colonised participating in isolated protects, whether organised by the Palestinian youth movement or isolated direct actions organised by the popular committees against the apartheid wall. It is necessary to reclaim the vision and the spirit of confrontation, as grounded and buttressed by counter modes of power that can fortify, anchor and sustain a process of struggle.

2.4 Organising Structure

The final way the parties created the condition of possibility for a people’s struggle for liberation was by establishing a structure to organise people, which enabled the vision and consciousness of liberation to spread and be translated into a daily praxis. In the mid 1970’s to early 1980’s, the

¹⁸ Following the Baghdad Summit in 1978, the PLO-Jordanian Joint Committee began distributing Arab *sumud* funds to the Palestinians in the occupied territories. For more details see (Dakkak, 1988; Tamari, 1991).

political parties created mass organisations, popular committees, women's committees, workers unions and student organisations, inspired by the voluntary work committees that were set up by the voluntary movement. The communists were not only the main force behind the voluntary movement, but they also prioritised popular organising, and set up workers' unions and student organisations in mid 1970's as part of an attempt to rebuild the movement and locate it in a popular base after many of its leaders and members were arrested by the Israeli colonial state.¹⁹ The DFLP, where women played a strong central role in the party, took the lead in setting up organisations for women, the female members of the party set up the first women's committee in 1978 (Hasso, 1998).

Most of the mass organisations described themselves as “mass democratic frameworks” (Taraki, 1989: 62). This reflected both the decentralised, democratic and often collective run nature of these formations, as modelled along the example set by the voluntary committees (Bargouti, 1989). Moreover, although the mass organisations were part of the parties, they were not fully subordinated to a central party apparatus; rather they were much more fluid and popular run entities that were linked to a higher national committee, as inspired by the voluntary movement. Later, cooperatives and home economic projects were also set up and run by the popular committees, and directly linked to the parties and their political worldview. The self designation of the mass organisations as “democratic frameworks” directs our attention to another dimension of the movement. The label reflects the progressive outlook of the mass organisations, specifically, the democratic as well as equalitarian principles along which the committees sought to organise people, build alternative non-dominating relations, and in the process a liberated “new human.”²⁰ I will explain this further below. For now, it is important to explain why these structures were so important.

The structures were significant as they created an infrastructure for resistance which transformed grassroots organising into a daily praxis and a mass based movement. These structures were a crucial factor as they provided a framework for mass based politicisation and mobilisation; this incorporated a wide alliance of classes and previously excluded social groups into the movement, from workers, urban intellectuals to peasants and refugees, consolidating actions into a coordinated collective struggle (Taraki, 1989). Tamari takes this further and describes the popular committees as the “organizational crucible for the uprising” (1991: 22). He explains that the committees “succeeded in creating a vast

¹⁹ Interview with Bassam Salhi, Head of the People's Party, March 21, 2012.

²⁰ Interview with Bassam Salhi, *ibid.*

organisational network” and “mobilised thousands of people” (ibid: 25). But more crucially, the committees were the framework through which daily organising was coordinated and proceed. This enabled the liberation struggle to translate into a routine daily praxis, or in the words of deported UNLU leader Ghasan al Masri it allowed “revolt to become a patterned activity” (quoted in ibid: 23).

The relevance of this model of struggle for today lies in the way it radically disrupts the depoliticised individualised notion of action that has now exerts a hegemonic hold over our imagination, and is a part of the neoliberal reconfiguration of the political. *It is a reminder that structures are necessary not only to mobilise the people but to transform spontaneous collective resistance into daily praxis and struggle for liberation.* In other words, structures are needed to enable the potentiality of people’s power to be transformed into praxis and continuous modes of struggle. The revolutions underway in the Arab world confirm this view. Today, activists in Egypt attribute the weakness and incomplete nature of the revolution to the absence of a structure capable of mobilising social forces and workers in a way to bring their full power to bear on the regime (Hamalawy, 2011). One can learn a lot from organic grassroots committees that the Palestinian national movement created in the 1970’s in order to imagine new modes of political organising.

