

MANIFESTATIONS OF IDENTITY

The Lived Reality of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

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Chapter 8

Palestinians: The Politics of Control, Invisibility, and the Spectacle

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In a meditation on the French revolt of May 1968, Jacques Rancière wrote about what post-1968, even post-modern, politics has become:

Police intervention in public spaces is less about interpellating demonstrators than about dispersing them. The police are not the law that interpellates the individual (the 'Hey, you there' of Louis Althusser)... The police are above all, a certitude about what is there, or rather, about what is not there: 'Move along, there is nothing to see.'

Rancière's comment is perceptive about how the police, embodying the state or the Metropole, do not want a public audience to "see." What makes this impulse particularly striking is that so much of politics is now about that which can and must be "seen," about "spectacle." In some senses, the prohibition upon seeing, the effort to make "unseen" is the necessary double of spectacular politics.

But Rancière's analysis is also problematic. In most circumstances, that terrifying moment of encounter – the creation of a subject and the recognition of an identity bestowed on one by an act of authority, which Althusser called interpellation – has not only *not* gone away, but in many places it has become far more intensified. The police state is being normalised not just in the US, where the state of emergency is, as this essay is being written, written into law by a supine Congress and an absolutist Executive, but also in Europe. The recipients of coercion are specifically identified, chosen, interpellated, and are often the outsider or the Muslim. The violent encounter between the "you" of "Hey, you

there” and the apparatus of coercion is ever more palpable in places like the Middle East, where the exercise of military power by the imperium and its regional allies has resulted in unimaginable bloodshed in recent times. So, while in one sense, one particular audience is being “moved along,” another is being hailed with the threat of violence.

In a sense, an economy of images and signs coexists alongside a corporeal politics of authority and dissent. Politics, then, must be understood not only as the moment of encounter between the authority and the subject (as Althusser would have it, the interpellated), but also of the performances and representations involved in this encounter. Politics is about the multiple encounters of power and the iterative processes through which the representations of power are countered, contested, and made to do political “work.” To imagine that all politics is now simulacrum is to look at military occupation from the vantage point of a dissociated television audience and to ignore what Feldman has called “the dense materiality of violent history,”² the very concrete ways that a concrete wall – and its barbed wire extensions, counter-insurgency trenches, and zealous security forces – attempt to shape a captive population and make it obedient. On the other hand, the claim that the only form of power that counts is the physical exercise of repression discounts the complexity of multi-site, transnational politics, and the performances that are involved in the process of mobilisation, or the extraordinary lengths the imperium and its allies are going to decide what aspect of the colonised and repressed should be visible and to whom, and what shall be kept cloaked and invisible.

When speaking of Palestinians, then, I want to argue that the politics of military coercion is distinct but inseparable from the politics of enforced visibility or invisibility. This essay will analyse the various manifestations of this multilayered politics with reference to three Palestinian populations: the citizens of Israel inside the Green Line, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), and the refugees in Lebanon.

1. Visibility and the Palestinians

Visuality and visibility has become the mainstay of much theory. Spectacles, whether in the Debordian sense of that which appears

on television or in Baudrillard’s sense of the hyperreal that pushes out the real, have long been incorporated into our understanding of how power works.³ A certain awareness of the role global visibility can play in mobilising solidarities has always been a significant part of Palestinian nationalist activism. The importance of visual symbolism, the performance of power and the power of performance have always been present in Palestinian public discourse.⁴ Palestinian guerrillas claimed that spectacular actions such as hijackings “forced [the world] to take notice of Palestinian actions.”⁵

In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, forging alliances with European and Third World revolutionaries similarly made the cause visible to the world.⁶ As early as the 1960s, various Palestinian political organisations invited foreign witnesses to “come and see for themselves” the refugee camps of Lebanon and Jordan or the Palestinian guerrilla training camps; and these witnesses carried back with them their narratives of what they had seen. Jean Genet’s *Un Captif Amoureux* was only the most prominent of such witnesses.⁷ Several nurses and doctors who had witnessed atrocities committed against Palestinians in Lebanon not only wrote books about what they had seen, but acted as witnesses in court inquiries.⁸

