Targeting space through bio-politics: The Israeli colonial project

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Since the Zionist myth of a “land without a people for a people without land” the policy of successive Israeli governments has been to appropriate land and ignore its people. The resulting invisibility of the Palestinian people is being encouraged by Israel's everyday colonial practices. For example, parts of the Israeli separation barrier are being constructed specifically to remove the visual presence of Palestinian villages. On a grander scale, there was never an attempt to assimilate the populations of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip or even East Jerusalem despite the unilateral annexation of the latter in 1967.

Ilan Papé has argued that one of the major factors behind the failure of the Oslo process was the fact that the sides were willing to resolve only the visible part of the conflict (the land issue) but not the invisible (the refugee issue, the Israeli responsibility for the birth of the refugee problem, or the non-citizenship of the Palestinians of Israel). In my opinion, another invisible that needs to be added to the list is the Jewish nature of the state of Israel and what the ramifications of this exceptionality are.

What I will argue here is that the Israeli colonial project is “spacio-cidal” (as opposed to genocidal) in that it targets land for the purpose of rendering inevitable the "voluntary" transfer of the Palestinian population primarily by targeting the space upon which the Palestinian people live. This becomes possible by deploying bio-politics to categorize Palestinians into different “states of exception” that render them powerless against Israel.

The “Spacio-cide” of Palestine

Compared to other colonial and ethnic conflicts (Serbian-Bosnian, Rwanda etc.) the 1948 war did not, relatively speaking, produce a lot of casualties. The notion of “nakba” is
based on losing land and becoming refugees rather than the loss of life. Even after three years of the Intifada the number of victims is relatively low. Compare the six weeks of madness in Rwanda in which some 700,000 people were killed.

The Israeli colonial project is not a genocidal project but a “spacio-cidal” one. In every conflict, belligerents define their enemy and shape the mode of action accordingly. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the target is the place. Different reports produced by the Jerusalem Emergency Committee, a committee set up by Jerusalem-based NGOs after the April 2002 Israeli invasion (also known as “Operation Defensive Shield”), show a systematic destruction of public places: all Palestinian ministries bar two and 65 NGOs were totally or partially destroyed. What was striking about this was not the confiscations but the vandalism. To steal documents and computer hard drives from the Ministry of Education can be “understood” in the framework of the military apparatus looking for information to prove that the Palestinian education system “produced incitement and suicide bombers,” but why did soldiers smash the computer screens and destroy the furniture?

During the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the architect Bogdan Bogdanovich coined the term “urbicide” to describe the destruction of cities in the Balkans. Serbian nationalism romanticized rural villages where a single community spirit predominated. The city in this context was a symbol of the multiplicity of communities and cultures, the antithesis of the Serbian ideal.

In the occupied territories the entire landscape has been targeted. The major tools are the bulldozers that have destroyed streets, houses, private cars, and dunam upon dunam of olive trees. It is a war in an age of literal agoraphobia, the fear of space, seeking not the division of territory but its abolition. It is “spacio-cide” not urbicide. It is more holistic, incorporating “socio-cide” (targeting social ties, a concept developed by Saleh Abdel Jawad), “economo-cide” (hindering the mobility of people and goods) and a “politi-cide” (destroying PA institutions and other embodiments of national aspirations).

The Israeli project during this Intifada has as its objective to effect, in the words of one Israeli minister the “voluntary transfer” of the Palestinian population. Since the beginning of the Intifada, some 100,000 Palestinians, or 3.3 percent of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza, have already left the country (according to a previous study I conducted).

People have been forced to leave internally as well. In Hebron, for instance, some 5,000 people (850 families) have quit the old city to neighboring villages because of Jewish settler activity in the old city and the Israeli army-imposed curfew.

House demolitions are another tactic to effect this transfer. From the beginning of the current Intifada in September 2000 until April 30, 2003, a total of 12,737 people have seen their 1,134 homes demolished in Gaza and the West Bank, according to a May 13, 2003 UNRWA report. The number has since risen dramatically.
The transfer is also effected when people become “de-naturalized” as in the case of the 200,000 Palestinians who have found themselves stuck between the separation barrier and the Green Line and are now a part of neither Palestinian nor Israeli space.

This “spacio-cide” was rendered easier by dividing the Palestinian territories into A, B, B-, B+, C, H1, H2. In such a scheme, Palestinian national infrastructure development became almost totally impossible, not only due to the fragmentation of the space, but also because of the fragmentation of the Palestinian political system and municipalities. The PNA cannot for instance have water reservoir projects for a set of villages if the pipeline passes through Zone C. The road between Bethlehem and Hebron was stopped in 1999 because no Israeli authorization was granted to pass through Zone C. There was urban development in Zones A and B, but these were always surrounded by the Israeli military authorities hindering any possible urban expansion for either industrial or residential zones.

