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LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

Negotiating Futures in Palestinian Refugee Camps: Spatiotemporal Trajectories of a Refugee Nation

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A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Honourable Custos, my esteemed Opponent, ladies and gentlemen.

I first visited a Palestinian refugee camp in 2008 when I was 19 years old. The camp was Far'a in the northern West Bank and I travelled there together with a youth delegation to visit the home of our local host. What I remember of the visit is that our laundry dried extremely quickly in the August heat, that kids gathered at the windows of a youth centre in which we were watching a *dabke* performance, and that I overate because my plate kept filling and as a proper Finn, I thought that it would be impolite not to finish your plate. But what I also remember is that it was only afterwards that I realized that I had visited a refugee camp. It might have been mentioned at the time, but I was probably already overwhelmed by everything else I had witnessed so the nature of the place was not something that stayed with me.

The same material landscape that I later came to associate specifically with Palestinian

refugee camps was probably what hid the nature of the place, as the multi-storey concrete buildings is not the image most of us have of a refugee camp. Actually, in a course I have taught on refugee spatialities, the drawings I had students make, in order to determine how they picture a refugee camp, without exception had tents, walls, and/or checkpoints. In the Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, there were no tents, no walls, nor checkpoints in sight that would have marked a demarcated, humanitarian space.

In 2008 I had travelled to the West Bank knowing only the very basics of Palestinian history, and on the ground, it was the Israeli occupation with its settlements, checkpoints, and soldiers that drew my attention. Between 2008 and 2015, before I had begun to work on my dissertation, I started to familiarize myself with the Palestinian history, revisited Palestine few times, and lived and worked in Lebanon, and slowly I learned to comprehend the refugees' situation, and how it lies at the heart

of the so-called Palestinian question, even more so than the occupation. The material landscape that I had witnessed at Far'a started to make sense. As Palestinian refugeeness has lasted for over 70 years, it is rather self-evident that also the spaces of refugeeness have changed. The majority of the camps were established by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA a few years after Palestinians were dispossessed in 1948, to cater to the humanitarian needs of the refugee communities. Since then, much has changed materially, politically, and socially. The camps have become durable spaces where already generations of Palestinian refugees have built their lives. The realities of the camps I have become acquainted with over the years are a coming-together of this long history of the refugeeness and the conditions in the separate contexts in which the camps exist.

In the dissertation my rather vast aim was to make sense of the Palestinian refugee conditions, and not only in the West Bank but also in Lebanon and Jordan. I did so in order to discuss the futures that my interlocutors envisioned for themselves. I adopted the multisited approach because Palestinian refugees have been positioned differently under these three sovereigns and I presumed that it must affect how the future was seen.

The topic arose from my interest in learning more about how the people most concerned thought about the right of return, the political call to return to pre-exile places of dwelling. I was interested in how Palestinian refugees envisioned the return and what types of spaces it would produce. The right to return to Palestine has been a central political claim of the refugees since the beginning of their refugeeness and it has come to structure their refugeehood in multiple ways. Geographer Adam Ramadan (2013: 66) has even noted that 'refugee camps

have become permanent-temporary landscapes of exile, spaces of Palestine in liminality, drawing meaning from Palestine of the past and future'.

Yet, very quickly after I had started my fieldwork, my interest widened to concern the future in general, as it became evident in encounters I had in the fields that the political narratives on return did not manage to capture the complexities of futures that especially the young adults envisioned. The political futures form but one dimension, and from the individual perspective, often not the most compelling one due to the prevalent situation of compromised living conditions. Rather, when discussing the futures with my interlocutors, what defined what was hoped for were the conditions of the present and what would be a feasible way to better them. For my interlocutors, the present is in many ways defined by a lack of possibilities. The specific forms of deprivation are defined by the position of their exile, those in Lebanon suffering from different problems than those in the West Bank and those in Jordan. It was, nevertheless, the lack of possibilities that all my interlocutors wanted to overcome.

When discussing the refugees' situations and their futures, I always feel the need to first address the present and the past. However, talking about the history of Palestinian refugees is never a simple task. The difficulties begin already at determining where to start. At first sight, the obvious starting point would be *an-Nakba*, the catastrophe of 1948 that not only forced Palestinians to flee from their homes, but ruptured the whole society and ways of being. It was in 1948 when Zionist forces were able to start fully implementing their project to erase and replace the Palestinian lifeworld. But starting from these events that made a great majority of Palestinians refugees would mean bypassing the complex colonial histories that paved the way to *an-Nakba*. The fall of Ottoman

Empire in the first world war and the British Mandate that followed played their role in enabling the dispossession of Palestinians, and so did the Second World War and the atrocities of holocaust. Furthermore, it is impossible to comprehend *an-Nakba* without addressing the Zionist ideology that initiated establishing a homeland for the Jewish people in the first place. Talk of the history is further complicated by the fact that the narratives of history in Israel/Palestine are extremely contested and infused with politics. This is the case specifically in relation to Palestinian refugees whose right to return Israel has denied in multiple ways.