The literature on witnessing is vast⁹ and well represented in a variety of disciplines, not the least of which is the sociology of social movements and political mobilisation.¹⁰ Visibility and witness are now the stock in trade of activists. The International Solidarity Movement declares that “messages to mainstream media” and “personal witness and transmission of information” are among its top priorities.¹¹ Their website includes extensive archives of photographs and “witness” statements. They both “see” and “make visible” through witnessing. The media has provided a conduit for imagery to be seen beyond where violence “happens,” and the advent of Arabic-language satellite news channels has encouraged the urgent transmission of imagery from the OPT and elsewhere.¹² The media has crucially provided lasting images that act as visual mnemonics for particular moments. In the first Palestinian Intifada, then Israeli Defence Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, is said to have ordered the military to “break Palestinian bones.” When “an Israeli camera operator for CBS filmed a 45-minute ordeal in which Israeli soldiers used rocks to break the bones of bound Palestinian youths,” the images transformed the particular moment into a broader metaphor for the coercive force of the

occupation, creating a visual narrative that loudly told a little-told story.¹³ During the second Intifada, the death of 12-year old Muhammad al-Durra in a hail of bullets as his father tried futilely to defend him was captured on camera and became an iconic representation of the violence practiced upon Palestinian bodies.

Foucault has written about the Janus-faced state, at once holding the power of domination *and* the magic of performance. In the latter instance, the state of Israel's performative representation as "the only democracy in the Middle East" in some senses masks the brute force with which it acts upon the Palestinian polity. In narratives, memoirs, and histories of the Israeli military, one persistent performative trope is of the lowly foot-soldier challenging the general in a debate.¹⁴ The supposed brashness of Israeli parliamentary debate is another instance of such spectacular performance of the alleged "democracy." These moments of visibility, during which the Palestinian becomes intelligible to a broader audience, in some sense strip away the magical cloak and lay bare the apparatus of coercion. To counter these, the Israeli state has acted to circumscribe Palestinian visibility; to only allow them to be subjected to the gaze of the state and its extensions and allies, rather than a broader international audience. The mechanisms of invisibility are manifold, but the wall is perhaps the most powerful one.

2. Controlling Visibility in the Occupied Territories

The wall is perhaps the most visually striking embodiment of the politics of invisibility. It is an extraordinary piece of construction, and an eerie concretisation of Zionist ideology. In the autumn of 1923, in an article presciently titled "The Iron Wall," a right wing Zionist intellectual, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, wrote:

[W]e cannot promise anything to the Arabs of the Land of Israel or the Arab countries. Their voluntary agreement is out of the question... Zionist colonization... can, therefore, continue and develop only under the protection of a force independent of the local population – an iron wall which the native population cannot break through. This is, *in toto*, our policy towards the Arabs. To formulate it any other way would only be hypocrisy... We would destroy our cause if we proclaimed the necessity of an agreement, and fill the minds of the Mandatory [British powers] with the belief that we do not need an iron wall, but rather endless talks.¹⁵

Historian Avi Shlaim has argued that the policy of the Iron Wall, though originally articulated by a right-wing admirer of Mussolini, soon became the policy and *modus operandi* of successive Israeli governments, whether controlled by Labour or Likud, in their encounter with their Arabs neighbours.¹⁶

After the failure of the Camp David negotiations in 2000, in an act of surreal literalism, Labour's Ehud Barak planned the wall as an encirclement instrument, and in 2002, Ariel Sharon, who was the ideological and political descendant of Jabotinsky, transformed the idea of an "iron wall of bayonets" (as Jabotinsky called it) into a reality. With extraordinary speed, fences of barbed wire, electric gates, dirt mounds, and trenches were constructed, soon to be joined by concrete walls six to eight metres in height and occasionally interrupted by high watchtowers, built at the cost of \$1.5 million per kilometre.¹⁷ This extraordinary edifice follows a tortuous route that encircles some villages and annexes substantial territories (most of them arable lands or valuable water sources) to Israel, separates villages from their farmlands, urban centres from their hinterlands, and neighbours from neighbours. As a form of physical control, the wall is the colonial carceral mechanism of "new village" or detention camp writ large. The wall divides the West Bank into multiple "enclaves" where any Palestinian male over the age of 12 is required to have a "residence permit" issued to him by the Israeli Civil Administration in order to continue living in his home.¹⁸

