

# 10. Reforming Resistance: Neoliberalism and the Co-option of Civil Society Organisations in Palestine\*

Sibille Merz

This article explores the effects of the neoliberal development paradigm on the restructuring of social formations through the external funding and promotion of civil society groups, especially non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It uses the case study of the increasing presence of NGOs in Palestine,<sup>1</sup> more precisely in the West Bank towns of Ramallah and al-Bireh. Based on fieldwork, it argues that neoliberal rationality aims at transforming societies and subjectivities around the notion of 'enterprise' and weakens the collective national resistance movement.

The subject of the international aid regime as well as the role of non-governmental organisations and especially their often depoliticising and de-democratising effects has been researched and criticised by various scholars in the past. Nonetheless, little has been said about the role of NGOs in an explicitly neoliberal development project that aims at the transformation of social relations, general conduct and subjectivities. In a neoliberal rationality, civil society is not - or not only - a philosophical concept and by no means a neutral space between the state and the

---

\* This article is based upon a longer article by Sibille Merz: "Missionaries of the new era": neoliberalism and NGOs in Palestine', *Race & Class*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 50-66.

market but rather the correlate of governmental techniques where many, even though by no means all, international and local NGOs function as handmaidens for or even pioneers of neoliberalism's reformulation of society. The resulting emphasis on individualism as well as the organisation of the social around the notion of 'enterprise' often leads to a further depoliticisation and fragmentation of a society's social relations. In the example of Palestine which serves as a case study here, it has led to the further weakening of the collective resistance movement against the Israeli occupation.

Since the concept of civil society has been rediscovered in the wake of the revolutions against the Stalinist states in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1980s it has become very much a buzzword on the political agenda. While previously it represented a sphere where people, organised in groups and initiatives, could pursue democratic projects in freedom from authoritarian state power in these regions, it has since been massively flattened out and is now commonly perceived by donors as a guarantee for democracy. Together with a few other key terms such as democracy, human rights, participation, self-help and empowerment, it is on the very top of a neoliberal development agenda which, powered by the twin motors of neoliberal economics and liberal democratic theory, sees private agencies and NGOs as main agents for democratisation.

Following the utter failure of the World Bank driven approach of development via Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s and early 1990s, the 1990s and 2000s have brought a shift of the development agenda from mere economic adjustment to a focus on participation, civil society, good governance and poverty reduction. With the expansion of the market into areas that it had previously not encroached upon, this new focus also implied a shift from a 'negative' or conservative neoliberalism which merely aimed to keep the state out of the market, to a more 'positive' or inclusive neoliberalism of empowerment, market enablement, participation and community and NGO partnerships. In development policy, the idea of civil society, mostly reduced to NGOs and aimed at the exclusion of other forms of collective action for the benefit of society as a whole, is closely tied up with the notion of good governance and often equated with political as well as economic liberalisation.

The NGO approach to development is thereby exemplary of this (neo)liberal logic. On the one hand, the needs of marginalised groups are addressed in terms of encouraging self-help or empowerment which reflects the neoliberal dogma of individualising risk and responsibility and fosters the privatisation of social services and institutions. On the

other hand, neoliberal thought and policies perfectly exemplify forms of biopolitical<sup>2</sup> governmentality since they aim at governing subjects and the population as a whole through the transformation of general conduct, rationalities, and self-conceptions. As Nicolas Rose and Peter Miller argue, political power in terms of “‘political rationalities’ and ‘technologies of government’... draws attention to the diversity of regulatory mechanisms which seek to give effect to government, and to the particular importance of indirect mechanisms that link the conduct of individuals and organizations to political objectives”.<sup>3</sup> Neoliberalism is a paradigm of indirect social control. The neoliberal “self as enterprise highlights... [the] dynamics of control in neoliberal regimes which operate through the organized proliferation of individual difference in an economized matrix.”<sup>4</sup> Essentially, neoliberal development discourses and practices attempt to govern “from a distance”, from an almost invisible position through localised institutions and practices and the transformation of individual subjectivities into “enterprise men and women”.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, it is important to stress that the neoliberal project has been contested since its very emergence. NGOs, citizens’ movements, transnational corporations, academia and mass media were turned into accomplices in these new forms of governance, but never completely nor without resistance, slippages or subversion. Many Palestinian NGOs, for example, refused to sign an agreement drafted by an important international donor guaranteeing that the undersigned denounce all forms of terrorism, given that all forms of opposition to the Oslo Process are labelled terrorist, and thus sacrificed potentially vital sources of income.<sup>6</sup>

