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A common space in Fawaar Refugee Camp

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Authors Alessandro Petti
Sandi Hillal
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In Western political tradition, the public has always been associated with collective interest. The public has been the space where the rights of the citizens have been inscribed and represented. The very idea of the city as a democratic space has been measured by the degree of inclusiveness and values expressed in the public space. Today, however, public spaces throughout the world are being “occupied” by institutional powers obsessed with security, surveillance and control. Defending the public against the massive privatization imposed by the neo-liberal regimes has been the only way to preserve a minimum sense of collectivity and the common good. The ongoing attack on the public has left little room for a critical understanding of the very nature of contemporary public space. In colonial and post-colonial contexts, the public has more clearly shown its ambiguous and controversial nature. Massive expropriations of land and house demolitions have often been legitimized by a presupposed “collective interest”. The public, hostage of state authorities already undermined in their powers by emerging transnational bodies, seems to increasingly operate for the interests of the few. In the name of the public, common spaces that are not mediated by state apparatus have been expropriated and placed under the control of the few.

Traditionally in Palestine there have been several categories of communal land. These lands not only existed as legal categories of communal ownership but also as forms of communal life. The Israeli state has leveled the different categories of communal land into one single category, state land. Manipulating the legal basis of Ottoman Land Law, Israel has nationalized Palestinian land. Today 90% of the land in Israel is, in fact, state land and the state prohibits ownership transfer[1]. The Israeli appropriation of these territories led to the transformation of communal land into public state territory for the exclusive use of the Israeli Jewish population, entirely excluding Palestinians. This expropriation is evident through the establishment of Israeli settlements, the majority of which are built on what was once communally used land.

Consequently, colonization brought on not only material expropriation, but also imposed changes to the forms of communal land use, relegating Palestinian land to private use.

We would like to propose a critical understanding of the contemporary notion of the public by re-imagining the notion of the common. Rather than the term “commons,” more familiar in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, we prefer to use “common” in order to refer to its Latin origin communi. The latin communem is composed of com=cum “together “and mòinis, originally meaning “obliged to participate”. This fundamental aspect of the common, a demand for active participation, is also present in the Arabic term masha, which refers to communal land equally distributed among farmers. This form of “common land use” was not fully recognized under Ottoman laws – for this reason, masha was not acknowledged under a written title in the Ottoman Code – and was dismissed by colonial authorities for its supposed economical inefficiency, yet it surprisingly still exists today in much of the West Bank. Colonial regimes, interested in territorial control, see in masha land a collective dimension beyond state control. Consequently, masha have been transformed into state land and therefore fall under the control of public land managed by state apparatus. Masha is shared land, which was recognized through practice in the Islamic world. It emerged as a combination of Islamic property conceptions and customary practices of communal or tribal land. Masha could only exits if people decided to cultivate the land together. The moment they stop cultivating it, they loose its possession. It is possession through a common use. Thus what appears to be fundamental is that, in order for this category to exist, it must be activated by common uses. Today we may ask if it is possible to reactivate the common cultivation, expanding the meaning of cultivation to other human activities that imply the common taking care of life (cultivation from Latin colere=taking care of life).

Reimagining the Common

The Arab Revolts since December 2010 have shown various ways in which the common can be reclaimed and reactivated. In the Arab world, what is defined as public has always been regarded with suspicion; the public often has been associated with repressive political regimes and colonial history. Rarely have people felt fully represented by the public, never really owning it.

During the weeks following the Egyptian revolt that began on January 25, 2011, we observed a public plaza transform into a common space owned by the people themselves. Tahrir Square became the political space where new claims were invented, represented, and translated into political actions. The day after President Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down, protesters began cleaning the space, an act that highlighted the end of a regime and the beginning of a possible new era for the Egyptian people. The space was no longer perceived as public—the space of

authority—but rather as the space of the people. Owning the space implied owning the future of the country. Cleaning the square was a gesture of reappropriation, ownership, and care. In fact, this apparently banal act demonstrated a sense of reconstituted community and collective ownership.

The power of people gathering and transforming public space into a constituent common space manifested itself in other places throughout the Arab world. In February 2011, people began assembling around the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, Bahrain, converting the anonymous infrastructure into a political arena. As in Cairo, this roundabout became a constituent assembly capable of undermining the political regime. Consequently, on March 18, local authorities brutally intervened, completely destroying the roundabout. This demonstrates the importance of a physical space where people can assemble and assert their rights—without it, the virtual space of social networks is ineffective.