However, the wall also acts to make Palestinians invisible to anyone but the security apparatus of the state. The enclaves mentioned above require special permits for entry. Checkpoints which have become regular features of travel in the OPT are now joined by gates that are operated arbitrarily, sometimes shutting residents out, at other times, trapping them in, and making it extraordinarily difficult to enter walled zones. Forty-two villages have lost access to their agricultural lands. As Amira Hass writes:

The state promised the High Court that it would make it possible for the farmers to reach these lands. So it promised. But most of the year, the gates are open only twice a week. People have therefore given up on trying to grow vegetables and wheat, which require daily attention, or on letting their sheep graze in uncultivated pastures. Many times, the gates do not open at the appointed hour. Many times, soldiers do not accept the residents' permits or confiscate them on various pretexts.¹⁹

The complete encirclement of a number of cantons in the West

Bank effaces the occupied population, and makes it a “residual curiosa in an Israeli landscape stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River.”²⁰ Even more surreal, on the Israeli side of the wall, in some places, gentle slopes climb to the top of the wall and they are landscaped and covered in flowers. What is on the Israeli side a pastoral landscape is on the Palestinian side a grey precipice dropping down eight metres. In other places, “colourful scenes of the countryside – meadows, trees and blue sky” are painted on the wall on the Israeli side, aestheticising “the wall’s stark, grey appearance.”²¹ For the Israeli or foreign visitor who drives along these pleasant roads, the grim ghetto beyond is wholly out of sight. This is in keeping with the Israeli programme of “re-branding” Israel. The Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni describes re-branding thus: “When the word ‘Israel’ is said outside its borders we want it to invoke not fighting or soldiers but a place that is desirable to visit and invest in, a place that preserves democratic ideals while struggling to exist.”²²

The policy of making all of the OPT physically invisible is fulfilled in the transformation of the whole of Gaza and West Bank into encircled enclaves. The borders of what was Mandate Palestine with Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan have been depopulated under the cover of “border security.”²³ By late 2002, a number of heavily populated quarters of the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza bordering Egypt were wholly demolished creating an empty “buffer zone”²⁴ in which Palestinians who dared to venture could be the target of sniper fire. The Jordan Valley has been increasingly depopulated in order to create a “closed military zone” and the wall, a series of checkpoints, and gates have isolated a number of communities from other Palestinians.²⁵

Whether or not the wall successfully makes Palestinians invisible is open to debate. The wall’s very size makes it a spectacle. The very fact that this concrete behemoth has become an iconic representation of the ghettoization of the OPT in some senses subverts its function. Political mobilisation by activist groups – both Palestinian and Israeli, both based in the villages that are being encircled and elsewhere through the OPT – performs a politics of dissent in the public eye. If, on the Israeli side, the wall is being disguised by painting and landscaping, on the Palestinian side, graffiti, paint-balloons, and murals (such as those painted by the London street artist, Banksy) draw the eye to the starkness of this instrument of control.

The wall isn’t the only element of this politics of invisibility. A

whole series of other policies make access to and travel through the OPT increasingly difficult not only for Palestinian residents, but also for Palestinians carrying foreign passports as well as foreigners, especially reporters, visiting the OPT. The issuance of residence permits has become another mode of control and cloaking. The Israeli state’s regulation of exit and entry into the OPT and the systematic harassment of travellers to the area are legendary. Restrictions placed on foreign reporters, for example, allow the Israeli state to “get rid of journalists that the state does not like.”²⁶ On a variety of occasions, there have been total bans on travel of journalists to Gaza.²⁷ Palestinian journalists are frequently refused permits to enter or exit the OPT, are injured, detained, or even murdered by Israeli forces. The Israeli military, moreover, has one of the most effective censors, limiting publication of news, images, or information that could ostensibly endanger Israeli “security,”²⁸ but which prevent reporters from reporting how the Israeli military endangers Israeli civilians (and particularly its Palestinian citizens) as we shall see below.