As Traboulsi argues, the traditional model of the vanguard party, which was characterised by a rigid hierarchy and patronising attitudes towards the grassroots failed, and as such, we are at a juncture where the parties need to rebuild themselves, while learning from the failures of the past (2012). Moving beyond the neoliberal framework of state/civil society and rebuilding political struggles requires a new model and framework for political organising that can avoid the limitations of the vanguard party (ibid). The decentralised, democratic popular committees of the 1970-80’s illustrate the possibility of a different model. This decentralised, flexible mode of organising managed to combine economic projects to meet peoples’ daily needs with the struggle for social and political liberation. These popular formations were run by party members and activists at the grassroots level, *as guided by the party*, its ideology and directives, and were not subordinated to a vanguard elite as in the traditional model of the party.

3. Sustaining a People's Movement for Liberation

3.1 Linking the Individual to the Collective through Alternative Horizontal Relations

The Palestinian grassroots movement of the 1970-80's also offers important lessons for how to sustain a people's struggle for liberation. In delinking from the colonial apparatus and seeking to reclaim the power surrendered to the colonial system, one of the important aspects of this movement is the way that it replaced Israeli settler colonial attempts to atomise and control Palestinian society with alternative non-dominating horizontal relations. Mutual forms of support, the practice of solidarity and voluntary work enabled subjects to overcome atomisation, build horizontal relations rooted in national principles that allowed the colonised to actualise and sustain power in collective action and struggle. At the same time, in weaving a broad class and social alliance together in this manner, the leftist parties created a progressive national consciousness that tried to replace submission to colonial domination with democratic and equalitarian relations, establishing the contours of an alternative to the colonial order.

Much of the foundation for the first *intifada*, the infrastructures for resistance, the organisational framework, the popular theories of resistance and the horizontal national social relations, were all laid down in the 1970's, largely through the work of the voluntary work movement. If the voluntary movement sought to "build a new human," it strived to transform the oppressed into autonomous self-reliant subjects who could rely on themselves and each other, where their very bodies and basic manual labour were the means used to build popular alternatives and strategies to combat settler colonialism. This new performative praxis gave rise to new "national ethics," new forms of mutuality and the principle of not just standing in solidarity with their fellow oppressed in the face of colonial apparatus, but intervening through physical work to overturn these oppressive conditions together through direct action. The Higher Committee for Voluntary Work describes their philosophy as follows:

We do not only build a wall or pave a road. We build a new human being... Working on the land voluntarily and extending help to the village and institutions is an exercise of the first degree. *It helped in the crystallisation of a new set of ethics*, dearly nurtured by the Higher Committee. Our purpose is to turn voluntary work...into a workshop and a school, both able to provide our Palestinian people with *pioneering individuals abiding by national ethics*, firmly anchored to the land and highly dedicated to the national cause, *(proving themselves) through their sweat and labour*" (emphasis added, quoted in Dakkak, 1988: 305).

As indicated in this quote, voluntary work consecrated new ethics. Leaders of the movement describe this as a process wherein the local tradition of *amneeh*, a traditional form of solidarity and mutual support where peasant communities assisted one another during the harvest, was extended from level of the community to the nation as a whole.²¹ Salhi suggests it was reconstituted as an anti-colonial national praxis where one worked for the *balad*, the homeland and the collective good, out of political commitment not an expectation of profit or material gain.²² It not only unified people, it shaped a collective political consciousness in which the colonised affirmed as themselves as a collective, saw themselves as both working to help each other, particularly those facing immediate colonial aggression, and working for the overarching goal of national liberation.²³ There was no contradiction between individual, groups and the collective as a whole – individual, group, women’s, workers’ empowerment were seen as integrally linked to collective empowerment.

The Israeli settler colonial attempts to pacify and control the Palestinian natives were therefore replaced with alternative horizontal bonds and collective solidarity that wove people together in resistance to domination. This created “an opposing hegemony” and normative infrastructure through which collective action and struggle could be organised and sustained (Farsoun and Landis, 1990: 18). The committees, the new social relations they established succeeded in:

knitting the people together in a web of reciprocal relations, mutual cooperation, and solid, politically conscious bonds, creating a “woven fabric” of hegemony that could unite many threads of Palestinian society which traditionally were separated by conflicting objectives (ibid: 27).

The woven relations and the new national ethics that promoted the colonised pooling their bodies and power together against the colonial apparatus, enabled individuals to “exercise power in collective action for liberation” (Kuttab, 2010: 248). It consolidated a sense of collective responsibility towards one another, towards the different parts of the nation, and the collective as a whole, in the course of the struggle for liberation. An activist describes this as the secret of first *intifada*, which enabled resistance and collective struggle to be sustained in the face of Israeli colonial repression and violence:

²¹ Interview with Muharram Barghouti, ibid.

