

'Missionaries of the new era': neoliberalism and NGOs in Palestine

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Abstract: This article explores the effects of the neoliberal development paradigm on the restructuring of social formations through the external funding and promotion of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Palestine,¹ and more precisely in the West Bank towns of Ramallah and al-Bireh; they are the 'missionaries of the new era'.² It argues that neoliberal rationality aims at transforming societies and subjectivities around the notion of enterprise and weakens the collective national resistance movement.

Keywords: civil society, foreign aid, neoliberalism, NGOs, Palestine, Palestinian Authority, PRDP, Ramallah and al-Bireh, West Bank

Walking up the narrow alleyways of Ramallah al-Qadima, the oldest part of the city, in the warm morning sun of the Palestinian spring, on my daily way to work with a Palestinian human rights organisation, I am greeted by the aroma of fresh cardamom-flavoured Arabic coffee, of sizzling hot and crispy falafels and some of the best hummus in town sold by the owners of various shops and stalls along the road. In the wake of the new day, the narrow alleyways are

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Race & Class

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10.1177/0306396812444820 <http://rac.sagepub.com>

already busy with people engaging in their small businesses and chatting with their neighbours about the latest political developments.

As I continue my way up and towards al-Manara square, the bustling heart of the city, an entirely different image suggests itself. The small family-run shops and vegetable stalls make way for those of transnational corporations and banks, glitzy shopping malls and stylish cafés serving the rich and beautiful of Ramallah's urban elite. The roads radiating from al-Manara are newly constructed or still under construction, including the pavements and red-and-white-painted barriers. On one of them, one can still see the remains of a poster announcing a film event sponsored by a German and French cultural centre and an offer for music classes organised by a Palestinian organisation in co-operation with a German peace and development organisation.

After passing the main square, with its busy mix of Palestinian businessmen and women in expensive suits, farmers from the surrounding villages selling their produce on the pavements and young students sipping their Palestinian version of a caffè latte in the trendy café Stars and Bucks, I start noticing more and more European-looking women and men who do not seem to be in Ramallah for touristy purposes, but are on their way to work – just like me. I am suddenly reminded of the small art and music schools, women's handicraft syndicates and human rights organisations that I had already spotted in the old part of the city, yet had not paid much attention to. Concentrating harder, I realise that most of the organisations' signs bear the logo of an international aid organisation. Also, I remember the yellow sign on a large building reading 'for rent – NGOs only'.

As I pass al-Muqata'a, the former residence of President Yasser Arafat and the site of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) parliament (which is likewise undergoing a massive reconstruction programme), I cannot help but feel estranged by all the signposts, labels and doorbell panels of Palestinian and international organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, working in the field of development, civic education or human rights. Besides the impressive blue glass building of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which served as an umbrella organisation for most of the Palestinian political organisations and movements, as well as civil society organisations, before the establishment of the PA in 1994, I spot political foundations, development organisations, human and children's rights initiatives, co-operatives for agricultural development, medical organisations and many more. Ramallah seems to be not only a booming centre for Arab and foreign investment, but also for the do-gooders of today's international aid industry. I suddenly understand Ava Leone's observation that, in Palestine and especially in Ramallah, 'virtually no space, physical or imagined, has been untouched by some aspect of foreign aid'.³

International aid, civil society and neoliberal development

The subject of the international aid regime, as well as the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Palestine and especially their often depoliticising and

de-democratising effects, has been researched and criticised by various Palestinian 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 neoliberal rationality, civil society is not – or not only – a philosophical concept, nor by any means a neutral space between the state and the market, but rather the correlate of governmental techniques whereby many, though not all, international and Palestinian NGOs function as handmaidens for, or even the pioneers of, a neoliberal reformulation of society; in effect, ‘missionaries of the new era’.⁴ The resulting emphasis on individualism, as well as the organisation of the social domain around the notion of ‘enterprise’, often leads to the further depoliticisation and fragmentation of social relations and, in the case of Palestine, also to the potential further weakening of the collective resistance movement.

