

## Resistance and the moral problems of scholarly refusal

I welcome the publication of the Virtual Forum on Gaza's Past, Present, and Futures. Most of the papers speak with great moral clarity and scholarly rigour. But I am troubled by the arguments put forward by Machold and Printy Currie (2024). Their argument, with explicit reference to the attacks of 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023 by Hamas and allies, is that "armed resistance is a legitimate, legal and moral right open to all Palestinians" (p2), and that political geographers should "refuse boundaries set by imperialist agendas" that might condemn this type of violent resistance. This is both intellectually and morally problematic. My aim in this short commentary is not to lay out the conditions under which the use of violence should be, or should not be, considered legitimate. Rather, I argue that taking a simplistic view of resistance, as Machold and Printy-Currie do, oversimplifies, romanticises and depoliticises the use of violence, with implications of how we conduct ourselves as geographers.

To begin, I do not deny or diminish the systematic and violent oppression of Palestinians, or the righteousness of Palestinian demands for self-determination, peace, and dignity. Nor do I disagree that oppression, resistance, and settler-colonialism are useful concepts for describing the deeply asymmetric violence and suffering within Israel/Palestine. My critique concerns the quality of discussion around resistance, and the scholarly, moral, and ethical implications of the approach taken by Machold and Printy Currie. Their uncritical acceptance and celebration of Hamas's acts of extreme violence rests on a shallow reading of scholarship on resistance and depends on simplistic binaries between monolithic oppressor and monolithic resistor. Their analysis depoliticises these acts of violence, morally justifying them by removing all discussion about the magnitude, intent, and impact of this violence. This has worrying implications for broader scholarly debate within political geography.

Resistance has been an important topic within political geography and the social sciences more broadly, particularly since the 1980s with the expansion of scholarship on 'the subaltern' and on anti-colonial and decolonial struggle (Scott, 1985, Ortner, 1995). Often grounded in detailed ethnography, this work has explored the complex politics of resistance, and the broad range of forms it can take, from overt violence to mundane, everyday actions. It has sought to understand resistance in the context of social, cultural, and institutional change, and in light of the constraints that shape which actions are possible for oppressors and resisters (Scott, 1985). The growth of resistance scholarship has been driven by the moral dimensions of identifying with the oppressed and seeking to understand and support their struggles (Moore et al, 1997).

This literature, and the expansion of understandings of resistance to include seemingly banal acts, however, has also been criticized for adopting a 'thin' understandings of politics and a romantic view of resisters and acts of resistance as unequivocally morally good (Ortner, 1995, Moore et al, 1997). One influential critique of 'thin' studies of resistance is Ortner's (1995) essay "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal". Here refusal refers to a "refusal of thickness, a failure of holism or density which itself may take various forms" (Ortner, 1995, p174). Ortner's essay is a rejection of the kind of simplistic view of resistance that I believe is contained within Machold and Printy Currie (2024)—a view that posits a binary struggle between a monolithic oppressor and a monolithic resistor whose resistance is merely a reflex against oppression. Ortner argues that resistance is more than simply opposing domination—more than a 'virtually mechanical re-action" (p.177). We need to understand the politics within resisting communities and what they are trying to achieve. Yet in Machold and Printy Currie's account, there is only fleeting mention of who undertook the attacks, with similarly fleeting mention of bland "anticolonial emancipation" as their goal. The oppressors, meanwhile, are described as the "Zionist entity and its western imperial supporters" (p. 1). Whilst Said (1978) urges an understanding of Zionist violence, and Palestinian reaction, that is grounded in

an understanding of their origins and beliefs and their broader links to other ideas and projects, here we are left with no idea of what either side believes in or the place of violence within it. The ideas, values and actions of Palestinians, and specifically those conducting the October 7 violence, are not grounded in anything bigger than a simple, mechanistic reaction to western and Zionist imperialism, without their own politics or history or links to other ideas and actors situated beyond Palestine's borders. In arguing that "Palestinians maintain that their resistance to this violence, and particularly armed resistance, represents legitimate means to ending colonial occupation" (p. 2), Machold and Printy Currie assume that this is the sole, obvious, and therefore apolitical driver of such violence. We are left with very little idea of who does what kind of violence to whom, in what way, and why; we are instead urged to accept any kind of violence as legitimate because it is resistance.

This is not just intellectually thin, but also, by depoliticising this violence, morally problematic. Machold and Printy Currie reduce Israel solely to its (significant) settler-colonial aspects, stripped of any internal social and political tensions, including a peace movement that was particularly active within the kibbutzim attacked on October 7—kibbutzim that were established before the state of Israel. It strips victims of their identities and histories. Unlike other papers in this collection, there is no mention that *anyone* was killed, raped and kidnapped on October 7, let alone that this included men, women, children, peace activists, Arab and Bedouin citizens of Israel, and citizens of other nations. Rather, the attacks were "a devastating blow to Israeli occupation forces (IOF) personnel and infrastructures" (p1) lumping these diverse victims together into a single oppressive and legitimate military target. It strips the perpetrators of October 7 of any ideology or political agenda beyond 'resistance'. Machold and Printy Currie thereby justify Hamas's actions without mention of the authoritarian, despotic, and extremely racist and eliminationist ideologies from which they draw, much of which predates the creation of the state of Israel. Machold and Printy Currie's portrayal of a monolithic, homogenous bloc of resistance also ignores politics *within* Palestine, and especially the way in which authoritarian movements such as Hamas violently suppress internal political opponents and basic freedoms.