²² Interview with Bassam Salhi, ibid.

²³ Interview with Muharram Barghouti, ibid.

It was not like today, in which there are link between the social groups and sectors of the colonised society. If one was hurt by the coloniser, i.e. Gaza was hit, all feel it, and others respond to mitigate and counter effects. UNLU addressed social groups and classes directly, with directives, ways to support others and outlining collective solution that helped sustain the movement.²⁴

Taking this further, Fadwa Shaer summarises the way these horizontal alternative relations broke the colonial system of fragmentation and unified the oppressed into a counter-power around a commitment to the struggle for liberation. The voluntary work and the horizontal relations it was based upon:

built a praxis in which people worked for collective goals... It tied the individual to the national level, the family and neighbourhood were organised by popular committees.... Voluntary work created a collective sense of responsibility. People saw themselves as part of a collective and were willing to work for collective national goals; they did not just see themselves as individuals. This means that any action, political or developmental they were ready to go, without funding, and act out of their own sense of commitment. Unlike today.²⁵

This rich model offers many important lessons for today. The entire neoliberal order of the present is, as explained above, predicated on an assault on collectives and a new paradigm of modernity that seeks to reproduce liberal individualism, negating collective held goals, including the collective good and national liberation. In the Palestinian colonial context today, the neoliberal drive to produce atomised individuals has worked hand in hand with settler colonial efforts to fragment and break up the indigenous society. The horizontal relations of the 1970's that unified and sustained the people into a body and counter force, underscore the need to rebuild collectivism, and re-establish the overlapping forms of identification that re-link individuals to the overlapping collective project and the national aspirations that bind them all together. Transcending individualism and the fragmentation of society requires reclaiming the basic premise that neoliberal individualistic notions "empowerment" have worked to undo, namely *that individual or group empowerment is incomplete and unsustainable without collective empowerment and national liberation*. Moreover, the experience of the 1970-80's also reveals the importance of alternative relations rooted in principles, such as solidarity and

²⁴ Interview with Sameer Khraishi, youth activist, Assistant Credit Manager, ACAD, May 7, 2012. Scholars remind us that during the first *intifada* communal solidarity manifested itself in the mobilisation of ongoing support to overcome Israeli punitive measures against the uprising, enabling people to withstand such aggressions. For instance, workers would volunteer to repair merchants' shops damaged and broken open by the Israeli army in an attempt to break commercial strikes, promoting the steadfastness of the merchants (Tamari, 1990: 164). This highlights crucial ways society develops its own ways of overcoming Israeli colonial attempts to assault the collective.

²⁵ Interview with Fadwa Shaer, former Fateh activist, General Director NGOs in Ramallah, Ministry of Interior, April 3, 2012.

the valorisation of voluntary work, according to which one acts on the basis of commitment. This normative political infrastructure links the collective around a shared emancipatory worldview.

3.2 Progressive National Consciousness

At the same time, in building these horizontal relations and organising the people into a movement, the left also shaped a progressive nationalist consciousness. Specifically, as the communists intervened through the voluntary movement to activate the oppressed and transform their individual agency into a collective power, they worked to breakdown social divisions as well as gender and class hierarchies. In other words, the movement not only strived to unify the nation through alternative horizontal bonds, but worked to build democratic and equalitarian relations. Fanon explains the significance of this type of organising as one that transcends model of the hero or charismatic leader and invests in the people as the agents of change and does so what he describes as “elevating their minds” through political education and praxis (1963: 138). The importance of this lies in the way that it transforms nationalism from empty symbols valorising an “authentic” national cultural and traditions into social and political consciousness and progressive vision of society (ibid: 142). As Fanon asserts:

If nationalism is not explained, enriched, and deepened, if it does not very quickly turn into social and political consciousness, into humanism, then it leads to a dead end... Only massive commitment by men and women to judicious and productive tasks gives form and substance to this consciousness (ibid: 144).