"Spacio-cide" is also a process applied independently of the peace process. Even after the signing of the Oslo Accords the number of settlers increased three-fold (from 120,000 to 430,000) and the area of settlements doubled.

The characteristic of “spacio-cide” is to deny and ignore the demographic development of the Palestinian community, and systematically deny space for demographic expansion. Here, it is important to realize that the geometry of the occupation can only be apprehended in three dimensions. There are unsettled questions regarding the underground sewage, archaeology, tunnels, water reservoirs, the air space, and so on. These surface complications (it’s no longer possible to draw a continuous line that separates Palestinians from Israelis) made clear to the negotiating parties during the Oslo process that a two-dimensional solution is no longer possible. The Israeli proposal was to give the Palestinians limited sovereignty on the land but to retain Israeli sovereignty of the subsoil and the airspace. In other words we have a kind of sovereignty sandwich - Israel, Palestine, Israel - across the vertical dimension.

The states of exception
Developing an exploration of biopower begun by Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben showed how sovereignty authorizes a “power over life” by the rule of the exception, being both above the law, as its constituting force, and a safeguard of the law in its deployment.

The sovereign, according to the German philosopher Carl Schmit, is the one who may proclaim the state of exception. He is not characterized by the order that he institutes through the constitution but by the suspension of this order. The sovereign has the right to suspend the validity of law, rights which of course will not be inscribed in the constitution.

The state of exception of Palestinians is especially evident in their status under Israeli law, where they are excluded from recourse to the law but remain subject to it.
The case of Palestinian Jerusalemites is the prime example of the game of exclusion/inclusion. Physically, they are included (insofar as Jerusalem was annexed and "unified") while being excluded (few services are extended to East Jerusalem, there is no master plan for construction, and the populations are effectively segregated).

The international community’s inability to see Israel as a constitutional colonial state comes from the fact that its practice regulating the “white” majority living in a “normal” zone (the Jewish population inside the Green line) overshadows its practices for the minority living in the state of exception: the Palestinians of Israel; the Palestinians of Jerusalem; the Palestinians of the different zones of the occupied territories; the refugees inside the camps and outside.

With these categorizations, Israel is able to restrict residential construction in East Jerusalem and then “legally” destroy housing built without permits. In a similar manner, residential construction for the Palestinians of the different zones in the occupied territories is constrained. Military order 418, “Order for the Planning of Towns, Villages and Buildings (Judea and Sameria),” outlines the requirements to obtain construction permits. One of the last articles (no 7) called “special powers,” gives the High Planning Council the power to “amend, cancel or suspend for a specified period the validity of any plan or permit; to assume the powers allocated to any of the committees mentioned in article 2 and 5; to grant any permit which any of the committees mentioned in Article 2 and 5 are empowered to grant, or amend or cancel a permit; to dispense with the need for any permit which the Law may require.” In other words, the sovereign can use these exceptions to cancel the very order that was promulgated to regulate the construction permit.

Exceptionality, “spacio-side” and resistance
Bio-politics render possible “spacio-cide” and “spacio-cide” de-territorizes the Palestinians. To counter this, Palestinians have focused particularly on construction, which may be considered the most effective means of non-violent resistance.

The bio-politics deployed and the regime of exception that the sovereign proclaims is reinforced in the case of the Israeli and Palestinian actors because of the chain of victimization. In a mirror of interactions and projections, Israelis look at themselves as THE exceptional victim, an exceptionality which stems from the exceptionality of the holocaust. The Palestinians also perceive themselves as the ultimate victims (THE colonized and THE refugees without rights) and they construct this exceptionality starting with the Nakba.

In the same vein as “spacio-cide,” which is informed by the Zionist myth of land without people for people without land, the Palestinian refugees have created a myth of land without people for refugees without land. The Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza as well as in the diaspora have greater attachment to the land of Palestine than to the people of Palestine. The interviews I did with many of them illustrate that they insist on talking about property, land, the Mediterranean sea, Al Aqsa Mosque, etc.
Any solution to the Palestinian refugee problem thus should address their political identity and not only their humanitarian situation. Having abandoned or been forced out of their former milieu, Palestinian refugees tend to be stripped of the identity that milieu defined, sustained and reproduced. Even if their protracted situation leave some of them very well integrated and even assimilated in their host countries, their old identities survive mostly as ghosts – haunting the nights all the more painfully for being all but invisible in the camp’s daylight.

We can sum up saying that “spacio-cide” becomes possible through three mechanisms: The first mechanism is the bio-politics deployed by Israel; then, the capacity of this power as sovereign to proclaim the state of exception; and thirdly by enforcing a state of suspension, whereby Israel and the United States can insist from the second year of this Intifada on establishing only a ceasefire rather than an end of occupation.

*However, the colonizers are not immune to those three mechanisms either. The settler becomes encircled after having encircled; the “voluntary” transfer becomes an Israeli one. Many indicators show the Israeli population quitting Israel and the year 2003 saw the lowest rate of immigration to Israel since 1975.*

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