But also, from a Palestinian perspective the past is a complex matter, not least because so many years have passed in exile. Therefore, there is not a single history of the refugees but multiple ones that connect at one point and divert at another. Furthermore, discussing the past can be a sensitive topic due to an ethical imperative to enhance the refugees right to return. Anthropologist Diana Allan (2014: 5) has noted that this imperative has led scholars to stress continuities rather than discontinuities, for example, how old pre-exile socialities have been reproduced in exile rather than how the exile has created new ones. It has also been common to depict the refugee as the suffering subject who steadfastly waits to return to Palestine. Lisa Taraki (2006: xi) has acknowledged that academic literature has tended to ‘treat Palestinians as one-dimensional political subjects’, but also that at least in the occupied West Bank, Palestinians have themselves internalised the discourse of resistance, in which ‘every person becomes an embodiment of The Palestinian who keeps the struggle going through acts of overt resistance as well as simple steadfastness, stubbornness, and resilience’ (Taraki 2006: xxi).

In the Palestinian context, the political is often emphasized, and understandably so, as it is the political reality that has deprived them of even the most basic rights. While I do not bypass this in my dissertation, the aim has been to approach the future more broadly and not only as it is envisioned in the national project. I discuss the future as I encountered it in the everyday life of the refugee camps. It should be rather self-evident that the national political aims are not all there is, and not discussing the other dimensions there naturally are would mean reducing Palestinian refugees into one-dimensional political subjects, as Lisa Taraki phrased it. As an anthropologist who is interested in the everyday lives of the people I encounter in the fields, my attention was obviously drawn to the mundane ways people build their futures, to their aims to continue studies, find a job, and start a family.

Philosopher Charles Guignon (2016: 138) has described human existence as ‘an ongoing event given meaning by anticipations of where it is all going to come out “in the end”, anticipations which are constantly being revised in the light of developments along the way’. In other words, futures are negotiated in the present with the knowledge of what has already happened and in relation to what is anticipated to happen. The futures that my interlocutors envisioned were negotiated in the refugee camps that carry a history of more than 70 years, in the temporal moment of the late 2010s, of Syrian civil war, the so-called refugee crisis in Europe, the failings of Oslo Accords and Palestinian Authority, and the general political deadlock. When I started to do fieldwork in 2015, there was unfortunately little trust for any sort of positive development on the ground. Combined with the economic decline of host sovereigns and UNRWA, and ills of occupation

and rightlessness, it is no wonder that my young interlocutors had started to imagine their lives outside the camps and host sovereigns.

At the moment the situation has been further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic that has generated major lockdowns in all Jordan, Lebanon, and the West Bank, Lebanon being under lockdown this very moment. Corona restrictions have worsened the already difficult economic situation. People have lost their jobs when places have been closed down. The camp refugees have been extremely vulnerable to the virus, as the crowded living conditions in the camps have meant limited possibilities for social distancing and compromised access to healthcare services.

Yet, even in times like these, the people I came to know during my fieldworks continue to live their lives and make plans for future. Some of them have gotten married and started a family, some have emigrated, while others have done both. Some are seeking possibilities to continue their studies by applying for scholarships abroad, some have already managed to do so.

While the ways my interlocutors planned and built their lives are familiar for most people and thus easily relatable, what I want to stress in my dissertation is that for the Palestinians I encountered in Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank, the very ordinary practices of future-making are always framed by several vulnerabilities placed on their way by their position as Palestinian refugees. Their lives, even in their mundane forms, are never divorced from the political, as their position and the conditions in which they live and negotiate their futures are infused with politics. They exist as refugees because of the Zionist project that insists on a Jewish majority on the lands from which they were expelled. In Lebanon, they continue to be deprived of rights because of

the sectarian system that sees their presence as a threat to the country's power balance. Their lives are considered as disposable by the violence of Israeli occupation. And their living conditions are framed by the camps that are portrayed as maintaining the right of return, but which at the same time mark the difficulties of more than 70 years of refugeeness.

Ironically, because of this very political positioning of Palestinian refugees, many do not have the possibility to concentrate on the future depicted in the national project of the right of return. In the present situation the hopes and dreams of my interlocutors are framed by conditions of stuntedness, conditions in which they do not see that they have the option to wait out the crisis (see Hage 2009), but that they have to act now, with the options they have at their hands in this very moment to enhance the living conditions of their families.

During my dissertation process I have often been asked why a person from Finland has ended up studying a topic to which I do not have any obvious personal connection. Yet, it is a topic I have carried with me over one third of my life, ever since I visited West Bank as an ignorant 19-year-old in 2008. What started as curiosity and desire to understand is what led to the more academic engagement with the case of Palestinian refugees. Many others have obviously explored and written about the same topics before me, to the point that nowadays there is a great abundance of academic literature on Palestinian refugees. My contribution has been to discuss the refugees' situation across different sites of refugeeness and to consider what are the conditions in which those now reaching adulthood encounter their futures. It is clear that the situation of the refugees has not been resolved and has in many ways gotten worse over the years. Therefore, as long as Palestinians are living in the refugee camps, there is also a

necessity to document the conditions of their refugeeness and to ask what their possibilities are to live the life they hope for. There is still a need to keep the discussion going and to hear out what Palestinian refugees have to say about their conditions.

And now, Professor Annelies Moors, I respectfully ask you, as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of Social Sciences, to present your criticism concerning my dissertation.

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