If restrictions upon reporters allow Israel to control media images broadcast around the world, limitations to foreign travel to the OPT similarly prevent potential “witnesses” or activists from accessing these areas. Extensive and invasive body and baggage searches at Ben-Gurion airport are often accompanied by intrusive interrogations where a foreign visitor is asked not only about the purpose of one’s visit, but also such questions that could allow the interrogators to gauge the visitor’s religion, national background, and political sympathies. The Israeli newspaper *Ma’ariv* wrote that, “Denying entry to ... activists has been defined as prevention of political subversion and involvement of members of the movement in acts of terrorism, and limitation of friction with Jewish settlers.”²⁹

The Kafkaesque rules that govern the entry and exit of Palestinians into the OPT are even more indicative of the kind of controls placed on the area to make them more inaccessible and invisible.³⁰ Palestinian residents of Jerusalem find themselves under siege. Building (or more usually house-destruction) policies of the state and the municipality increasingly tighten the area in which they live. The confiscation of their Jerusalem residence permits has become a further instrument of discipline, one that is used to restrict their travel to and from the West Bank (or Gaza). In some senses, the attempt to push these residents out of Jerusalem is an effort to make the Palestinian presence and claim to the city

invisible. More recently, Palestinian residents of the OPT who hold foreign passports are being subjected to what can only be called a gradual “transfer” policy. These holders of dual citizenship are particularly “problematic” Palestinians, because aside from the fact that they often are actively engaged in the political and public life of the OPT, they also act as conduits for narratives and images to be transmitted to a broader public in their European or North American homelands.³¹

Within the OPT, a sophisticated system of controls segregates the Palestinian polity into isolated and increasingly smaller spatial areas. Checkpoints – whether well-established and technologically advanced, primitive and ad-hoc or mobile – carefully control movement between Gaza and the West Bank, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and different sections of the West Bank. If the checkpoint inhibits the movement of Palestinians, it makes them supremely legible to the coercive apparatuses of the Israeli state. Indeed, this extraordinary enforced legibility – the recording of movements, the bodily searches, the taking of fingerprints and recording of other biometric data, the performative establishment of the authority of the state – are the inseparable flipside of the invisibility the Israeli state wills on the Palestinians.

The spatial placement of settlements acts as another instrument for making Palestinians visible to the Israeli state, and its various “civilian” extensions. As Eyal Weizman has documented, the “politics of verticality”³² has been a significant part of bringing the panopticon to Palestinian lives. Settlements on hilltops overlooking Nablus and Ramallah and dozens of other villages, but also in the densest parts of Hebron or Jerusalem give the settlers – and their armed defenders, the soldiers of the state – the superior position they need to maintain control over the Palestinians below them: the dense fabric of life in the villages, the much-reduced everyday transactions of Hebron. As Weizman writes, these settlements are “urban optical devices for surveillance and the exercise of power.”³³

On the periphery of Hebron city centre, turnstiles make entry into the city an ordeal for anyone but settlers and Israeli soldiers (as they did in Belfast in the 1970s), thus limiting access, while in the souks themselves, settlers living on the second floor of occupied buildings can look below, dump their rubbish, dead animal carcasses, and hot water on the passersby and perform the theatre of power in their hostile interactions with the Palestinians. Passing through these souks under the wire-mesh cover, which catches solid waste but not hot liquid, is the best reminder of how