While the war in Gaza is clearly asymmetrical, and notwithstanding the violence perpetrated by Israel's armed forces, violence by Hamas against Israel's armed forces is inseparable from violence inflicted by Hamas against both Israeli civilians and its Palestinian opponents. Edward Said (1979, p33) made a similar point in his analysis of the Palestinian experience of Zionism, in which he railed against how Arab authoritarian states had used the cause of 'fighting Zionist aggression' to suppress internal dissent. In other words, oppression at home was acceptable because it served the "sacred cause". Said's observation shows that excusing violence in the name of resistance and liberation simplifies and sanitises the dynamics of the violence. It forecloses honest examination of who is doing violence to whom, under what circumstances, and why. We see something resembling this kind of honest examination with International Criminal Court's decision to investigate of crimes against humanity in the violence of October 7 and in Israel's subsequent bombardment of Gaza. The ICC has since issued arrest warrants for members of the Hamas leadership and for Israel's Prime Minister and his former defense minister. What is important about this decision is that it is not concerned with whether violence as an abstract category is justified or not, but about the actual mechanics of violence—who has committed which acts of violence against whom and why. Resistance scholarship should do the same.

Justifications of violence in the name of resistance often reflect a "fundamentally romantic" urge "to sanitize the internal politics of the dominated" (Ortner, 1995, p179). Resistance, from everyday acts to the most extreme instances of violence, has often been fetishized by scholars wishing to identify with, and support, victims of oppression, and who have feared that showing internal problems

within a society might somehow justify their oppression. Whilst Machold and Printy Currie (2024, p1) argue that they want to “talk about resistance without romanticising or fetishizing it”, they do precisely this, in a paper that wishes not “merely to honor” resistance, but to “break free from the ongoing attempts by the Zionist entity and its western imperial supporters to police what counts as “proper” or “authentic” resistance”. In doing so, they knowingly or unwittingly lend support to the ideologies that underpinned specific acts of violence on October 7, at the expense of the wider cause of Palestinian independence, sovereignty, and even existence. Writing about violence in Israel/Palestine, Caprotti (2005, p636) warns against glorifying and romanticising violence, which will create a “mythical faceless foe, but where the victims are real people, real children”. Machold and Printy Currie (2024) silence the victims of violence on all sides. Their argument does little to advance decolonial geographies of Palestine advocated elsewhere (e.g. Agha et al, 2024) that are based on carefully analysing the politics and history of the region, that put human beings and human rights at the centre, and that identify positive, constructive means of supporting Palestine and its students and scholars. By romanticising and fetishizing extreme violence, they may harm these decolonial geographies.

Whilst it is unlikely that this journal is widely read by those engaged in acts of violence, it is widely read by geography scholars, including students. Discussions of Israel/Palestine within universities worldwide are currently strained, though, of course, such discussions are trivial in comparison to the experiences of scholars and students in Gaza, where all universities have been destroyed and over a hundred professors have been killed by Israeli bombing. In some countries, notably the US, scholars have been punished by their institutions for peacefully advocating for a ceasefire in Gaza, and events discussing Palestinian culture hosted by British, American, and European institutions (including geographical institutions) have been cancelled (see Griffiths et al, 2024). At the same time, debate in online geography forums has become toxic, ranging from criticism of those deemed insufficiently critical of Israel to outright denials of the existence of antisemitism. This atmosphere has led to some Jewish geographers, despite professed pro-Palestinian credentials, to post anonymously for their own safety (Anonymous Geographer, 2024 Anonymous Geographer Two, 2024). My own personal experience is that, after posting a message on a well-used geography forum calling for more careful language and argumentation (Holmes, 2023), I received direct emails from academics in geography departments justifying the ethnic cleansing and genocide of entire populations on the basis of the actions of people from the same religion, thousands of miles away. I also withdrew from a proposed research collaboration after my would-be collaborator at another university re-posted nakedly racist, far-right, conspiracy theories on their social media account in response to events in Israel/Gaza. Their view was that the racists riots in the UK in summer 2024 shared the same root cause as violence in Gaza – the sinister machinations of a global cabal of Jews who secretly control the media and politics. More broadly, there is currently a political atmosphere on the political left in which being seen as insufficiently pro-Palestinian opens people up to personal attack. To explore a broader range of politics and human impacts is to be denounced as complicit in acts of settler-colonial oppression. There is ample evidence of self-censorship in the face of simplistic, depoliticised, ahistorical rhetoric, and implicit or explicit support for authoritarian, violent, oppressive political organizations (Anonymous Geographer, 2024, Anonymous Geographer Two, 2024).

It is disappointing, but perhaps not surprising to read Machold and Printy Currie’s argument that to criticize violent, armed struggle is to follow “boundaries set by imperialist agendas”. This argument suggests, wrongly, that this is a binary discussion consisting of two positions, those who support the October 7 attacks, and those who support Palestinian oppression via imperialism. It implies that to reject Hamas is to reject Palestinian claims to self-determination. It is to treat Palestine and Hamas

as synonymous—the very equivalence the Israeli state draws in justifying their violent repression of Gaza and the West Bank. Machold and Printy Currie’s commentary reads like another attempt to denounce Hamas’s critics as complicit in acts of oppression against all Palestinians. It is also somewhat ironic, given that scholarship of resistance, with their much more detailed understanding of violence, emerged from studies of decolonial struggle. We can do better than this. I am calling for geographers to reflect on recent decades of scholarship to offer thicker discourse that reflect the complex politics, to be able to discuss and condemn violence and crimes against humanity, whilst improving our public discourse. We need to be able to conduct ourselves better as scholars, to seek collegiality and humanity in our work.

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