Since the concept of civil society was 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 it once represented a sphere where people, organised in groups and by initiatives, could pursue democratic projects in freedom from authoritarian state power in those regions, it has since been massively flattened out and come to be perceived by many donors as a guarantee of democracy. Together with a few other key terms, such as democracy, human rights, participation, self-help and empowerment, it is at the very top of a neoliberal development agenda, which, driven by the twin motors of neoliberal economics and liberal democratic theory, sees private institutions and NGOs as the main agents of democratisation.

Since the World Bank-driven approach to development via Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s and early 1990s has utterly failed, the 1990s and 2000s have brought a shift in the development agenda from simple 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 touched, this new focus has also implied a shift from a ‘negative’ or conservative neoliberalism, that merely aimed at keeping the state out of the market, to a more ‘positive’ or inclusive neoliberalism of empowerment, market enablement, participation, 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 reveals 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; while, on the other hand, neoliberal thought and policies perfectly exemplify forms of biopolitical governmentality in that 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'.⁵ 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'.⁶ 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'.⁷

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that the neoliberal project has been contested since its very emergence. NGOs, citizens' movements, transnational corporations, academia and mass media were made accomplices in these new forms of governance, but never completely and never without resistance, slip-pages or subversion. Many Palestinian NGOs, for example, refused to sign an agreement drafted by an important international donor guaranteeing that they denounce all forms of terrorism, in that all forms of opposition to the Oslo Process are labelled terrorist, and thus sacrificed potentially vital sources of income.⁸

The emergence of new forms of governance has been both intensified and obfuscated by the increasing securitisation of international relations following the so-called war on terror, expressed by the idea of development *as* security in the name of opportunity and empowerment. It was because of global security concerns, involving the security of people and the environment as well as the security of nation states, that the concept of good governance was introduced into development programmes; governance itself was redefined as also involving 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'.⁹

Development is essentially a biopolitical security mechanism which, in Mark Duffield's words:

promises to mobilize the poor and aggrieved against society's enemies. Development practitioners enact a contract with the marginalized and alienated: the satisfaction of basic needs, the expansion of choice and opportunity, and empowerment through self-reliance in exchange for active political support and loyalty.¹⁰

In order to produce broad-based consent to these measures, the new approach of security as development plus good governance has to involve civil society and the private sector. In the Palestinian case, security has always been key in international donors' funding conditionalities, with the focus on NGOs representing an attempt to 'pacify' the Arab-Israeli conflict through stimulating civic modes of action. The ensuing containment of Palestinians is, of course, massively reinforced by the Israeli occupation and mechanisms of control, especially the separation barrier with all its economic and political constraints.

Hence, while enlisting the support of NGOs represents the inclusive neoliberal approach of framing poverty not in politico-economic terms, but as local vulnerability, such NGOs can also function as channels for international political and economic interests trying to produce widespread consent, and the correlate of governmental techniques, disciplining and regulating bodies and societies according to particular norms. Thus, Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar observe 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'¹¹ in the history of Palestinian civil society organisations.

Palestinian NGOs and the national resistance movement

Historically, Palestinian NGOs secured their legitimacy and popular support in the absence of a national government and have 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, had always been relevant in Palestinian society, the development of explicitly political civil society organisations was triggered by the ongoing occupation and the lack of an officially acknowledged government, thus allowing them also to respond to the political needs of the communities.¹² The geopolitical shifts following the 1977 Camp David Accords, which marked the conclusion of a 'peace' treaty between Israel and Egypt, yet failed to achieve any solution for occupied Palestine, called for a new resistance strategy. The National Guidance Committee (NGC) thus aimed to widen support for the national liberation movement as resistance to both Camp David and the increased Israeli attempts to crush all forms of Palestinian nationalism.¹³ During the 1980s, growing factionalism and competition between 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 increasing demand for external funding, which led to the establishment of the first links to donor NGOs in the global North.