The ambiguous nature of contemporary public space can also be observed in Western society. During the summer of 2011, a group of protesters tried in vain to assemble and camp out in several public spaces of New York. Paradoxically, their attempts were limited by regulations and curfews imposed on these spaces. Only on September 17 were the protesters able to set up camp in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned public space. This crack between the public and private perhaps represents all that remains of a shared collective space, what we call a common space, nether public nor private.

The Refugee Camp as Site of Political Invention

Refugee camps are definitely sites where the categories of public and private no longer make sense. Within camps, neither public nor private property exists. After sixty-four years, Palestinian refugees still cannot legally own their houses (though in practice they do) and the camp is a space carved from the territorial state. Though states and non-governmental organizations are actively participating in conceiving and managing camps, we are still struggling to fully comprehend how the camp form has contaminated and radically transformed the very idea of the city as an organized and functional political community. Thus, the birth of the camp calls into question the very idea of the city as a democratic space. If the political representation of a citizen is to be found in public space, in the camp we find its inverse: here, a citizen is stripped of his or her political rights. In this sense, the camp represents a sort of anti-city, but also a potential counter-site in which a new form of urbanism is emerging beyond the idea of the nation-state.

Despite the fact that the camp form has been used as an instrument for regulating the refugees' "excess of the political

dimension", the camp, as an exceptional space, is also a site for political practices yet to come. Similarly, although more recent scholarly work highlights the refugee figure as a central critical category of our present political organizations, these very conceptualizations have reduced the refugee to a passive subject, created by the exercise of power and lacking an independent and autonomous political subjectivity.

By investigating emerging social and political practices in West Bank refugee camps, we would like to challenge the idea of refugees as passive subjects.[2] We aim to invert the conceptualization that sees refugees' everyday practices as, at best, a reaction or resistance to a sovereign power. We argue that the everyday political dimension of refugees comes first, followed by the military, control and disciplinary apparatus built by authorities in order to repress and expropriate what is produced or lived by refugees. These practices in Palestinian West Bank refugee camps are emerging under specific and historical conditions.

The Palestinian refugee camps, which first appeared after the 1948 Nakba, were conceived as emergency assistance to the massive expulsion, operated by Jewish militias, of almost the entire Palestinian population of that time. The first pictures of these camps, in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and Gaza, showed small villages made of tents, arranged according to the same regular grids used for military encampments.

As the years passed, and no political solution was found for the plight of the displaced Palestinians, tents were substituted with shelters in an attempt to respond to the growing needs of the camp population without undermining the temporary condition of the camp, and therefore undermining the right to return. However, with a growing population, the condition in the camps worsened. The terrible situation in which Palestinian refugees were forced to live was used by the Palestinian political leadership to pressure Israel and the international community in terms of the urgency of the refugees' right to return. The precariousness and temporariness of the camp structure was not simply a technical problem, but also the material-symbolic embodiment of the principle that its inhabitants be allowed to return as soon as possible to their place of origin.

Most refugees' stories hinging on the process of replacing tents with houses begin with the description of an extremely rigorous winter that obliged them to think about substituting their tents with concrete walls. After erecting the four walls, they realized they were constructing something tangible: they were building a camp. Hence, the roof, the last architectural element defining "a home", gained importance. The refugees recognized that the process of building the roof introduced the fear of tawtin (settling down), incorporating the camp into the city and transforming refugees into citizens of host countries.

The state of Israel denies the internationally recognized right of return of Palestinian refugees. Consequently, Palestinian refugee camps have become magnetic force fields in which competing and unequally matched political entities – the host states, international governmental and non-governmental agencies, and the refugees themselves – attempt to exercise influence. Every single banal act, from building a roof to opening a new street, becomes a political statement concerning the right of return. In the camp, there is nothing that can be considered without political implications.

However, during the Nineties and within the framework of the “peace process”, which subsequently led to the creation of an interim Palestinian Authority, the right of return was increasingly marginalized under the pressure of the unwillingness of successive Israeli governments to acknowledge Israel’s responsibility in the Palestinian Nakba. At the same time, the withdrawal of the Israeli army from most Palestinian urban areas created the conditions for some West Bank camps to become relatively autonomous and independent socio-political communities.