“compulsory visibility”³⁴ is a useful instrument for increasing the coercive power of the state and its extensions. Using what Tamara Neuman has called “enactment of [their] presence” the extremist settlers of Kiryat Arba establish their authority over the Palestinians, while rendering them powerless, especially when the settlers act as vanguards of Israeli nationalism, for example during those holidays where thousands of Israelis visit Hebron and the Ibrahimi mosque, protected by hundreds of Israeli soldiers and dozens of armed settlers.³⁵ If on the one hand, the settlers can gaze upon the space below and assert their control over what and who passes beneath their windows, where they are literally forced to interact with Palestinians (as for example with shop-keepers) they make a show of “indifference” and exaggeratedly perform “a decided lack of concern or curiosity about the people who live beyond” the barbed wire fences that separate the settlement from Palestinian villages.³⁶ In the everyday interactions between settlers and Palestinians, the dialectic of compulsory visibility and studied indifference are intended to discipline Palestinians. Hebron’s city centre is fully saturated with the odour of state violence, precisely because of the stark exercise of force by settlers and the naked vulnerability and paradoxical invisibility one feels when accidentally catching the eye of a settler.

3. Erasure and Identity in Israel

But the history of Palestinians is also erased *within* the borders of Israel. After the 1948 eviction of nearly 800,000 Palestinians from what became Israel, 418 Palestinian villages were destroyed to prevent the return of the villagers.³⁷ In most places, whole villages were destroyed and in some places, they were replaced with forests.³⁸ Where these villages were not destroyed, they were appropriated by the citizens of the Israeli state and subsumed by its system of signs. All that remains are the stubborn *sabra cacti* which before 1948 marked the boundaries of properties and which have resisted the destruction that has been visited upon most of these villages. A tour of northern Galilee looking for the traces of these destroyed villages requires an acute search for such cacti. Where the remnants of villages have been wholly incorporated into kibbutzim, the buildings have lost their original function, a mosque becoming a café, the *mukhtar*’s house becoming a community centre, etc. These kibbutzim are inaccessible to most Palestinian

citizens of Israel, and indeed to foreigners who overtly declare their intentions to visit such remnants of the prelapsarian Palestinian life. Erasure of the memory of pre-1948 Palestine and the effacement of the material objects that embodied it occurs in the context of the Israeli national(ist) memories being valorised. Memorials to Palestinian victims of 1948 are scarce while the memorials to Israeli victims of 1948 proliferate.³⁹ Ironically, the ruins of Dayr Yasin village, where a massacre of some one-hundred Palestinians at the hand of Irgun and Lehi in April 1948 became an iconic moment in Palestinian history and the centrepiece of Haganah's "whispering campaign," today should be visible from the window of the Vad Yashem but is not.⁴⁰ As one activist writes, "only a mile from where the Jewish martyrs are memorialized lie the Palestinian martyrs of Deir Yassin whose graves are unknown and unmarked."⁴¹

Lest one forget, the politics of invisibility extends to the Palestinian citizens of Israel. These Palestinians number around one million or 17-20 percent of the Israeli population⁴² and are the perpetual targets of the state effort to contain and control them.⁴³ Palestinian citizens are made invisible through a whole series of efforts, including appropriation of their agricultural land, differential allocation of state social and economic resources, and limitations to the mode and manner of their political organisation.⁴⁴ After 1948, in many instances, former residents of appropriated or destroyed villages became internally displaced or, as the surreal Israeli law has it, became "present absentees" without the ability to lay claim to their properties, lands, or their village. The Palestinian village of 'Ayn Hud became the artist colony of Ein Hod and the former residents of 'Ayn Hud who were pushed out in 1948 and who set up a new concrete village nearby returned to their iconic stone village to act as gardeners tending their former properties for the new owners.⁴⁵ The struggle of former residents of the villages of Iqrit and Kafr Bir'im to return to their villages has come to nought. Even though in 1951 the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the residents must be allowed to return, the Israeli state with then-Prime Minister Sharon at its helm prevented them from return.⁴⁶ This struggle to return and the state refusal of the return are as much about the ability to re-present pre-1948 history as they are about the reclaiming of land.⁴⁷ A return and reclamation of destroyed villages creates synchronicity between the present of the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the past of the destroyed Palestinian landscape. It also makes visible the treads of memory

and identity that connect Palestinian politics across borders by gathering under the same spotlight all those Palestinians laying claim to the right to return, including the refugees whose right of return construes the "demographic threat" to the Jewish character of the Israeli state.