Although, in retrospect, it is clear that many of the popular organisations and initiatives were used as a means of recruitment to a particular party or faction, they were nonetheless 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 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 organisational 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. Dina Craissati notes that:

the organizations challenged traditional, nationalistic and elitist patterns of development through the mobilization of the poor, especially in the villages ... these NGOs mobilized attention through alternative, decentralized, more open and democratic structures, through grass roots voluntary work, and within a spirit of egalitarian social transformation. When the Intifada began, they could provide the organizational basis and the agenda to sustain the movement.¹⁴

However, this heyday of NGOs as pure activists was short-lived; it was soon 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 PA in 1994. Oslo changed both the nature and scale of foreign aid to Palestine and, hence, the self-conception of Palestinian civil society fundamentally. As the newly founded PA attempted to ensure its legitimacy and control over the political field, Palestinian NGOs were expected to engage in the building of a civil society independent of the new interim government, a task further emphasised by the international support that played such a pivotal role and which led to the dependence of roughly 30 per cent of indigenous NGOs on financial aid by the mid-1990s.¹⁵ This dependence has led to international policy trends, which shifted from 'relief' to 'development' in the 1980s, and have focused on the role of private and non-governmental institutions since the 1990s, having a greater influence on local agendas.

The new focus on civil society and NGOs, which was aimed at ensuring that the Palestinians saw concrete improvements in their daily lives in order to minimise resistance to the peace process, has left deep marks. Among the most noticeable changes has been the gradual neutralisation of Palestine's formerly highly active and political civil society. Donor funds to various organisations have resulted in NGOs' retrenchment from popular support, diminished their mobilising potential and consequently hindered mass mobilisation during the second intifada. This is exemplified by the new focus of many foreign-funded Palestinian NGOs on civic education programmes, human rights training, 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 collective act of resistance against an Israeli occupation that had metamorphosed into an 'apartheid regime of checkpoints, permit systems, bypass roads and settlements'¹⁶ was dramatically weakened by the lack of synergy between civil society actors and political forces or the local population. Many Palestinian NGOs used their funds and international recognition, gained during the previous 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 to develop non-violent forms of resistance and entirely ignored popular calls for the boycott of Israeli goods.¹⁷ Likewise, they did not use their experience and resources to organise the popular committees that would have sustained the socioeconomic steadfastness (*sumoud*) of the population, as they did during the first intifada.

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 stance over widespread calls for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to resign, exemplified their attempts to occupy an apolitical, 'neutral' position in the midst of a national and anti-colonial struggle.¹⁸ Their failure to advance alternative modes of resistance, while critiquing the armed struggle, left them open to delegitimisation.

This transformation, however, was the product not of an internal, but of a mainly external process and largely due to an international aid industry that envisions society as neatly divided into either the political or the 'civil'. Various Palestinian NGOs increasingly internalised the global aid community's mantra of professionalisation and political neutrality and, as a result, became less engaged in the explicitly political, nationalist project. Many other organisations and individuals, secular and Islamist, however, opposed such a neutralisation; still others used the opportunity to work in decent and relatively well-paid jobs, while not 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 co-ordinators.)

The al-Aqsa intifada nonetheless exemplifies the absurdity of a vision of society as partitioned – despite the social reality of Palestine – into 'civil' and 'political' spheres, for it places Palestinian NGOs in an antagonistic relationship to the mass-based national struggle. Hence, western donors' conceptualisations of civil society have undermined their stated aim of strengthening Palestinian society, contributing instead to its fragmentation. The international aid regime and globally popular ideas of individual responsibility, self-empowerment, professionalisation and political neutrality increasingly shape local agendas and power relations.

