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# *Organising for Change* one year later – Response to the critics

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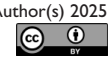

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**Response to the Critics by Silke Roth**, *University of Southampton, UK* **and Clare Saunders**, *University of Exeter, Cornwall, UK*
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A year after the publication of *Organising for Change* it is wonderful to learn what readers think about our attempt to understand the ways in which people and organisations try to achieve or prevent social change. We are grateful to Malin Arvidson, Lydia Hiraide and elena pavan for sharing their reflections and constructive engagement with our book. We particularly appreciate their recognition of our effort to reframe social movements as parts of complex systems for social change, and of social change pathways as unique sets of intricately interrelated interdependencies. In our response we take the opportunity to update our thoughts in relation to contemporary issues and recent developments in the field since we submitted the book manuscript in April 2023.

We start with Malin Arvidson's challenge of identifying patterns recurrent across successful attempts to bring about social change. Given the current political situation, shaped by the rise of far-right groups in many countries and ongoing genocides in Gaza[1] and Sudan, it is pertinent to identify how progressive, anti-colonial and anti-racist movements can stop ongoing violence. Although *Organising for Change* tells a range of stories about more-and-less successful attempts to bring about or prevent social change, we argue that it is neither possible nor desirable to use other episodes of social change to provide a straightforward account of what will work across all socio-political contexts and issues. Moreover, episodes of organising for change themselves have interrelated expected and unexpected outcomes that cast ripples across individuals, communities, societies and polities.

Since October 2023, the solidarity movement with Palestine has mobilised extensively through weekly demonstrations, events, ongoing boycotts and practical support through fundraising. In addition to grassroots mobilisation, the International Criminal Court (ICC) considers the military action in Gaza a war crime and probable genocide (Fassin, 2024). In November 2024 the ICC therefore issued arrest warrants against Benjamin Netanyahu and former minister of defence, Yoav Gallant. The ICC also issued a warrant against the Commander in Chief of the military wing of Hamas, Mohammad Diab Ibrahim Al-Masri, for crimes against humanity.

The conflict and repression of Palestinians of course did not start on 7 October 2023 but is embedded in a complex history of European anti-Semitism, British colonialism, Zionism and settler-colonialism, which shape discourses about, and alliances with, Palestinians, Israelis and activists around the world. Even before 2023, the Anti-Semitism

Definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA),[2] which was adopted by the majority of UK universities in 2020, had been weaponised to undermine, repress and prevent solidarity with Palestinians and curtail free speech.[3] Ironically, in Germany (and elsewhere) Jewish intellectuals and activists criticising the Israeli government and Zionism, and comparing Israel to South African apartheid or colonialism, are accused of anti-Semitism and disinvited from events and prizes. Honors and events involving Nancy Fraser, Ghasan Hage, Masha Gessen and Judith Butler were cancelled for challenging the discourse around the politics of memory and signing letters such as 'Philosophers for Palestine'.[4,5] Political foundations in Germany established to promote democracy after the end of the Nazi regime extensively – and rightly so – cover the Holocaust but are silent about the Nakba.[6]

How does this relate to organising for change? The greatest urgency is to stop the genocide in Gaza and confront the trauma caused by the death of 44,000 (at the time of writing) civilians, countless maimed children and adults, the destruction of hospitals, universities and other infrastructure.[7] But how? Demonstrations and boycotts continue, direct action seeks to prevent weapons being delivered. But as long as countries such as the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom support the Israeli government in UN meetings, through provision of weapons, and otherwise, the genocide continues. And as long as solidarity with Palestine is labelled anti-Semitic and the situation of Palestinians is barely covered in the mainstream media, there are barriers to broad support. Mobilisation needs to take place around the globe using many forms including street demonstrations, acts of solidarity, speaking out, and pushing back against limitations of free speech.

Rather than pointing to serendipity or patterns to explain social change making outcomes, we are convinced that analysts must consider the aims and goals of change makers, their values and preferred tactics, and the context in which they seek to achieve change, recognising that local contexts are shaping and shaped by national and global contexts. Thus, we advocate a nuanced, historical approach that concurs with Tilly and Goodin (2006), who similarly argue in relation to pathways to success that 'it depends'. Our interactionist approach anticipates constant push-back of counter-movements from the left and the right. Consequently, social justice gains need to be defended against attacks, just as racist and sexist mobilisations must be countered. Moreover, a fundamental cornerstone of our argument is that efforts to achieve or defend social justice require bridge-building and coalition formation, particularly in relation to polarised issues like the Israel–Palestine conflict. Initiatives like the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), *Omdim Beyachad/Naqif Ma'an/Standing Together*, the Israeli–Palestinian human rights organisation *A Land for All* and the Haifa Women's Coalition, which bring together Arab and Israeli peace and human rights activists, are important and necessary for delivering social change and, ultimately, social justice. Another example for bridge-building are the connections made between the Palestinian cause and environmentalism (Malm, 2024).