The effort to render Palestinian narratives inaudible and places of memory invisible is held in tension with the compulsory legibility of Palestinian citizens of Israel to the state and to its Jewish citizens. As in the OPT, largely Palestinian cities and villages are "overlooked" by settlements primarily populated by Jewish citizens. The relationship between neighbouring towns is often quite tense.⁴⁸ The massacre of Palestinian citizens of Israel in Kafr Qasim on the eve of the Suez War was justified as a security measure and has been acknowledged by the state only in fits and starts,⁴⁹ while a court exonerated the police in their shooting of 13 Palestinian citizens who were killed while demonstrating in October 2000. The refusal to recognise violence done to Palestinian bodies extends beyond the acts of violence committed by the Israeli state. When an off-duty Israeli soldier opened fire in a bus full of Palestinian and Druze citizens in the town of Shafa 'Amr and killed several people, the families of the victims were not deemed to be "victims of terror" and were therefore denied compensation.⁵⁰ In the 2006 war, a disproportionate number of the civilian victims of Hizbullah shelling of northern Israel were Arab, primarily because Arab towns and villages do not have warning sirens or bomb shelters, or because many of the Hizbullah rockets fired at Israel during the 2006 war were targeted at military installations, many of which are located very close to Arab neighbourhoods, villages, and towns inside Israel, making them particularly vulnerable to external attacks.⁵¹ In the aftermath of the war, compensation for war damage was allocated unequally.⁵² Thus while the Palestinian citizens of Israel are painfully visible to the coercive apparatus of the state, they are made invisible to its distributive arm, thus denied the social and economic provisions they should expect as tax-paying citizens of their state.

4. Reconstruction of Invisibility in Lebanon

However, what makes the politics of invisibility something broader than the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised is the manner in which it has also affected the lives of

Palestinian refugees in their camps in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. These refugees are not administered by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), but rather by a UN agency established specifically for them, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). In annual world-wide calculations of refugee numbers, Palestinian refugees are often excluded from the totals tallied by UNHCR, or are counted in a separate category than, say, Tibetans, or southern African refugees during the Apartheid era. Indeed most refugees thought UNRWA to be “part of the machinery of dismemberment and dispersion,”⁵³ established to settle the refugees in their host countries. In all the countries in which they settled, Palestinian refugees were subjected to varying degrees of controls, surveillance, and repressive or incorporative measures. In Jordan, the Jordanian national narrative emerged out of a complex set of interactions between the British, the Hashemite monarchy of Jordan, and various social forces, and it was premised upon the political exclusion of Palestinians,⁵⁴ unless they were willing to become “jordanianised.”⁵⁵ If assimilated, class position and affluence are better determinants of visibility and access to power, whether or not citizens are of Palestinian origins, than nationality. In Syria, Palestinians in the refugee camps are subjected to the same set of controls and surveillance as the rest of the population.

It is in Lebanon that the politics of invisibility is most predominant among Palestinian refugees.⁵⁶ Today, more than 400,000 Palestinian refugees reside in Lebanon, around half of whom reside in twelve refugee camps. From the very beginning, the Palestinian refugees, whose number amounted to ten percent of the Lebanese population, were considered a threat to the “fragile sectarian composition” of Lebanon: their being predominantly Sunni Muslims imperilled the politically dominant Maronite Christians, and placed them in direct competition for jobs and resources with the numerically superior but politically disempowered Shi’a underclass. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Lebanese *Sûreté Générale*, and later the *Deuxième Bureau*, virtually controlled the camps and monitored all resident activities.⁵⁷ Later, the PLO’s radical politics was supported by large swathes of the Lebanese population, but generated much anxiety among the Lebanese elite who saw revolutionary politics as a threat to their continued domination.⁵⁸ One of the hallmarks of the brutal civil war that took place between 1975 and 1990 was the extent to which Palestinian camps were erased from mixed or Christian neighbourhoods, and the frequency and brutality with which