The emergence of new forms of governance was further intensified and obfuscated by the increasing securitisation of international relations since the Cold War and the so-called war on terror expressed by the idea of development *as* security in the name of opportunity and empowerment. It was down to global security concerns, involving the security of people and the environment besides the security of nation states, that the concept of good governance was introduced into development programmes and governance redefined to involve non-state actors and organisations. As David Craig and Doug Porter explain:

... the IMF, all MDBs [Multilateral Development Banks] and multi-/bi-laterals were through ‘good governance’ able to accomplish the full convergence of risk, crisis and security management, all joined to the adoption of slightly more ‘inclusive’ neoliberal market reforms by what was seen as the

unassailable ‘moral duty to reach the poor and needy’.<sup>7</sup>

This focus on security further exemplifies how development has become a biopolitical security mechanism to contain the marginalised in their peripheral spaces.

In order to produce broad-based consent to these measures the new approach of security through development plus good governance must involve civil society and the private sector. In the case of Palestine, security has always played a key role for international donors’ funding conditionalities, and the focus on NGOs represents the attempt to ‘pacify’ the Arab-Israeli conflict through stimulating civic modes of action. Of course, the containment of Palestinians is additionally massively reinforced by the Israeli occupation and mechanisms of control, especially the separation barrier with all its economic and political restraints.

Hence whilst the support of NGOs represents the inclusive neoliberal approach of framing poverty not in politico-economic terms but as local vulnerability, NGOs can also function as the filters for international political and economic interests trying to produce widespread consent, and the correlate of governmental techniques through disciplining and normatively regulating bodies and societies. Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar thus observe for the Palestinian case a “displacement of a political mode of action, in the form of mobilization, by a civic mode of action, promoting new subjectivities and a new reflexivity on social norms”<sup>8</sup> in the trajectory of Palestinian civil society organisations.

## **Palestinian NGOs and the National Resistance Movement**

Palestinian non-governmental organisations have historically secured legitimacy and popular support in the absence of a national government and have therefore acted as local political leaders since the military occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in 1967. While secular and religious charitable societies and organisations committed to providing basic social services as well as voluntary work committees have always been relevant in Palestinian society, the development of explicitly political civil society organisations has been triggered by the ongoing occupation and the lack of an officially acknowledged government, which allowed them also to respond to the political needs of the communities.<sup>9</sup> During the 1980s, factionalisation

and growing competition between the different initiatives and groups resulted in the institutionalisation of the grassroots movement against the occupation, the formalisation and professionalisation of its executive structures and staff, and to the increasing demand for external funding which led to the establishment of first links to donor NGOs in the global North.

Palestinian NGOs were crucial in organising the population to resist the Israeli occupation. The first *Intifada* (1987-1993) consolidated their roles as local political leaders and reasserted their embeddedness in the local communities. The popular committee structures that had served as the frontline in the first two years of the uprising were made possible by the mobilising and organising skills of the various grassroots organisations. They provided not only the framework and the avant-garde of the uprising, but also formed its source of direction, cohesion and continuity.

However, this heyday of NGOs as pure activists was short-lived and soon to be overshadowed by their increasing 'professionalisation' and the international recognition of their contributions to service delivery accompanied by financial support. The transformation of many of the mass-based national movements into elitist, professional and politically independent NGOs intensified during the Oslo negotiations and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994. As the newly founded PA attempted to ensure its legitimacy and control over the political field, it was expected that Palestinian NGOs would engage in the building of a civil society independent of the new interim government. This task was further underlined by the pivotal role played by international support, leading to the dependence of roughly 30 percent of the indigenous NGOs on financial aid in the mid-1990s.<sup>10</sup> This dependence has led to a greater influence of international policy trends on local agendas, which in the 1980s had shifted from 'relief' to 'development' and since the 1990s has focused on the role of private and non-governmental institutions.

