

SPECIAL FEATURE

Social Reproduction as Survival and Insurgency in Gaza

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Abstract

What is happening in Gaza now is a total displacement of any form of normality. This displacement of the normal has been effected by a population-wide project of social reproduction. Every Gazan, including children, is solicited to reproduce life, to survive. At the same time, social reproduction in Palestine has always also entailed insurgent possibilities, where this form of labour has indeed sustained and reproduced Palestinian revolutionary action. From collective kitchens to local initiatives of care for children, to using drones as musical instruments to distract children from the deafening violence of its soundscape, social reproduction is iterated as both survival and insurgency. This short intervention tries to think through the question of how to make sense of social reproduction as capitalist oppression through the unwaged housework, and as colonial violence through the mass extermination of a population, without leaving behind its potential for insurgency?

Keywords: palestine; settler colonialism; social reproduction; resistance; survival; genocide; Gaza

What is happening in Gaza now is a total displacement of any form of normality—no regular working hours, school schedule, or even meeting friends in a coffee shop. This displacement of the normal has been effected by a population-wide project of social reproduction. Every Gazan, including children, is solicited to reproduce life, to survive; nothing else seems to be happening. The daily search for food, the crowding at the death squads masquerading as aid distribution centers, the making and remaking of homes where the home no longer means what it normally means. The home in Gaza is on peoples' backs, in their backpacks or trolleys, in a make-shift tent, or in a half-fallen building. This precarity of the home space means that the space that was most traditionally a primary site for reproductive labor no longer exists in the way we understand it. While all forms of normality have ceased to exist, reproductive labor continues, except that this labor is not to sustain the wage relation as in “normal times,” but rather aims to sustain life at a moment of mass extermination.

Home demolition is a common colonial tactic. Israel has consistently resorted to this tactic in the West Bank both before and after October 7, but nowhere near the scale of what has been happening in Gaza for two years. The destruction of the home means disrupting the form of labor that reproduces life. Marxist-feminists have long argued that capitalism not only relies on the exploitation of waged labor, but also on the unwaged reproductive labor that was historically done by women. Indeed, social reproduction theory has provided a much-needed analysis of the importance of this labor in sustaining production and circuits of capital. But how do we make sense of this analysis and its political implications for facing what is happening in Gaza today? What does social reproduction look like in a colonial genocide? It is certainly no longer as simple as saying that it is the unwaged labor that sustains the wage relation. Again, all of Gaza is now a site of social reproduction—but a different kind of social reproduction. Every Gazan is now doing reproductive labor—but a different kind of reproductive labor. The form that social reproduction takes in Gaza today illustrates how settler colonial capitalism in Palestine continues to oscillate between the logics and practices of elimination and exploitation or pursues both at the same time.

By the end of 2024, the unemployment rate in Gaza reached 80 percent, amounting to a total economic collapse. Those who are still employed, mainly in health, humanitarian aid, and essential services, receive irregular or partial salaries.¹ The genocide has also blocked all access to employment in the 1948 territories. Immediately after October 7, Israel arbitrarily arrested 10,300 workers from Gaza, 3200 of these were released and 6441 deported to the West Bank, with approximately 1000 workers still missing. Thousands of these workers were forcibly returned to Gaza after being abused and stripped of their belongings.²

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics has stated that due to the ongoing genocide in the Gaza Strip since October 7, 2023, “which led to the suspension of the economy in Gaza Strip indefinitely, addressing labor force properties in Gaza Strip is *unrealistic and useless* ... Furthermore, the majority of the labor force concepts became inapplicable to be used for measuring the labor force characteristics in the Gaza Strip, since the priority of Gaza’s people is looking for shelter, food, and safety.”³

True, one could say that Gaza’s labor market today defies representation in that *labor force concepts have become inapplicable*. But we could also say that this is precisely the economy of a genocide that is orchestrated by a settler colonial system. It is, in other words, one iteration of settler colonial capitalism as it operates differently across the different sites of historic Palestine. While unemployment has reached unprecedented levels, capital has not been vacated from Gaza; it just takes a different form.⁴ Overlooking the Mediterranean, Gaza is regarded as an attractive real estate location for both settlers and investors. Indeed, Israeli settler colonialism has always relied on the elimination of the local population in tandem with capital expansion and exploitation.