massacres and sieges were perpetrated against the Palestinians. At Tall al-Za’tar and Jisr al-Basha, at Karantina and Sabra and Shatila, and during the War of the Camps, tens of thousands of Palestinians perished or were brutally murdered, thousands of others “disappeared,” their abodes and communities were bulldozed, and even their ability to commemorate their losses during these seminal moments was circumscribed.⁵⁹

Post-war Lebanese politics, however, has not improved the lot of Palestinians. Aside from intense pressures to relocate Palestinians from Lebanon to a third country, various “reconstruction” plans have severely limited Palestinian living spaces. Segments of the Shatila camp which were destroyed by Israeli bulldozers loaned to Maronite militiamen in 1982 have now been incorporated into the neighbouring municipality, in effect severing it from the camp itself. The Palestinian national cemetery in Lebanon, which holds the bodies of large numbers of national martyrs and foreigners who died for Palestine, was for a period threatened by complete destruction in order to make way for the airport highway. Intensive struggle by Palestinian refugees and some Lebanese allies prevented this, but today the cemetery is incongruously located in the middle of a traffic roundabout. Project Elissar, which is a public/private partnership aimed at the “reconstruction” of the southern suburbs has similarly gnawed at the edge of the largest camp in Beirut, Burj al-Barajneh. Elissar has the authority to expropriate land, and originally its plans included the destruction of some of the densest quarters of the camp to make way for yet another airport highway extension. Only a great deal of struggle by Palestinians and their Hizbullah allies have influenced the final route of this highway, such that now, it will traverse the only open space left for the camp children, a dusty stretch of rubbish-strewn land the size of a football field and used for play by the children of the camp, who have access to no other facilities. Hundreds of densely occupied Palestinian houses will be shortly hidden in the curve of this massive highway’s underpass, being literally made invisible under the concrete and asphalt of new construction.

Inside the camps, because of legal limits placed on further construction, population expansion has had to be accommodated through vertical building. In practice, this has resulted in dense and labyrinthine alleyways into which very little sunlight penetrates. Finding one’s way in the camp requires familiarity with the camp. A visitor can very easily get lost in the switch-backs, blind-alleys and passageways most of which are at most shoulder-width. The

spatial invisibility thus created is not wholly unwelcome, however. As an old guerrilla claimed in an interview, any hostile party penetrating the camp would never be able to reach their destination.⁶⁰ Nor have the attempts at making Palestinian refugees invisible to foreigners been wholly successful. Committed activists frequently visit and live in the camps of Lebanon. Indeed, the Palestinian refugees of Lebanon are more invisible to the Lebanese citizens living alongside them than they are to an activist community hailing from around the world. In Lebanon, when formerly marginalised and newly mobilising social segments threaten the elite monopoly of power, discourses of belonging and foreignness are used to explain the dizzying disparities of wealth and insidious sectarian politics. Palestinians have consistently served as the convenient scapegoat for Lebanese social ills, and attempts at their expulsion from Lebanon are only the most recent in the line of egregious attempts to make them literally invisible.⁶¹

5. The Pitfalls of Visibility

It is, however, important to note that visibility itself is not always considered an unalloyed virtue. Nor are the attempts at invisibility left uncontested. How to struggle against effacement, how to be represented and how to self-represent (in all meanings of the word), the audiences to be reached and mobilised through Palestinian visibility, and the limits and unintended consequences of visibility – to a broader international audience of sympathisers – are all significant foci of contention within the Palestinian polity.