This new focus on civil society and NGOs was aimed at ensuring that the Palestinians saw concrete improvements in their daily lives in order to minimise resistance to the peace process. This has left deep marks on the Palestinian civil society sector. One of the most noticeable changes has been a gradual neutralisation of a formerly highly active and political civil society as donor funds to various organisations secured the retrenchment of NGOs from popular support, diminished their mobilising potential and consequently hindered mass mobilisation during the second *Intifada*. This is exemplified by a new focus of many foreign funded Palestinian NGOs on civic education programmes,

human rights trainings, awareness raising activities and advocacy work as a result of their entry into complex relations with various international donors.

The outbreak of the *al-Aqsa Intifada* in 2000 clearly exposed a disconnection between the largely professionalised, elitist NGOs and popular, anti-colonial movements in Palestine. The lack of synergy between civil society actors and political forces or the local population dramatically weakened the collective act of resistance against the Israeli occupation, which had metamorphosed into an apartheid regime of checkpoints and permit systems.<sup>11</sup> The NGOs' absence from popular demonstrations, their reluctance to be associated with the popular National and Islamic High Committee (NIHC) as well as their refusal to take a position in the widespread calls for the resignation of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon exemplified the NGOs' attempts to occupy an apolitical, 'neutral' position in the midst of a national and anti-colonial struggle.<sup>12</sup> Their failure to advance alternative modes of resistance while critiquing the armed struggle left them open to delegitimisation.

This transformation however was not the product of an internal process but a largely external one, the result of an international aid industry that envisions society as neatly divided into either political or 'civil' spheres. Various Palestinian NGOs have increasingly internalised the (imagined) global aid community's mantra of professionalisation and political neutrality and, as a result, disengaged from the explicitly political, nationalist project. Many other organisations, secular and Islamist, however, opposed such a neutralisation, while others used the opportunity to gain decent and relatively well-paid jobs without giving up their political stand towards the occupation. Most of the Palestinian NGO critics cited in this article are actually affiliated with NGOs as researchers, consultants or project coordinators.

The *al-Aqsa Intifada* nonetheless provides a good example of the absurdity of a vision of society as partitioned into a civil and a political sphere, with no regard to the social reality in Palestine, since it positions the Palestinian NGOs in an antagonistic relationship to the mass-based national struggle. Western donors' conceptualisations of civil society have therefore undermined the stated aim of strengthening Palestinian society and instead contributed to its fragmentation. The international aid regime and the globally popular ideas of individual responsibility, self-empowerment, professionalisation and political neutrality thus increasingly (re-)shape local agendas and power relations.

## Neoliberalism, Development and NGOs in Palestine Today

Since 2011, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's statehood-programme and especially the 2008 Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP) it incorporates, to promote Palestinian statehood, development and independence, further redefines and diverts the Palestinian liberation struggle. Even though they represent a 'home-grown' approach to development and state-building, they are inspired by a "model of neoliberal governance increasingly widespread in the region, indeed in neocolonial states around the world, but which socially, culturally, and politically remains an alien creation of the Washington-based international financial institutions".<sup>13</sup> Built on the premise that Palestinians have to prove their ability to build a state despite the occupation in order to be well prepared at the time of final status agreements between Israel and the PLO originally scheduled for mid-2011, its architects mainly invest in neoliberal institution building. This will, in effect, increase Palestinian dependence on Israel, further reinforcing the latter's quest for security as it formalises a truncated network of industrial zones entirely dependent on the Israeli infrastructure of control, providing a pool of cheap Palestinian labour to be exploited by Israeli and other capitalist interests in the region. The transformations that Palestinian society is witnessing must be understood in the context of the significant shifts in the Palestinian labour force over the last fifteen years, which have been mainly caused by Israel's refusal to employ Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank after the second intifada. This has meant that employment by the PA (or NGOs) has become a major means of survival. The likely outcome of the PRDP is even greater economic and political dependence on Israel - and thus, the normalisation of the occupation - and the strengthening of informal economic activities, which has itself become a new target of development, bolstered by micro-credits, technical equipment or managerial training.