In mobilising the grassroots and trying to build a people’s movement, the communists linked people in “productive tasks” that worked to break down social hierarchies and unify people across class and social divisions. According to Muharram Barghouti one of the leaders of the voluntary movement:

Voluntary work tried to overcome class division and differentiation. Professionals, intellectuals etc all went and volunteered in the same capacity. All participated in cleaning the streets, for instance. There was no hierarchy.²⁶

In a similar manner, the movement also strived to challenge social hierarchies and patriarchal subordination of women. Salhi explains that voluntary work:

Challenged social norms, gender divisions and female seclusion. Women’s work was promoted and women’s role was valued. This sent a progressive message to society; it

²⁶ Interview with Muharram Barghouti, ibid.

encouraged change in rural areas, it increased women's participation in political work and promoted gender equality.²⁷

The horizontal relations that the movement created, therefore, sought to establish new equalitarian relations, which incorporated people into a progressive national consciousness that sought to replace colonial realities with inclusive and egalitarian vision of society. Salhi describes the relations created inside of the voluntary work as follows:

We were all equals inside of the committees. There was no hierarchy until the Higher Committee for Voluntary Work was set up. We organised on equalitarian principles. Inside the committee, a professor from Birzeit and me, for instance, had the same equal weight and an equal voice... The vision of building a new human, therefore, entailed promoting the equality of all human beings, and respect for all. We practiced this by promoting democratic principles and consolidating democratic decision making process in our work.²⁸

The progressive national consciousness and project that the left fashioned, therefore, was rooted in direct democratic practices and culture that promoted relating to others as equals.²⁹ In organising the people around these ideals and embedding this new consciousness in their daily lives, the movement did not do so by homogenising the nation as a monolithic whole. Rather, the left and the parties as a whole differentiated between workers, classes, students, women etc and separately mobilised through committees, unions and mass organisations. This is not just due to a broad based class and social alliance that included workers, peasants, women and other forces. Rather, as indicated from the outset, this people's movement for liberation integrated overlapping struggles against capitalist, patriarchal and nationalist oppression and sought to provide an inclusive framework in which overlapping resistance to these forces could be organised.

This popular movement therefore represents a unique attempt to "liberate the collective consciousness of every sector of society to challenge the ruling institution, and replace them with civilized, horizontal, and human alternatives" (Rira, 2011). Moreover, what defines this struggle as a people's movement for liberation is the way *it sought to harmonise and realise the overlapping rights and the liberation of social groups, classes and the collective as a whole*. Therefore, it promoted the idea that the rights and the liberation of workers, women and the nation as whole were not mutually exclusive or antagonistic, but were overlapping and necessary components of a holistic progressive vision of

²⁷ Interview with Bassam Salhi, *ibid*.

²⁸ Interview with Bassam Salhi, *ibid*.

²⁹ Activists in Dheisheh camp describe how the democratic culture created in the spaces of the popular committees and grassroots organising shaped them: "we married individuals of our own choice and married other members of the party (breaking out of traditional arrange marriages). It reflected the democratic culture in the movement, and we lived democratic lives in our marriages." Focus group with activists from Bethlehem, *ibid*.

liberation. This created linkages between class struggles, movements for workers rights and economic equality, on the one hand, as well as struggle for social rights and women's liberation, on the other, and the struggle for national liberation.

Nonetheless, while this is the case, it also true that the national movement incorporated women's movement and class based struggles into the national liberation struggle through a form of subordinate inclusion. Moreover, women's activists argue that the relationship between feminism and nationalism at the time was much more tilted towards national resistance and liberation over social liberation,³⁰ although important gains were made in terms of promoting progressive social norms and creating women's feminist consciousness (Hasso, 2001). Moreover, eventually the women's movement came up against the limits of the secular nationalist movement and the patriarchal nature of the male dominated movement (Hamammi, 1990). This was one of the factors behind the women movement's decision to separate itself from the national movement at the time of Oslo and use newly available donor funding to attempt to set up an autonomous women's movement (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001).

One of the central lessons from this period, and one of the issues that movements like the women's movement are struggling with today, is the need to re-link the now severed ties between feminist, class based struggles and the national liberation struggle (Hamammi and Kuttab, 1999). Women's activists are aware that the replacement of a mass based movement with the "NGO model of lobbying, advocacy and workshop-style education... activities" has weakened the women's movement and uprooted it "from the real locus of political power" (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001: 26). Moreover, in seeking to reconstitute the relationship between the women's movement and the national movement, feminist activists affirm that social liberation is meaningless without national rights and liberation, thus reclaiming the inclusive overlapping sense of empowerment and vision of liberation of the past.