The bridge-building between causes and communities brings us to elena pavan's point about the importance of acknowledging the socio-technical dimensions of using information and communication technologies (ICT) to promote or prevent social change. We fully agree with pavan that ICT use extends far beyond mobilising social change makers; it also allows for new forms of activism. Platforms have different affordances, i.e. features that

determine the length and format of contributions, allow privacy settings or the blocking of other users, or the use of algorithms to highlight or hide posts. The 'EXodus' from X (formerly Twitter) to other platforms, including Bluesky, after Donald Trump's election in November 2024, demonstrates the central role of social media in shaping public discourses and influencing election outcomes. Migrating to new social media platforms requires familiarisation with new features and (re)creating networks. We are delighted that elena pavan noted the importance of data activism to address 'algorithms of oppression' (Noble, 2018; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2023) and the need for design justice (Benjamin, 2019; Costanza-Chock, 2020). This includes the analysis of the export of surveillance and military technologies from Israel to the US and elsewhere (Loewenstein, 2024). Information technologies play a crucial role in generating resistance and circulating discourses, but also in technologies of repression and surveillance. As Schradie (2019) argues, the right has made powerful use of social media. Initial optimism about ICTs in enabling Twitter 'revolutions' such as the Arab Spring has descended into pessimism in the face of election interference. Although we could have engaged more with these processes in *Organising for Change*, they are each consistent with our overall interactive approach.

Lydia Hiraide raises other issues that talk directly to our insistence on considering social change processes as sets of actions, interactions and reactions. First, she rightly challenges us to consider (some types of) political parties as social change organisations. Although political parties are embedded into our Big Picture analysis (see Chapter 2), we admit that our analysis elsewhere largely side-steps consideration of the role of political parties in organising for change. We took this decision to delimit the size and scope of an already ambitiously broad-ranging book. With respect to political parties and social movements in general, we encourage readers to turn to Tarrow (2021), and on movement parties we point to Hutter et al. (2018) and della Porta et al. (2017). Our historically and deeply contextualised analysis of social change organisations recognises that they sometimes institutionalise as political parties that gain votes in elections and might form governments or join the opposition. It is important to keep in mind that social change organisations interact with political parties, while we recognise a blurred boundary between social change organisations and small oppositional parties.

Hiraide is also absolutely right to note our lacking attention to disability activism and thus 'activist affordances' (Dokumaci, 2023) and practices of world-making. We acknowledge that our intersectional approach is limited by failing to sufficiently consider disability – or crip – activism. Moreover, while we have emphasised intersectional approaches to organising for change, we welcome very much two recent publications that both examine the actual practices and challenges of intersectional politics (see Brower, 2024; Christoffersen, 2024).

Furthermore, Hiraide raises an important point noting the ambivalence of service provision in a neoliberal context. Mutual aid and acts of solidarity might underpin neoliberal structures as well as challenge them. This important matter concerns not only disabled activists but also mutual and citizen aid in communities struck by austerity measures, conflicts, and other disasters. Humanitarian aid can maintain, underpin and stabilise repressive contexts. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA), established in 1948 to support Palestinian refugees, is a good example. Simultaneously, support provided by UNRWA is lifesaving and by holding identity documents of refugees an

important resource to claim rights. In our book, we draw on Vandevoordt's (2019) concept of 'subversive humanitarianism' to illustrate that service provision can be both a part of (neoliberal) power structures *and* an embodiment of resistance. If lives are at risk, service provision is crucial. Assistance to migrants is subversive by challenging government efforts to limit migration. Being confronted with the needs of refugees and other marginalised groups can encourage service deliverers to get involved in advocacy and protest to change social structures and legislation.

We fully agree with Malin Arvidson that accountability has many nuances and facets. Indeed, in Chapter 4 of *Organising for Change* we discuss not only accountability towards large donors, but also value accountability towards constituencies and downward accountability towards beneficiaries (see Table 4.1). We also acknowledge that funders might have the best interests of the constituencies that they are supporting at heart. Nevertheless, we think that Krause (2014) has a point when she considers that beneficiaries are not just an end, but also 'a means of delivering aid work' (p. 40) and are thus justifying the existence of humanitarian relief organisations. However, it is important to distinguish between different types of donors and different types of donations. When we think about donors, the first things that come to mind might be governments, inter-governmental organisations and large foundations. However, individual donations can also influence organisational practices. For example, Bocking-Welch (2024) examined how members of the public were able to convince Oxfam to boycott Barclay's bank due to support of South African apartheid. However, it took the charity 15 years after receiving the first letter asking to support the boycott before the charity left the bank.

Our analysis sheds fresh light on social movement organisations' accountability to their beneficiaries, often overlooked in social movement research. It is crucial to address questions of accountability related to entitlement to represent constituencies. This necessitates paying more attention to decision-making processes within social change organisations to avoid marginalisation and discrimination of activists in (progressive) activist spaces (see for example Emejulu & Bassel, 2024). Social change makers are constantly confronted with ambivalence, contradictions and compromise, which is particularly challenging in the polarised discourses and contexts that have become even more predominant since *Organising for Change* went to press in 2023. We have learned immensely from and with activists. We share Meghji's (2024) view that social change makers are knowledge producers and contribute to sociological analysis. We also take seriously our own contribution to discourses around organising for change and wish we could do better justice to representing the varieties of interlacing, interacting and ever evolving struggles for social change.

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## Notes

1. We wrote this response in November 2024, prior to the fragile cease-fire in Palestine/Israel. As the time of writing this edit, February 2025, while Palestinians were allowed to return to their former homes in Gaza, the attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank have intensified.

2. https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism
3. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/sep/13/antisemitism-definition-used-by-uk-universities-leading-to-unreasonable-accusations
4. https://jacobin.com/2024/04/nancy-fraser-germany-palestine-letter
5. https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-weekend-essay/in-the-shadow-of-the-holocaust
6. https://jacobin.com/2024/11/germany-stiftungen-genocide-gaza-censorship
7. Of course, the war in Lebanon must not be forgotten as well.

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