For decades, the political discourse around the right of return, and the associated imperative to stagnate living conditions, imposed by different political actors in order to reaffirm the camp’s ephemerality, forced refugees to live in terrible conditions. From 1948-49 to the present, official political discourse has sought to prohibit any development in, or formalization of, the refugee camps. The fear was that any transformation of the camps would bring about an integration of the refugee community with the local environment and thus the political motivation for the right to return would be lost. This discourse was also based on the assumption that as long as refugees were living in appalling conditions, their suffering would pressure the international community to enact their right to return. Thus, any improvement to camp infrastructure and housing was seen as jeopardizing the right to return.

Today this imperative is being reconsidered: the latest urban transformation have demonstrated that improved living conditions in refugee camps do not necessarily conflict with the right to return. No longer a simple recipient of humanitarian intervention, the refugee is seen as an active political subject, through his or her participation in the development of autonomous governance for the camp. Today, refugees are re-inventing social and political practices that improve their everyday life; the refugee camp has been transformed from a marginalized holding area to an interconnected center of social and political life. It is however crucial that this radical transformation has not normalized the political condition of being exiled.

A Common Space in Fawaar Refugee

Camp

More than sixty years after the 'roof debate', or rather, whether building a roof implies blurring the distinction between the camp and the rest of the city and, consequently, normalizing its exceptional political condition –and its embodiment of the right of return– a somewhat similar discussion took place in the Fawwar refugee camp in the south West Bank. However, this time the discussion did not revolve around the replacement of tents with walls or the construction of a roof, but rather around the meaning of a public space within the camp.

This discussion was initiated by a UNRWA Camp Improvement Programme[3] proposal to create a common space in the camp. The team organized numerous assemblies with the camp community in order to discuss the implications and possibilities of such a transformation. In the beginning, the very idea of creating a "public square" was outright suspicious for the people of Fawwar. If the camp is the testimony of over sixty years of exile, would the "public square" signify that refugees were giving up the right of return and accepting their life in the camp? Would the "public square" create a distance from the classic image of a camp constituted of miserable living condition? Or, on the contrary, would a "public square" create a physical space where public issues can be more openly represented and discussed?

Over five years have passed since the UNRWA camp improvement team based in Bethlehem, partook in numerous assemblies with the camp community. What follow is a brief account of problems and opportunities arisen during the meetings. Among the participants were Abu Rami and Abu Rabiah, considered to be the living memory of the evolution and transformation of the camp. They are among those who saw the tents of Fawwar replaced by concrete houses and were now witnessing the inhabitants beginning to consider the transformation of the spaces between the houses as well. The decision to do so evidently was not so easy. Abu Rabih's preoccupations concerning the very idea of the "public square" and its possible social implications were expressed as follows:

"If you think that this plaza would be open to anyone, whoever he is, to come and bring his chair and sit, or to have fun or to stay during the night, you are absolutely on the wrong track. This is unacceptable in Fawwar camp. Mixing between men and women would be unacceptable, especially mixing between young ladies and young men"

These words were followed by those of another elderly man who described the way the plaza should look:

"This plaza should be organized. We should have a guard on duty at all times because our kids will not be able to take care of it without supervision. If this plaza were to be open for people to

come and go as they pleased, it would never work. People would steal and destroy everything. They would rip up the pavement, they would take the ironwork, and nothing would stay put. The plaza needs to be organized and official. It has to have a door, it has to have a lock, it has to have a key and it has to have a guard”

These statements touch upon the limits of notions of private, public and common that are nearly impossible to clearly define in the realm of the camp. What is the public in a temporary camp? After all, what is claimed to be private is not really private since homes are not registered as private property. Likewise, what is claimed as public is not really public either. The host government does not have sovereignty in camps and the UNRWA mandate is to provide services to the camp inhabitants, not to administer its population. Therefore, the public in camps does not have a political body responsible for the collective interest.