The women's movement's strategic vision for re-linking with the national struggle provides important insights and possible ways forward for other movements in the present. Palestinian feminists regard the national struggle as a necessary terrain in which to negotiate women's rights and re-link feminism to national goals. Palestinian feminist envisages the process of re-linking these movements together as a dialogical process where the women's movement builds alliances with

³⁰ Interview with Amal Khreisheh, *ibid*.

nationalist forces breaking “the political siege around the women’s movement” (Hammami and Kuttab, 1999: 7). Thus, building alliances, coalitions and joining forces with nationalist movement and actors around issues critical to the Palestinian national struggle such as refugee rights, prisoners rights and colonisation of land (ibid: 9) is conceived as a way to negotiate a new relationship to the national movement. This model provides an example that other class based struggles or the prisoner’s movement can follow, working to advance social or economic struggles against oppressive structures while re-linking to the national movement.

The women’s movement and the popular people’s movement of the 1970-80’s remind us of the need to reinvest the national struggle with overlapping progressive social and economic vision and programme for liberation. The popular movement of the past also alerts us to the power of grounding this progressive national consciousness in new equalitarian social relationships, embedded through daily grassroots organising.

3.3 Economic Liberation is Necessary for National Liberation

Finally, the last and most important lesson the popular struggle of the 1970-1980’s offers for the present lies in the way the movement placed the economy at the centre of its vision of building alternative people’s power, and specifically the way it theorised economic self-reliance and economic liberation as necessary for national liberation.³¹ At the time, the popular committees and the movement as a whole sought to build people’s economic self-reliance outside of colonial power through household economy, cooperatives and the return to the land. This was tied to a broader vision of building a national economy that could escape dependency and subordination to Israeli settler colonial control and logics of dispossession (Kuttab, 1989). An independent national economy was regarded as necessary to help sustain political struggle and move from economic survival into a resisting economy or a type of “development for liberation” (Abdul Hadi et al, 1992: 171). At the same time, the whole idea of building an autonomous and liberated economy was linked to the vision of establishing a more humane social and economic alternative to capitalism (ibid: 171).

The philosophy and theorisation of the relationship between economy and politics that was behind the first *intifada* is extremely relevant for today. It represents an antidote to the neoliberal hegemony

³¹ Interview Eileen Kuttab, ibid.

and its free market orthodoxy, which seeks to subordinate society and abandon collective well being to the market and unrestricted private capitalist enrichment. The neoliberal dream of an unregulated market has produced impoverishment and misery for the majority of people in the world today. In contrast to this, the Palestinian people's struggle affirmed the economy as instrument in the hands of society, accountable to social and national goals. It was rooted in an alternative philosophy that *defined the economy* as an instrument through which to realise collective national goals and, therefore, *as a transformative tool at the service of society and the collective good*, as opposed to serving private gain. A review of this vision offers important insights for the present.

Popular Theory of the Economy

The economic philosophy that underpinned the grassroots organising of the 1970'-80's was a combination of two elements, local theorisations of resistance, on the one hand, and Marxist thought, on the other. Dakkak's local theory of *sumud muqawim* explained above rested on the premise that the economy and the political are inextricably intertwined. He argued that to focus on the economy, i.e. promoting a market economy as the PA is doing today, in isolation from the struggle against colonial oppression, and therefore separating the economy from national goals, will lead to "a dead end" and the normalisation of colonial realities (Dakkak, 1989: 295). At the time, USAID programmes to "improve the quality of life" under the Israeli colonial system, were sharply rebuked as integrating Palestinians into the Israeli settler colonial system, increasing their dependency and accommodating them to oppression (ibid: 291; Kuttab, 1989: 133). In contrast to this, Dakkak's notion of *sumud muqawim* and his vision of *resisting development* rested on the premise that economic development is not an end in itself, but it is a means and it is a tool to achieve long-term social and political goals (ibid: 294). As Kuttab explains, the popular organising of the 1970's and the associated popular economy it produced rested on an understanding of the "dialectical relationship between political struggle and development as a tool for liberation."³² Economic self-reliance through small scale economic projects was not only seen as enabling people to engage in a long-term struggle against colonialism, but development was also seen as tool of struggle against oppression.