It is also true that *the priority of Gaza’s people is looking for shelter, food, and safety*—their basic survival, or indeed their social reproduction, in times of genocide. But “[s]urvival is not living. It’s just existing, day to day, moment to moment, waiting for it all to end.”⁵ In Gaza, the destruction of the home is now accompanied by mass starvation in which simply finding a bag of flour is hard labor. It is no longer about peeling the potatoes and cleaning up after the children; it is battling the crowds at the

aid-distribution center or praying for survival when aid is “air-dropped,” a despicable form of distribution that humiliates and kills. At the same time, many Gazan chefs have led collective kitchens that have aimed to provide other avenues than the inhumane “humanitarian aid” of food distribution centers, blurring the lines between social reproduction as survival and social reproduction as insurgency. But those collective kitchens too were consistently targeted by Zionist forces who have actively created a fully-fledged famine in Gaza.

Alaa Alqaisi has described the situation in her hauntingly beautiful words:

Hunger now governs time. It becomes the unrelenting measure by which each hour is known. It rewires the body’s understanding of itself, distorting perception, dulling memory, blurring the boundary between emotion and need. When it arrives, it does not knock or whisper—it dismantles. Longing mutates into nausea. Anxiety folds into cramping silence. Hunger enters without permission and rearranges everything—how we think, how we feel, how we move through the hours. My own senses have started to betray me. Food no longer tastes the way I remember it. My body mistakes fear for emptiness, exhaustion for need. I reach for water and feel panic instead. There are moments when I cannot eat even when food is near. Something deep inside refuses it. Something else insists that the feeling might not be hunger at all, just a different kind of loss.⁶

Alqaisi, a translator, a writer and a literary scholar, recalls Imru’ al-Qais when he says:

If only the soul could die all at once—but it falls apart, one self at a time.

That is Gaza. It is a sustained dismantling of the soul. We do not vanish all at once. We fall in stages, hunger, disillusionment, dispossession, numbness. And still, we write. Still, we speak. Because to name this is to resist its totality.⁷

In many ways, writing about Gaza today defies translation into words. Indeed, how can one write about the labor of food and water when food and water are no longer available? My intention for this short intervention was initially to think through “insurgent social reproduction” within the long Palestinian revolution.⁸ This means thinking with the socially reproductive labor necessary for sustaining and indeed reproducing the revolution and its revolutionaries. But once I started writing, it became very difficult to hold on only to the insurgent and rebellious forms of social reproduction as Gaza is experiencing these grotesque forms of genocidal violence accompanied by mass starvation. I am struggling to have a coherent analysis. I resist the temptation to forget and foreclose the insurgent possibilities across all of Palestine, yet it is important also to live with that agony and that defeat.

The conditions in which Palestinians today are solicited to reproduce their life in Gaza are specific. From collective kitchens to local initiatives of care for children, to using drones as musical instruments to distract children from the deafening violence of its soundscape, social reproduction is iterated as both survival and insurgency. I struggle to simply call it one or the other. Perhaps it is too hard or too early—or indeed too late—to tell. And I want to sit with this incompleteness of analysis.

My initial project was to find that insurgency in these forms of labor. As mentioned, there is a rich line of Marxist-feminist literature on social reproduction theory. My

work has pivoted off this tradition to argue not only that socially reproductive labor has been historically undervalued, but that it has also played a revolutionary role. I think of the home in Palestine as a space of resistance—almost like a battlefield, it harbors weapons, food, water, and rebels. If social reproduction theory showed that without women's reproductive labor, workers simply won't go to the factory then perhaps also, without women's labor, workers won't "go" to the revolution. But importantly, this poses another fundamental question: who indeed is a revolutionary and what is revolutionary action?

Gaza itself witnessed the birth of one of the most inspiring revolutions, the First Intifada of 1987, and perhaps recalling this history could remind us that Gaza is and has always been resisting. This does not mean that one brushes over the ugly and brutal forms of settler colonial violence we see unfolding today. Returning to the last century means reckoning with the distinctions between different historical conjunctures and the forces that made the 1987 Intifada possible.