There are a variety of dangers in a persistent calling up of victims to perform their suffering for a broader audience. First and foremost is that the demand that the victim proffer a narrative of her victimhood for the benefit of this audience, which is considered therapeutic (or even mobilising) witnessing for a committed audience, reaffirms her status as victim and, in some instances, re-creates the moment of victimisation. Furthermore, such witnessing almost always requires the *victimised* to speak and reflect on the process of victimisation, rather than the *victimiser*. As a member of Australia's Lost Generation stated,

I am not comfortable talking about myself, precisely because marginalised people are often called upon to do a kind of public confession. The others say, 'If you speak to us about your personal

experiences we can better understand your position.' I often wonder why people from dominant groups couldn't understand my position by reflecting more on their own actions.⁶²

Such a persistent pressure on victim narration and performance of their suffering demarcates the boundary between the dominant and the dominated and, while the latter is asked to make visible their suffering, the former are rarely called upon to reflect on the suffering they have instigated.

Laying bare a polity's victimisation to a foreign audience, furthermore, makes that polity vulnerable to the latter's political judgement. In what Iris Jean-Klein calls "political audit tourism," the foreign witnesses presume that they are "naturally equipped to monitor and instruct Others' liberation struggles."⁶³ For example, the International Solidarity Movement's insistence on non-violent struggle is interpreted by some activists in the OPT as a pejorative judgement of their own militant strategies of struggle.⁶⁴

Another potential pitfall of visibility is the transformation of concrete places and peoples and struggles into "empty signifiers" that can stand in for other struggles.⁶⁵ Palestine has come to stand in for representations of "a global Muslim space" and a symbol of oppression in the age of globalisation.⁶⁶ On the one hand, this symbolising of Palestinians serves to "name" Palestinians, making them visible to a broader audience and legible through analogy. On the other hand, the process of abstraction that goes into creation of "empty signifiers" serves to efface the day-to-day struggles of Palestinians *qua* Palestinians – not as the vanguard of a broader Muslim struggle or an anti-globalisation movement.

Finally, visibility is not a guarantee of sympathetic mobilisation. Mediated images are not the absolute reproduction of the reality they claim to represent and they are always already imbued with questions of power and positionality.⁶⁷ Images aesthetise; they reify; they transform complicated situations into narratives that can be grasped in one view; they transform diachronic events into synchronic ones. Even when the image manages to reproduce the complexities of a particular moment, history is often excised out of that moment. Not even with the most-subtle image, can we expect it to overcome existing perceptions of the Other:

The pain of the Palestinian people is something not easily translatable on our Western television screens. These brown people look different to 'us', with their strange chants of 'Allah akbar', their loud funerals, their broken English, and their unforgivable ways of retaliating against their occupiers.⁶⁸

Decades ago, Guy Debord wrote that “the concentration of ‘communication’ is thus an accumulation, in the hands of the existing system’s administration, of the means which allow it to carry on this particular administration.”⁶⁹ Domination and control, then, are not only about the day-to-day administration of subject populations, or about making them legible to the state’s coercive apparatus through constant surveillance and control, but also about demarcating which other audiences can “see” the subject population, and about how domination is represented via communicative media. The politics of invisibility is about powerful state actors compelling subject populations to be visible to their own police and security forces, while preventing them from being visible to audiences not chosen by the state. It is about establishing a narrative of the self, and forcibly defining the parameters through which alternative narratives – the story of the Other – can be silenced.

The interaction between Palestinians and their far more powerful adversaries, foremost among them Israel, is as much a struggle against being “hidden” from potentially sympathetic publics as it is against marginalisation, dispossession, the constant gaze and monitoring of the state and its violent apparatuses.

Visibility and invisibility become progressively more important as political mobilisation increasingly travels across national boundaries and new decentralised media, such as cyberspace, attempt to provide an alternative representational space for news and opinions. Because the basis of transnational mobilisation is so often the generation of sympathy, powerful images can be particularly effective. However, the power to make visible also comes with the ability to silence, or to judge, or to transform what is being seen. And importantly, to be legible is to be more vulnerable to discipline and coercion. In an age of spectacular politics, the Palestinian struggle is to find the narrow zone between being laid bare to the machinations of domination and performing their struggle in a theatre of sympathetic audiences ready to “see” and recognise.

Notes

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