³² Interview Eileen Kuttab, ibid.

Crucial notions such as *development for liberation* and a *resisting national economy* centred on enabling people to return to the land and developing economic productive capacities, and therefore, building a national economy that could enable the colonised to withstand and contest colonial structures. It was envisaged as:

creating an economy of resistance whose aim would be to transform the Palestinians from consumers and passive receivers of foreign aid to producers who are resistant to any attempts to remove them from their land (Abdul Hadi et al, 1992: 170).

Harold Dicks similarly explains that national economic power would give the indigenous society independent resources and means through which to “stand fast under occupation” and develop their own “offensive strategies” to contest colonisation and throw off colonial controls and structures of oppression (1988: 311-13). These authors advocated building a national economy through an inward oriented system of import substitution that would meet “local consumption patterns” (Dakkak, 1988: 298; Dicks, 1988: 326). However and in relation to the present, this resisting model is also predicated on the national bourgeoisie “fulfilling its historic role,” becoming agents of transformation and producing a “dynamic national economy,” instead of being subordinate vehicles for external capital (Fanon, 1963: 100-101). Or it requires a system, structures and linkages to coordinate and manage a popular economy.

In addition to the local theorisation of resistance, Marxist and broader third world liberation theories also shaped the economic philosophy that buttressed the Palestinian popular struggle. As explained above, the Palestinian left were conscious of the articulations and interlocking relationships between settler colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. These parties therefore were not just concerned with working class struggles, but saw the economy as needing to be liberated from external domination, and its resources reclaimed by the peoples’ of the third world for the betterment of their societies. At the same time, in building popular economic formations, such as cooperatives, the leftist parties also used many of these spaces to build alternative economic and social modes of life to capitalism. Cooperatives were decentralised economic entities that were run collectively through democratic decision making processes and equalitarian structures (Kuttab, 1989: 133-134). They reorganised economic life according to the principles of social and economic equality, dignity, and economic self-reliance (Abdul Hadi et al, 1992: 172). The cooperatives were part of a drive to create alternatives to political and economic subordination through grassroots:

projects which would lead to the mobilization of the people in transforming their own society, with emphasis on the equal development of all members of society through the enhancement of co-operative relations and democratic exchange (Kuttab, 1989: 134).

In serving collective national goals, resisting political and economic subordination, and reorganising economic life according to equalitarian and democratic principles the cooperative movement created the basis for alternative national economy while waging “development for liberation” (Abdul Hadi et al, 1992: 171).

The Dialectical Relationship Between Economic and Political Liberation

One can see how the above economic philosophy and dialectical relationship between political and economic struggles for liberation played out in practice. The popular committees’ and the UNLU’s vision of development focused on building people’s economic self-sufficiency, with an emphasis on returning to the land, building agricultural development and attaining food self-sufficiency. Again this served a dual function, it gave people autonomous power and it contributed to building independent economic structures. The leaflets of the first *intifada* include calls to increase the home economy, cultivate the land and intensify the boycott of Israeli goods (UNLU Communique 13, 1988: 104). Some of the leaflets salute the committees for supporting this process and having “created a new way of life based on cooperation and self-reliance” (UNLU Communique 23, 1988: 133). Moreover, this process of building self-reliance was understood as tied to a larger processes that of building alternative structures “our people are beginning to establish a new national system and to consolidate their authority” (UNLU Communique 13, 1988: 103).

Thus economic self-reliance through small scale projects was a means to empower the colonised and work towards the creation of a national economy. As Barghouti explains:

cooperatives were a tool to build self-reliance... The household economy was also a response to poverty and hunger. People were given the means to grow their own food items; instead of purchasing goods, they could consume what they didn’t sell. It was a very simple lifestyle but people were convinced because it was a way to build autonomy and contribute to building independent economic structures.³³

³³ Interview with Muharam Barghouti, *ibid*.

The home economy, small scale projects and cooperatives were means to strengthen people's steadfastness but were also envisaged as part of a larger, more lasting project, that of an alternative popular economy. Suha Barghouti elaborates:

Our objective in setting up cooperatives was not profit. We wanted to help families, provide them with an income and strengthen their *sumud*. Moreover, under the curfews and the sieges that existed at the time, these small centres of production would enable localities to survive and would become a source for meeting local needs...The cooperatives therefore had three objectives: firstly, strengthen family's economic independence, secondly, contribute to building local products and a national economy, and thirdly, enable the *sumud* of local communities and became a source for meeting local consumption needs.³⁴

The emerging popular economy that Barghouti points to directs our attention to the alternative structures that were created by the grassroots committees. The entire popular struggle of the 1970-80's carried with it the potentiality of consolidating alternative economic, social and political structures (Tamari, 1991), alternative people's structures to replace colonial system.