Different generations perceive the public in different ways: the younger generation see the public as an opportunity for expanding their social interaction beyond the private space of their congested and family controlled houses. The “public square” being discussed has become the physical site for the young generation to negotiate their rights with the older generation, the place to discuss what is right and what is wrong, what is possible and what is not. A young man reacted to the suggestion made by the elderly to close in and lock up the public space as follows:

“I don’t think that the idea of enclosing the plaza is a very good one. I am against keys, I am against locks, I am against doors, I am against the idea that this plaza would open and close at certain hours. How could we feel that we own this place? I am not against having a guard to take care of this place, but no keys, no locks, no closing time. Because if we use it this way, we will cancel out any idea of a common plaza and it will function like a private space.”

A more traditionalist-oriented elderly man would interpret the public space as posing the risk of “losing control” of women who are relegated to the home and family. Meanwhile, some women would interpret the new public space as an extension of their domestic space, therefore not open to all members of the camp, but only to their neighbors. This is the way one woman described the plaza:

“There is no problem with building a plaza for our neighborhood. But it has to be only for the people of our neighborhood and not for all the people of the camp. Casual passersby cannot use this plaza. Young males that have nothing to do can’t just come and hang out in our plaza. Yes for the neighborhood, no for the all camp”.

Younger members of the community supported the position of the women. One young man claimed:

“This plaza will serve this neighborhood very well; here the kids

will play, here we will have our important occasions, here we will have our weddings and funerals. It is the only open space in this big neighborhood: how come you think that we will not take care of it? This plaza will be a treasure for all of us."

In an attempt to understand the difference between a public square for a neighborhood and a public square destined to an entire camp, the question was posed as to how women imagined they might use the space. Would they ever come to the plaza and have morning coffee together in the sunshine? The answer, though expressed by one, was fully agreed upon by most of the others:

"What woman would leave her home, her kids, and come to drink coffee in a plaza? It would be a shame for a woman to leave her home without a proper reason. Do you want us all to come here in the plaza and have coffee and tea? Do you want them to write about us in Al Ah'hiram newspaper? We already cannot deal with our husbands; never mind us going out and having tea and coffee in the plaza! "

After several meetings and discussions, we began designing the form of this "public square". The essential element emerging during the discussions was the definition of the "borders" of the space, interpreted as a home without a roof, made of four walls clearly demarcating its limits. In this way, passersby should feel that entering the plaza was like entering someone's house – entailing the same sense of respect and responsibility – rather than a space that does not belong to anyone. Each household located in front of the plaza decided the height of the walls and the permeability. The result is a variegated limit, sensitive to the different desires of privacy or publicness of its inhabitants. This also creates pockets of private life between the walls of the homes, as one woman pointed out:

"Thank God the wall in front of our home is the highest of them all. It gave my husband and me the chance to create a private terrace in front of our home where we can sit outside without being seen. You didn't just create the plaza, but you also created very small plazas in front of all of the homes that flank it! Now, we can be outside in the sunshine and still enjoy some privacy. If the wall were not so high, my husband would not have let me come out and get some sun and have coffee outside while the youth are playing nearby. Also, for me, it's not at all a closed plaza – why are we speaking about closed plazas? It has entrances and exits. We can easily come and go."

Paradoxically, the reactivation of a shared place, so problematized in the beginning, was then considered connected to old communal camp life. In the words of Imad, a man in his forties:

"The habit of sitting out of doors is not new for us in Fawwar. On the contrary, it is an old tradition that all of us used to do when I was a kid: we would sit outside our small homes and have a bit of

fresh air. I think that the main reason that this habit faded is the crowdedness of the camp. As people expanded their homes, the streets became narrower and narrower, until they became very tight alleys. If I were to take a chair outside and sit in the alley, I would block the entire street. This is why I think we lost this tradition, and people became unused to taking leisure time and having activities out of doors. For me, the main reason is therefore that we didn't have any adequate space where we could sit without feeling that we are basically sitting in the streets and blocking traffic. I think that the plaza is giving us the possibility to recreate that culture of using outside spaces, especially because, if you look at us as a society, we are a society where the relationships between neighbors are very close."

Built as a house without a roof, the "public square" embodies the fertile ambiguity between public and private space within the camps. Conceived as an enclosed space protected by four walls, it is dedicated to the surrounding neighborhood. Through direct participation from the refugee community, the space has already been put to use even before its completion, inundated with a range of new activities.[4]

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1. Basic Law: Israel Lands, July 25, 1960
2. www.campusincamps.ps [no longer active}

1. See www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=31
2. see http://www.campusincamps.ps/en