Deeply pervaded with this neoliberal rationality, the Plan does not only redefine economic and political but also social structures and relations. Indeed, its success, as well as the long-term goal of the construction of a single neoliberal economic zone across the Middle East which the US envisions, is dependent on a fracturing of the resistance movement, of the national unity and the reshaping of people's self-conceptions as atomised, private individuals working for their own economic success rather than for the collective goal of a wider political liberation. Through the simultaneous maintenance of a

semblance of stability and the incentive of personal economic gains, the motivation to resolve the conflict declines. As a Palestinian taxi driver rightfully noted to an Al-Jazeera correspondent: “They want to distract us with roads until our country is gone”.<sup>14</sup>

This attempt to manufacture a consensus on national and individual goals, i.e. freedom, individualism, consumption, choice, responsibility and competition, is, needless to say, conducted via an increased focus on civil society organisations, especially NGOs. Further consolidating the international financial institutions’ role in this regard, the Palestinian NGO Development Centre, for example, has received a ten million US-Dollar grant from the World Bank to implement a third phase of the Palestinian NGO Project which is directed towards improving the effectiveness, self-reliance and sustainability of the Palestinian NGO sector.

According to the parameters of the neoliberal development agenda, the buzzwords of democratisation, community participation and grassroots mobilisation have thereby made it into most of the Palestinian NGOs’ funding applications and project descriptions. The community’s role in the decision-making process and a deep connection to the ‘grassroots’ has to be ensured in order to secure international funding. Yet, in contrast to the international donors’ democratising aspirations, the various studies on the de-democratising effects of the “NGOisation of Palestinian social movements”<sup>15</sup> have shown that international donors largely ignore popular committees, trade unions or political councils and prefer working with NGOs that are trained in writing applications, managing large grants and setting up glittery websites. Standardising, bureaucratising and normalising goals and forms of action contribute to the displacement of explicitly *political* in favour of *civic* modes of action.

### Changing NGO Agendas: A Case Study

As my ethnographic fieldwork<sup>16</sup> in the West Bank has shown, in hardly any of the project proposals by the Palestinian NGO (PNGO) was any community representative involved nor was there any assessment of the respective community’s needs. Rather, the responsible employees of the PNGO thought about what would sound most attractive in a proposal for international donors. ‘Youth’ and ‘women’ therefore seemed to be the most lucrative target groups, and their ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’, in the form of drawing contests, was included as a



remunerative project aim. The two Western European interns' experiences in proposal writing were thereby seen as authoritative and most auspicious for attracting donor funding, despite their lack of deep knowledge of the Palestinian context. A one-size-fits-all approach according to globally standardised models, discursively homogenising 'underdeveloped' regions, is apparently more beneficial than knowledge about the 'facts on the ground'. As a result there has never been an attempt to assess the gender relations that were apparently in need of intervention, nor the local youth's actual concerns. Thus the generation of ideas or the development of proposals for new activities seldom occurred through meetings with the local population, and if it did it was only with its - mostly male - leaders, rather than via a representative survey evaluating the current requirements of the community.

For example, in a meeting with a German donor, the director of the PNGO was told that the donor attaches great importance to the promotion of women's rights and the enforcement of gender equality. While this reflects Kanishka Goonewardena and Katharine N. Rankin's statement that the significance of gender equality is even more insisted on "when the Empire embarks on the Middle East",<sup>17</sup> it also demonstrates the scale Palestinian NGOs are supposed to fulfil the donor's expectations: while the organisation had not had a special focus on women's rights and sees much larger gender inequalities in the urban middle-classes than in the more traditional countryside which the German donors wished to target, the director affirmed their request and emphasised the PNGO's explicit commitment to women's equality. This illustrates how the donor's agenda and not the actual needs of the respective community shapes local organisations' projects, leading to a further alienation of people from many established NGOs. In an informal talk, a young Palestinian activist explained that:

the NGOs especially in Ramallah appropriate the normative power to define our struggles. They mainly work for global capitalism and the ruling classes, sometimes for the PA, and legitimise the Israeli occupation but pretend they contribute to our national liberation. I wish there were no NGOs here. Then there would be truly political resistance (an architect and activist living in Ramallah).