Neoliberalism and development in Palestine today

The neoliberal rationale that underlies global development discourse, with its consequent transformation of the social sphere, was further evidenced by the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP), introduced by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in 2008, and his state-building programme of 2009. Promoting Palestinian statehood, development and independence, they further redefine and divert the Palestinian liberation struggle. Although 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'.¹⁹ Built on the premise that Palestinians had 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 undergoing have to be understood within the context of the significant shifts in the Palestinian labour force during the last fifteen years. These shifts have mainly been brought about by Israel's refusal to employ Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank after the second intifada, which 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. The sphere of the informal economy has itself become a new target of development, which bolsters its activities by micro-credits, technical equipment or managerial training.

The PRDP is based upon a set of proposals written by the World Bank and other international financial institutions and, like the statehood plan in general, gained tremendous support from western powers, whose influence can be 'clearly seen in its policy recommendations and outlook';²⁰ indeed, grassroots organisations have described the neoliberal financial institutions as a 'de facto shadow government in the West Bank'.²¹ In effect, virtually all donor support to the PA has become dependent on the PRDP's implementation.

The PRDP, then, not only redefines economic and political, but also social structures and relations. And 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 the fracturing of the resistance movement and of 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 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. 'They want to distract us with roads until our country is gone', rightfully noted a Palestinian taxi driver to an *Al Jazeera* correspondent.²²

The attempt to manufacture a consensus over national and individual goals, such as freedom, individualism, consumption, choice, responsibility and competition, is carried on, needless to say, through an increased focus on civil society organisations and especially NGOs. A further consolidation of the international financial institutions' role in this regard is the US\$10 million grant made by the World Bank to the Palestinian NGO Development Centre to implement the third phase of the Palestinian NGO Project, directed towards improving the effectiveness, self-reliance and sustainability of the Palestinian NGO sector.²³

Buzzwords such as democratisation, community participation and grassroots mobilisation have thereby, according to the parameters of the neoliberal development agenda, made it into most Palestinian NGOs' funding applications and project descriptions. The community's role in the decision-making process and a deep connection to the 'grassroots' have to be ensured in order to secure international funding. Yet, in contrast to the international donors' democratising aspirations, various studies on the de-democratising effects of the 'NGOisation of Palestinian social movements'²⁴ have shown that international donors largely ignore popular committees, trade unions or political councils and prefer to work with NGOs 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

Although mine was not an anthropological study in the classic sense (and I am aware of the pitfalls of ethnographic research in relation to the privileged position that an embedded researcher, such as myself, occupies in relation to the larger society), my intention during my stay in Ramallah was to use ethnographic methods to explore and expose the global discursive framework that is being used to reframe Palestinian social reality and is skewing aspects of its civil society.²⁵ How did this, in concrete terms, refocus the work being done by the NGOs?

First, in hardly any of the project proposals by the Palestinian NGO (PNGO) that is used as a case study here 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 aimed at international donors. 'Youth' and 'women' seemed to be the most 'needy' target groups; their 'participation' and 'empowerment' through such activities as drawing competitions a remunerative project aim. The two western European interns' experiences of writing proposals were

seen as authoritative and most auspicious for attracting donor funding, despite their lack of detailed knowledge of the Palestinian context. A one-size-fits-all approach, according to globally standardised models that discursively homogenise 'underdeveloped' regions, is apparently more beneficial than knowledge of the 'facts on the ground'. For there was never any attempt to assess the gender relations that were apparently in need of intervention, nor the local youth's actual concerns. Generating ideas or developing proposals for new activities hardly ever came about through meetings with the local population (and, if they occasionally did, only with its – mostly male – leaders), nor through a representative survey evaluating the current requirements of the community.