Yet, despite this potentiality, over a decade of grassroots organising failed to consolidate these structures into an alternative popular system. One of the main reasons behind the collapse of the system was the absence of a long-term vision for building alternative indigenous structures on the part of the PLO. Many activists and intellectuals argue that the exiled PLO did not grasp the strategic significance of the alternative popular formations that were created by the grassroots movement under Israeli colonial rule. Or it is also likely that these alternative formations threatened the interests of the Fateh dominated PLO in exile. According to Fadwa Shaer "they did not have a long-term vision to invest in what was happening on the ground, otherwise what we had created could have continued,"³⁵ and been consolidated into alternative economic structures, empowering Palestinian society as a whole. Omar 'Asaf former member of the UNLU argues:

The popular committees and the general vision that existed at the time was not enough to create an alternative economy, broader support and strategic planning was needed....But the PLO did not have a plan to support what was happening. The PLO and the Joint Committee with Jordan focused on services and investing in housing projects, they did not invest in production, agriculture and land reclamation. If money had been sent for these purposes people could have relied on the land in a much more systemic manner.³⁶

³⁴ Interview with Suha Barghouti, PFLP activist, March 27, 2012.

³⁵ Interview with Fadwa Shaer, *ibid*.

³⁶ Interview with Omar 'Asaf, former member of the UNLU, April 18, 2012.

Others echo this and critique the PLO for not having a long-term vision and for failing to build productive centres and agricultural production.³⁷

At the same time, another factor that aborted the emerging structures was the way in which the cooperatives – as well as the popular committees – were targeted and closed down the Israeli coloniser. This raises the question how alternative structures, if attempted today, could be protected from the settler colonial system?

Despite the eventual collapse of the popular economy and the attempt to create a resisting national economy, this experience is an important reference and model for today. First and foremost it shatters the neoliberal hegemony and the tyranny of its unregulated ruthless form of capitalism that seeks to make the economy unaccountable to social and political concerns. It reminds us that an alternative model is not only possible but is necessary, particularly for a colonised people. The notion that the economy and development are transformational tools that should not just serve society and people's welling but can serve as instruments for liberation must be reclaimed today. It is true that the possibility of a development for liberation is harder to realise today given the creation of a capitalist class with its own class interests.³⁸ Yet, today many organisations including the women's movement are returning to the cooperatives as a way to rebuild economic autonomy and self-reliance. Economic autonomy remains a crucial requirement for rebuilding the national liberation struggle today. The sophisticated philosophy that underpinned the people's struggle of the 1970-80's provides crucial insights for the present by underscoring the centrality of liberating the economy from subordination and turning it into a transformative agent in support of the national struggle. The vision of building a popular national economy to sustain and fortify the ability of the indigenous society to withstand settler colonialism and wage its own struggle is still relevant today. Equally the notion of a development for liberation that confronts and resists the colonisation of land and contests other colonial measures and modes of repression is necessary and can be reclaimed today, but it requires political will and a commitment to struggle. Finally, it is crucial to reclaim and recreate the emancipatory vision of the 1970's. The popular committees' attempts to build a popular economy which could provide an alternative to capitalism and create more humane

³⁷ Interview with Eileen Kuttab, *ibid.*

³⁸ Interview with Eileen Kuttab, *ibid.*

social and economic modes of life are an important reference for today. It illustrates the possibility of building an alternative economy model that provides social justice and equality.

Conclusion

This paper examined the grassroots organising that laid the foundation for the first *intifada*. This movement is distinct in its attempt to consolidate a people's struggle for liberation in which the people were both the means and the goals of the struggle – the purpose of which was liberate them from overlapping national oppression, economic exploitation, and social domination. It was a unique instance in which the popular committees tied to political parties, through their involvement in daily grassroots organising, tried to “liberate the collective consciousness of every sector of society” (Rira, 2011) to challenge the structures of oppression. This people's power movement struggled to break colonial patterns of rule and replace them with popular alternatives to the colonial system, which also sought to free people from capitalism exploitation and patriarchal domination.