Asked for her opinion on the large presence of international and foreign funded NGOs in Ramallah, a Palestinian-American student active in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) in the US similarly stated that "they all mainly engage in normalisation work and try to

spread consent on giving up resistance, just as Israel and the US want them to” (a student and researcher from Washington).

Furthermore, despite their emphasis on ‘promoting democracy’, Western donors sharply limited their aid expenditures after Hamas had been democratically elected and secured a majority within the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in 2006. This refusal of any contact with Islamist organisations such as Hizbollah or Hamas while at the same time calling for democracy and free elections has been characteristic especially of the US-American stand towards democracy in the Middle East in recent years and is also reflected in the donors’ funding conditions. The PNGO has, consciously or subconsciously, internalised this mantra of secularisation and the de-radicalisation of religio-political movements and is increasingly committed to promoting religious tolerance and secularism. Their projects are shaped through an explicitly anti-Islamist lens in which forms of organisation, collectivity or political action not defined by secular norms are at best ignored, and at worst made the target of an education or de-radicalisation project. For example, the tolerance and human rights programme, conforming to its self-definition, focuses on trying to reform religious ideology by emphasising connections between religious thought and human rights. As Nasser, one of their employees, explained, every criticism of Israel in a project proposal lessened the chance to receive funding, despite the fact that religious and political factionalisation and radicalisation are fuelled by the Israeli occupation, the ongoing forced eviction of people from their lands and the daily discrimination of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers.

Not only does this exclude large segments of society as potential target groups or partner organisations but also it reflects the international agenda to refuse support to Islamic or Islamist groups and parties, or indeed to anything related to Islam, no matter its deep roots in society. Leone gives the example of a Palestinian NGO she worked with which had developed a project with the women of the community about the rule of law aiming at supporting women in learning what elements of Islamic law are supportive of their own rights. However, the international donor they had approached made it clear that one could only propose topics in civil law, no matter which law is actually locally prevalent. “Anything related to Islamic law, she [the USAID officer] said, would not be considered”.<sup>18</sup>

Hence far from implementing projects with a strong connection to the grassroots, strengthening participatory development and democratisation, the daily work of many NGOs is dominated by donor-driven agendas and the implementation of an international neoliberal

agenda that supports institutions and rules which provide the framework for the conduct of public and private businesses. Despite donors' explicit aim of democratisation, democracy is only desirable if certain groups that would threaten the neoliberal, imperial project in the region, such as Islamist movements, remain excluded. Formerly popular civil society and community organisations are often re-organised hierarchically and played off against each other in the competition for funding, driving a wedge between Palestinian institutions and dismantling social cohesion. NGOs are co-opted, turned into consensual governing partners and serve or even actively promote the neoliberal agenda of privatisation and deregulation. Disseminating values and concepts like good governance and democracy skills has thereby become a means of redirecting the focus of the NGOs toward implementing universalised standards of behaviour and away from active political resistance.

Secondly, the main focus of the PNGO on human rights, tolerance and diversity, all catchphrases on the current development agenda, also exemplifies the organisations', and their donors', depoliticised approach to development, since these concepts cover up current power asymmetries and sources of social injustice such as political and economic restrictions caused by the Israeli occupation. The idea of human rights, for example, seen in narrowly humanitarian terms of merely preventing suffering, has been shown to implicitly or explicitly prevent the formation of a collective political project and of real socio-political transformations.<sup>19</sup> The PNGO implements this depoliticised concept of human rights, deemed universal, which has become one of the main pillars of international development aid that often postpones a politico-economic transformation by treating only the symptoms, not the causes of 'poverty' and 'underdevelopment'. This is in spite of the fact that many of its employees believe that "universal human rights declarations cannot contribute to any solution of our struggle and only serve the powerful to reinforce their power" (a PNGO employee). Human rights advocates and NGOs often treat political, economic or colonial conflicts as if they were mere humanitarian crises that can be solved by preventing immediate suffering through the provision of food, shelter or (human) rights. Such humanitarianism "presents itself as something of an anti-politics, a pure defence of the innocent and the powerless against power, a pure defence of the individual against immense and potentially cruel or despotic machineries of culture, state, war, ethnic conflict, tribalism, patriarchy, and other mobilizations or instantiations of collective power against individuals."<sup>20</sup> The concept of human rights thus relies on a violent de-politicisation and victimisation of the subject,