Indeed, in a meeting with a German donor organisation, for example, the director of the PNGO was told that the donor attached 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',²⁶ it also demonstrates the extent to which Palestinian NGOs are expected to fulfil a donor's expectations: while the organisation did not have a special focus on women's rights and was aware of much larger gender inequalities among the urban middle classes than in the more traditional countryside that the German donors wished to target, the director acceded to 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)

Similarly, a Palestinian American student active in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) in the US, who was asked for her opinion on the large numbers of international and foreign-funded NGOs in Ramallah, 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 discourse of promoting democracy, western donors sharply limited their aid expenditure after Hamas were elected and secured a majority within the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in 2006. As Olivier Roy has noted regarding the US stance, 'one cannot at the same time put Hamas and

Hezbollah on the terrorist list (which means refusing contact with them) and call for free elections in which both would by definition emerge as legitimate and representative political movements'.²⁷ This refusal of any contact with Islamist organisations, despite their democratic legitimacy, is also reflected in donors' funding conditions. The PNGO has, whether consciously or subconsciously, internalised the mantra of secularisation and the de-radicalisation of religious-political movements and is increasingly committed to promoting religious tolerance and secularism. Its projects are conceptualised and viewed through an explicitly anti-Islamist lens in which forms of organisation, collectivity or political action not defined by secular norms are at best ignored, at worst targeted by educational or de-radicalisation programmes. Under the tolerance and human rights programme, for example, it focuses on trying to reform religious ideology by emphasising the connections between religious thought and human rights. Even though, as one male employee explained, religious and political factionalism and radicalisation have been fuelled by the Israeli occupation, the ongoing forced eviction of people from their lands and the daily discrimination against Palestinians carried out by Israeli soldiers, every criticism of Israel in a project proposal lessened its chance of receiving funding.

This not only excludes large segments of society as potential target groups or partner organisations, but also reflects the international agenda of refusal of support to Islamic or Islamist groups and parties – indeed, to anything related to Islam, no matter how deep its roots in society. Leone gives the example of a PNGO she worked with that developed a project on the rule of law involving the women of the community, which aimed to assist them to learn what elements of Islamic law were supportive of their own rights. But the international donor approached for funding made it clear that only topics in civil law could be proposed, no matter what law was actually prevalent locally: 'Anything related to Islamic law ... [the USAID officer] said, would not be considered.'²⁸

Hence, many NGOs, far from implementing projects with a strong connection to the grassroots, strengthening participatory development and democratisation, have their daily work dominated by donor-driven priorities and the implementation of a neoliberal agenda that supports institutions and rules to provide a framework for the conduct of public and private businesses. Despite donors' explicit aim of democratisation, democracy is only desirable if certain groups, such as Islamist movements that would threaten the imperial project in the region, are excluded. Formerly popular civil society and community organisations are often reorganised hierarchically and played off against each other in the race 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 democratic skills has become a means of redirecting NGOs towards implementing universalised standards of behaviour and away from active political resistance.

Second, the main focus of the PNGO on human rights, tolerance and diversity – all current development catchphrases – also exemplifies the organisation's and its donors' depoliticised approach to development, in that these concepts cover up current power asymmetries and sources of social injustice such as the political and economic restrictions caused by the Israeli occupation. The idea of human rights, for example, seen in purely humanitarian terms as simply the prevention of suffering, has been shown to implicitly or explicitly prevent the formation of a collective political project and real sociopolitical transformation.²⁹ The PNGO implements this depoliticised concept of human rights, which is deemed universal and which has become one of the main pillars of international development aid, effectively postponing a politico-economic transformation by treating only the symptoms, not the causes, of 'poverty' and 'underdevelopment'. Yet, 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' (female PNGO employee). Human rights advocates, and especially human rights NGOs, often treat political, economic or colonial conflicts as if they were straightforward humanitarian crises that can be solved 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.³⁰

The concept of human rights thus relies on a violent depoliticisation and victimisation of the subject, a private individual who is, more often than not, of the Third World rather than the First World, and an 'authentic' victim. Such a conception of human rights does not only rely on an individualised, atomised notion of the subject, but also depoliticises conflicts and 'underdevelopment'. While some claim that the concept of human rights can be strategically appropriated in order to secure entitlements in a given political struggle, that the PNGO focuses exclusively on human rights violations *within* Palestinian society is staggering. This approach entirely bypasses any criticism of the Israeli occupation, the greatest violator of human rights in Palestine, and conceals how its parameters increasingly shape all areas of Palestinian life. It further takes the responsibility away from the Israeli state, as the occupying power, of enforcing human rights.