The grassroots movement was organised and sustained on the basis of a number of principle. The movement affirmed the people as the locus of power and worked to get them to reclaim the power they had surrendered to the colonial system, by delinking from the colonial apparatus, its structures and building counter forms of power to sustain the struggle for liberation. Decentralised, local structures, in the form of the popular committees, which linked to the parties yet were also relatively autonomous and run by grassroots activists and party members, provided the necessary framework which enabled this vision to spread. This structure also allowed resistance to become a daily practice, on a mass scale, consolidating the real power of the people. New national ethics and principles, such as solidarity, voluntarism and mutual support in direct action, linked segmented social forces and classes together in horizontal relations that sustained collective struggle. At the same time, grassroots organising was underpinned by an economic philosophy that regarded the economy as a central pillar in the struggle and sought to create resisting forms of development to further the goals of liberation.

The popular movement of the 1970-80's was a holistic movement that was organically tied to the PLO and its alternative emancipatory worldview. This sophisticated movement cannot be replicated in the same form today. But the principles and modes of organising that guided it are relevant for the present and can help direct the struggle to reconstitute the Palestinian liberation movement

today. A few concluding observations are needed. Before proceeding it is necessary to emphasise as others stress that efforts to rebuild the Palestinian national liberation movement must be predicated on breaking the fragmentation of the Palestinian people and the Zionist settler colonial strategies of divide and rule, which have sought to sever the connections between Palestinians in the occupied territories, 1948 occupied Palestine and the diaspora. This includes economic strategies of integration and “inventing mechanisms to restore economic cohesion across the green line” (Khalidi, 2012: 4).

Firstly, movements struggling to rebuild a framework for the Palestinian liberation movement that re-links all of the parts of the Palestinian people in a struggle against Zionist settler colonialism must reclaim a critical understanding of overlapping colonialist, capitalist and patriarchal domination. Today, before we can rebuild a liberation consciousness that can envisage an alternative just order, we must become conscious of the way these structures intersect and work together within a single framework, namely the Oslo architecture. Specifically, it is crucial to develop a holistic diagnosis that understands the way new economic forms of dependency, subjugation and new neoliberal predatory forms of capitalism, which were enabled by the single Oslo architecture, reinforce settler colonial political domination. Just as the committees, particularly the women’s movement, worked with people in their daily struggles to make them conscious of the way systems of domination work in their daily lives, it is necessary to help people seek how the above structures produce daily conditions of economic deprivation, dependency on food aid, repression of agricultural development, expulsion of labor and spatial confinement.

Secondly, movements trying to rebuild a framework for the Palestinian struggle must rebuild a progressive national consciousness, one that goes beyond static symbols, claims of cultural authenticity and link people together through a progressive social and political consciousness that affirms social and economic equality and the overlapping goal of national liberation. In addition to this, it is clear that while there new movement are emerging many remain captive to the neoliberal logic its colonisation of political life and its repackaging of resistance as an isolated protest or individualised activity, replacing drawn out struggles to transform and overthrow structures of oppression. Notions of power, resistance and collective struggle need to be reclaimed today. One of the main obstacles preventing the emergence of organised new movement today is the way this neoliberal way of thinking reduces struggle to episodic protests and demonstrations, severed from an

imaginary capable of reclaiming people's power and creating a framework for a people's movement for liberation rooted in people's daily lives. Not only do we need to reaffirm and reclaim a sense of the creative forms of counter power that people are capable of fashioning. But this in turn requires flexible, decentralised structure to organise people in their daily struggles, and coordinate their resistance against oppression.

Thirdly and finally, today as the settler colonisation of land advances at furious pace, and processes of ghettoisation, confinement, repression of agricultural development and destruction of the economy's productive base continue unabatedly, the economic philosophy that informed the movement of the 1970's-80's needs to be reclaimed. The idea of building a national economy, a popular based national economy that can fulfil the requirements of both *sumud* and resistance is crucial today. To advance this project, it is necessary that motion like a resisting economy, development for liberation be revived, translated into a rigorous vision, and promoted discursively, practically, politically by intellectuals, the political parties and movements, such that it is translated into a counter-hegemony capable of imposing itself on the PA and its neoliberal orientation.

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