a private individual that is, more often than not, a Third World rather than a First World subject as the 'authentic' victim subject. Such a conception of human rights does not only rely on an individualised, atomised notion of the subject but also depoliticises conflicts and 'underdevelopment'.

The PNGO's focus on tolerance and diversity similarly exemplifies a depoliticised approach to development and social justice. Whilst the concept of tolerance is based on the passive acceptance of the (subaltern) 'Other', defined in terms of 'I suffer your presence because I cannot get rid of you', it does not challenge the processes of othering *per se* and thus only targets, like human rights concepts, the symptoms but not the root causes of social injustice. It rather affirms the tolerating subject's powerful position from which it can represent itself as philanthropic and altruistic and hence reproduce itself as the norm. Thus the NGO elite presents itself as part of the international aid regime that sets out to promote plurality and inclusion, plays off different sections of society against each other, and consolidates the construction of a new bourgeois elite. The 'tolerated' Other thereby remains trapped in its 'being-Other'. The PNGO's self-conception clearly expresses this narrow approach as it defines tolerance as the willingness to recognise and respect the beliefs of others and *to allow* others to be different.

A third example of the effects of the aid industry on local NGOs' agendas and hence on social formations and subjectivities in the West Bank is the increasing number of projects on entrepreneurship, business skills, artistic trainings and other projects such as writing proposals or managing funds, thereby contributing to the production of new subjectivities according to a globally standardised model. In this way the idea of training relies on the assumption that the body politic, as well as the individual, can and has to be shaped by various governmental techniques and interventions.

Most of those under the age of thirty in Ramallah who were interviewed for this article had previously participated in at least one workshop or training sponsored by an international, mostly European or US-American organisation. The underlying idea of the subject as both a producer of goods and as a producer of her- or himself clearly originates in the international neoliberal paradigm. Accordingly, one of the most popular forms of training is in entrepreneurship bolstered by the notion, increasingly favoured within development circles, that entrepreneurs make model citizens. This approach reflects the current neoliberal development agenda to attempt to transform subjects into little enterprises and divert their attention away from politics. On the one hand, they aim at transforming subjectivities around the notions of

enterprise, consumerism, individualism and freedom; on the other hand they often result in increased economic dependency on international aid, declining voluntarism, and political apathy. A weakening of the collective project of national resistance, 'violent' or 'non-violent', is a likely result of the dissemination of individualistic, profit-oriented and competitive ideas and values.

Similarly, local and international NGOs in Ramallah offer numerous artistic trainings and workshops for aspiring artists, film-makers and musicians in the region. Nearly all of the trainings were short-term, often conducted by a 'generous' foreign artist or trainer flown in for just a few days, and did not result in the establishment of any durable structures such as art or music schools, let alone in regular employment for the participants.

Rather, they are based on the idea of producing human capital and subjectivities which conform to the idea of 'enterprise men and women'. The marketisation and commodification of social relations eventually also encompasses individuals and subjectivities and engenders the biopolitical production of new entrepreneurs in all areas of life. In the case of the arts and music scene in the West Bank, this implies that the young artists are being trained to become or lay bare their human capital, their potential and talent to be commodified, capitalised and sold.

Many of the young artists seem highly critical of these singular events, even though they admitted that they are a good opportunity for them to forge links with the international arts community. One of them, an actor and trainer for theatre and performance also complained about his decreasing income opportunities. Earlier, he explained, he was a freelance instructor working for different theatres and film productions all over the West Bank. Today, theatres and theatre schools do not hire Palestinians any longer but prefer working with foreign funded NGOs which can offer trainings for free. Consequentially, he himself relies on tedious application procedures with NGOs, all requiring English language skills. This is only one of many examples of the NGO sector constantly reproducing itself and penetrating every possible space, physical or imagined, in the West Bank today in order to neutralise and depoliticise behaviour, aspirations and self-conceptions.