During the First Intifada, new collectivized forms of reproductive work started developing. These included nurseries organized by Palestinian women. They also included the organized committees for food self-sufficiency that spread across Palestine. Indeed, building a resistance economy that would ensure safe supply of food and care for the land was seen as essential for building broader anticolonial resistance.⁹ And collectivized social reproduction was central to building this resistance economy. In 1989, young women would work on a make-shift assembly line in one of the homes in the village of Sa'ir in the north of Hebron. The work would be carefully divided: one table for cutting slices of lemons, one for juicing, one for straining, and another for packaging. This was the Sa'ir cooperative, which was established by the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees during the First Intifada.¹⁰ Its format spread across occupied Palestine in response to the organized boycott of Israeli commodities as well as the economic blockade and the banning of Palestinian workers from working within the Green Line. The creation of a resistance economy through collectivized reproductive labor was not new to Palestinians. The 1936 revolution against the settler project in Palestine also built a parallel clandestine economy led by women in the villages that sustained the urban centers with agricultural produce and ensured that the Arab boycott and the strike were successful. Indeed, this is the history of Palestine's insurgent social reproduction.¹¹

Reproductive labor here, while also a form of oppression and exploitation, also has a revolutionary side. The reproduction of the long Palestinian revolution has always entailed reproductive work. But again, how to make sense of social reproduction as capitalist oppression through the unwaged housework, and as colonial violence through the mass extermination of a population, without leaving behind its potential for insurgency?

It is not surprising that one of the most recent massacres by Israel in Gaza has targeted its bakeries, persistently seeking to destroy all basic elements of survival necessary for the reproduction of life. But as Alaa Al Qaisi reminds us, Gazans are still writing and surviving. But perhaps it is a mutinous survival. Again, survival is not living, but it is a precondition for living. Survival is not necessarily insurgent, but sometimes it is. This is precisely the challenge that Gaza poses to all of us, which is how to sit with

the grief and the defeat without forgetting about the insurgent possibilities and the insurgent histories across all of Palestine.

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Notes

1. "The Impact of the Gaza Crisis on Human Capital" (June 2025) European Training Foundation, available at: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-07/Gaza%20update%202025.pdf>.
2. Ihab Maharmeh, "Israel's Exploitation of Palestinian Labor: A Strategy of Erasure" (January 5, 2025) Al-Shabaka, available at: <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/israels-exploitation-of-palestinian-labor-a-strategy-of-erasure/> (emphasis added).
3. Ola Awad, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), "The Current Status of Palestinian Labor Force in 2024: Unprecedented Unemployment Rates and Sharp Contraction in Employment in 2024," available at: <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=5980>.
4. Many scholars of the Global South have sought to understand how capitalism takes different forms under colonialism, be it in Frantz Fanon "stretched Marxism" or Mahdi Amel's "colonial mode of production" or Samir Amin's "dependency theory." See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Penguin Classics, 1961); Mahdi Amel, *Moqademat Nadhariya li Dirasat al-Fikr al-Ishtirkaki fi Harakat al-Taharur al-Watani* (Dar al-Farabi, 1972); and Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment* (Harvester Press, 1978).
5. Alaa Alqaisi, "The View From Gaza—As Seen Through WB Yeats's Widening Gyre" (August 13, 2025) Literature Hub, available at: https://lithub.com/gaza-through-yeatss-gyre/?fbclid=PAQ0xDSwML-rpleHRuA2FbQlXMQABp2j6UllDc8p-2RHXi-gMy_koDiy_Tl-hLL0Vfq7Gw-ebwa8LGmlUr9uEZlIK_aem_HR_THdhwaYj0LRdqJvB3bA.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Mai Taha, "Insurgent Social Reproduction: The Home, the Barricade and Women's Work in the 1936 Palestinian Revolution" (2025) *Theory, Culture and Society*.
9. "When Pickles Become a Weapon: The Economy of the First Intifada," The Palestinian Museum, available at: <https://www.palmuseum.org/en/museum-from-home/stories-from-palestine/when-pickles-become-weapon#:~:text=Back%20in%20the%20year%201989,ir%2C%20north%20of%20Hebron%20>.
10. Ibid.
11. Mai Taha "Insurgent Social Reproduction: The Home, the Barricade and Women's Work in the 1936 Palestinian Revolution" (2025). *Theory Culture and Society*.