The PNGO's focus on tolerance and diversity similarly exemplifies a depoliticised approach to development and social justice. While 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, like human rights concepts, targets only the symptoms, 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, through projects focusing on diversity, acceptance and tolerance, the NGO elite presents itself as part of an 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 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 training or on writing proposals or managing funds, all of which contribute to the production of new subjectivities and ways of constructing human experience according to a globally standardised model. The idea of training thereby 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 30 in Ramallah who were interviewed for this research had participated in at least one workshop or training programme sponsored by an international, mostly European or US 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. Hence, one of the most popular forms of training is for entrepreneurship, on the basis that entrepreneurs make model citizens, which has increasingly met with approval within development circles. Middle Eastern and North African youth have become a favourite target of western, especially USAID, entrepreneurship projects as a means of civic education and disseminating the business spirit. This approach reflects a neoliberal development agenda that is trying to transform organisations into small enterprises and divert people's attention away from politics. On the one hand, they aim at transforming individuals' frames of reference, their 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-orientated and competitive ideas and values.

Similarly, local and international NGOs in Ramallah offer numerous artistic training programmes and workshops for aspiring artists, film-makers and musicians in the region. The PNGO was one of those offering occasional art competitions and workshops on a particular topic. Nearly all the programmes 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 tangible results, such as art or music schools, let alone in regular employment for the participants. Many

of the young artists seem highly critical of these one-off events, although they admit 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 earning power. Formerly, he explained, he had been a freelance instructor working for different theatres and film productions all over the West Bank. Today, theatres and theatre schools no longer hire Palestinians, but prefer working with foreign-funded NGOs, which can offer free training. Consequently, 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, tangible or intangible, in the West Bank today, in order to neutralise and depoliticise behaviour, aspirations and self-conceptions. As Leone also discovered, students increasingly abandon their studies in humanities, Arabic or Palestinian history, and prioritise technical degrees in NGO management and English translation. Almost all of her interviewees who currently graduated had chosen their field of study according to available opportunities in the NGO sector, pursuing careers in accountancy, project management or translation services for an international NGO. As one interviewee stated: 'The government is overcrowded, the private sector is exploitation, and starting out on your own is very difficult. All that's left is NGOs.'³¹

Hence, with this focus on the production of 'self-entrepreneurs', the penetration of virtually all areas of life and the consequent dependence on the aid industry, the neoliberal development regime constantly reproduces the conditions for its own intervention and, thus, secures its own survival. 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 any more' (female PNGO employee). A male PNGO worker stated: '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 are strong indicators that the process of the NGOisation of Palestinian social movements that began in the 1990s may well 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 sixty-third 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 and exhaustion, but also the governmental techniques of the development regime and the prospect 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 (15 May 2011) have shown, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan – indeed, across the globe – have not forgotten their right to return and demand it with all possible insistence. Embedded within a broader anti-imperialist struggle within and outside Palestine, and inspired by the revolutions occurring almost everywhere in the Arab world, these newly emerging networks may well 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 popular non-violent initiatives, such as the BDS or the Stop the Wall Campaign, they may give rise to a new national collective identity that transcends political cleavages and, surely, will continue to play a significant role in the political processes of the region.

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- 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 phrase is Yash Tandon's from his 'An African perspective' in David Sogge, ed., *Compassion and Calculation: the business of private foreign aid* (London and Chicago, IL, Pluto Press and Transnational Institute, 1996), n.p., available at: <http://www.tni.org/article/africa-perspective> (visited 26 August 2011).

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