Hence with this focus on the production of subjectivities as self-entrepreneurs, the aspired penetration of virtually all space and the consequential dependency of many areas of life on the aid industry, the neoliberal development regime constantly reproduces the conditions for its own intervention and thus secures its own survival. Social formations increasingly disperse through the promotion of neoliberal conceptions

of work, life and the subject. The fragmentation of political resistance to the occupation is one among many potential results of these processes: “People are tired, you know. They have been doing politics for all their lives, but now, with the economic boom and all the NGOs offering jobs, they can actually make a living and do not need to care about politics anymore” (a PNGO employee). Also, another PNGO worker, states: “I am not doing this job because I believe in it. It is a good way to make money to survive, but in the long run, all these NGOs destroy the base for a political struggle which is what we actually need”. These and other statements provide strong indications that the processes of the NGOisation of Palestinian social movements beginning in the 1990s might even have increased due to the intensification of neoliberal policies and the consequent atomisation, individualisation and depoliticisation of society. In a meeting with political activists who organised demonstrations in the wake of the 63rd anniversary of the *Nakba*, the founding of the State of Israel or the *catastrophe*, for the Palestinians, the participants similarly bemoaned the decreasing willingness of Palestinians inside the West Bank to engage in political demonstrations and direct actions. One of them explained that:

people have always been afraid, but while they did not have anything to lose before, they are now promised personal economic gains if there is political stability. They are being bought by the government and the United Nations! How can there be stability and peace without justice and our right to return [one of the main claims of the resistance movement that the PA has abandoned]?

Repression, fear, exhaustion but also the governmental techniques of the development regime and the perspective of economic rewards in exchange for political rights seem to have further fragmented the resistance movement in the urban centres of Ramallah and al-Bireh.

### **New Forms of Resistance?**

While the traditional Palestinian resistance movement has been weakened through the increased influence of international interests and donor money in the West Bank, new forms of opposing the occupation, the deprivation of political rights and the many forms of everyday discrimination have nonetheless emerged. As the large demonstrations

at Israel's borders on *Nakba* Day, the 15 May 2011, have shown, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, indeed across the globe, demand their right to return with all possible insistence. Embedded within a broader anti-imperialist struggle within and outside Palestine and inspired by the revolutions almost everywhere in the Arab world, these newly emerging networks might mark a new era of collective movements. Characterised by their independence from one specific centre, network or individual leadership figure, they cannot easily be closed, manipulated, controlled or co-opted by the regime as could more traditional forms of protest such as leftist movements, Islamic initiatives or labour protests prevalent in the region (which, of course, simultaneously still exist). Together with the popular non-violent initiatives such as the BDS or the Stop the Wall Campaign, they may give rise to a new national collective identity which transcends political cleavages and, surely, will continue to play a significant role in the political processes of the region.

Hence while traditional forms of protests have been repressed by the increasingly authoritarian regime of the PA, redefined due to the lack of international support of armed resistance and transformed through the attempted construction of a neoliberal consent in civil society, these and other new forms of resistance have emerged. Alongside decentralised actions, newly emerging *ad hoc* popular committees, such as the Popular Committee for Ending the Division which contributed to the reconciliation of the political rivals Fatah and Hamas in May 2011, show that the Palestinian struggle is far from co-opted, neutered or depoliticised.

## Notes

- 
- 1 I favour the term 'Palestine' over 'Occupied Palestinian Territories' to highlight Palestine as an entity that is the reference point for its inhabitants and refugees, not just disconnected 'territories' whose inhabitants could live in 'any other Arab country as well', as the Zionist narrative would have it. Nonetheless, my hypothesis cannot be generalised to the situation in the Gaza Strip, but is specific to that in the central West Bank, recently bolstered with massive development and reconstruction aid. Throughout this article, unattributed quotes are taken from the author's research and interview data.
  - 2 The Foucauldian concept of biopolitics or biopower refers to a specific governmental technique which, according to him, emerged at the beginning

- of the eighteenth century. In contrast to earlier forms of sovereign government, biopolitical techniques are utilised by emphasis on the protection of life rather than the threat of death. They target the individual body as well as the population, representing “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations”; (Foucault 1998: 140) . Today, biopolitics comprises various forms of regulating, managing and normalising the individual body and the body politic as a whole. Ref.: M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol.1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998). See also: M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- 3 N. Rose and P. Miller, ‘Governing Economic Life’, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1 ( 1990) p. 1.
  - 4 L. McNay, ‘Self as enterprise: dilemmas of control and resistance in Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics*’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (2009) pp. 55-77, p. 55.
  - 5 T. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 28.
  - 6 N. Abdo, ‘Imperialism, the State, and NGOs: Middle Eastern Contexts and Contestations’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 30, No 2 (2010), p. 245.
  - 7 D. Craig and D. Porter, *Development beyond Neoliberalism? Governance, Poverty Reduction and Political Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 77.
  - 8 Hanafi, Sari and Linda Tabar, *The Emergence of a Palestinian Globalized Elite: Donors, Organizations and Local NGOs* (Jerusalem: Institute for Jerusalem Studies/Muwatin, 2005), p. 30.
  - 9 R. Hammami, ‘NGOs: “The Professionalisation of Politics”’, *Race and Class* Vol. 37, No. 2 (1995), 51-63, p. 53; and S. A. Shawa, ‘NGOs and Civil Society in Palestine: A Comparative Analysis of Four Organization’, in *NGOs and Governance in the Arab World*, ed. by Sarah Ben Néfissa, Nabil Abd al-Fattah, Sari Hanafi, and Carlos Milani, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005) p. 210.
  - 10 Shawa, ‘NGOs and Civil Society’, p. 212.
  - 11 Many Palestinian NGOs used their funds and international recognition gained during the last decade for advocacy, the provision of up-to-date information on Palestinian fatalities and the frequent human rights violations by the Israeli military operations and organised an international protection and solidarity movement. Nonetheless, they did not take any active leadership role, failed in developing non-violent forms of resistance and entirely ignored popular calls for the boycott of Israeli goods. Likewise, they did not use their experience and resources to organise popular committees that would have sustained the socio-economic steadfastness



- 
- (*sumoud*) of the population as they did during the first *Intifada*.
- 12 S. Hanafi and L. Tabar, 'The Intifada and the Aid Industry: the impact of the New Liberal Agenda on the Palestinian NGOs', *Comparative Studies of South Asian and the Middle East*, Vol. 23 Nos 1/2 (2003), pp. 205-214, p. 206.
  - 13 R. Khalidi and S. Sobhi, 'Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Movement', *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. 40, No. 2 (2011), pp. 6-25, p. 8.
  - 14 N. Odeh, 'Money can't buy you Love', *Al-Jazeera English*, 26 March 2010. <<http://blogs.aljazeera.com/blog/middle-east/money-cant-buy-you-love>>
  - 15 I. Jad, 'NGOs between buzzwords and social movements', *Development in Practice*, Vol. 17, No.4 (2007), pp. 622-9, p. 622.
  - 16 I spent six weeks in Ramallah and conducted twelve semi-structured interviews, as well as recording numerous impromptu conversations with those I met during my daily work as an intern with a Palestinian NGO and in meetings with foreign donors.
  - 17 K. Goonewardena and K. N. Rankin, 'The desire called civil society: a contribution to the critique of a bourgeois category', *Planning Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2004), pp. 117-49, p. 132.
  - 18 A. Leone, 'International development assistance and the effects on Palestinian community mobilization', unpublished MA thesis (Centre for Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, 2010), p. 34.
  - 19 Žižek, Slavoj, 'Against Human Rights', *New Left Review*, Vol. 34 (2005), 115-131; Douzinas, Costas, *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (London: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007).
  - 20 Brown, "'The Most We Can Hope For...': Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism", *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 103, Nos 2/3 (2004), pp. 451-463, p. 453.