



BILAL AWAD SALAMEH, *On the Meaning of Land: Reclaiming the Palestinian Selfhood* (Doha/Beirut ACRPS, 2021), pp. 207.

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Introduction

There is relatively a paucity of academic literature on the question of land in the Arab context, particularly when it comes to sociology. The sole exception is the Palestinian context, in which land, because of the settler-colonial dimension, represents a central element in the formation of social relations at all levels. It is within this tradition that Bilal Salameh's *On the Meaning of Land: Reclaiming the Palestinian Selfhood* stands, approaching land as a macro-phenomenon around which the author weaves the

many variables that make up the colonial conflict in Palestine, thus situating the book in the broader field of peasant studies.¹ The author uses a theoretical framework that draws on a decolonial intellectual heritage in order to approach the land question within its Zionist colonial context, given that the latter is a neoliberal setting which can be understood in a complex and holistic way. He discusses this through a decolonial lens and through a critique of neoliberal social control and social engineering, drawing on the works of Franz Fanon, Melanie Klein, Achille Mbembe, and Malcolm X.²

The author explores “the issue of land as [an object of] both symbolic and material value that offers Palestinians dignity, and guarantees that dignity”.³ He records the people's representations of land's value, whether in its own (symbolic) terms or because of its (material) value as a means of production on which the Palestinian community and its self-reproduction depend, a representation that is closely related to the colonial system and its social relations. He argues that we should not think of colonial control over land simply as a material, authoritarian practise aimed exclusively at the land itself. It also comprises, in the first instance, strategies and techniques to cement control over Palestinians as people, as well as over land as an object of value and a source of material production.

Land as Value in the Colonial Context

Salameh roots the question of land relations in the colonial context in Palestine in the gap between the legal understanding of land, based on property deeds and ownership, and Palestinians' existential understanding of it. The relationship with land sits at the heart of Palestinian peasants' collective consciousness. It is this close connection to land that is the target of the policies and practices of control adopted by Israeli colonial

¹ The study of peasant society forms a field within rural sociology. See, for example: Teodor Shanin, “Peasantry: Delineation of a Sociological Concept and a Field of Study,” *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1971), pp. 289-300.

² Bilal Awad Salameh, *Fī ma' nā al-Arḍ: Isti'ādat al-Dhāt al-Filasṭīniyya* [Arabic] (Doha/Beirut ACRPS, 2021), p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

logic, and the field in which “shock” policies, as described by Naomi Klein,⁴ are applied. The author draws from Klein’s concept to characterise a Zionist colonial mandate that inflicts shocks to undermine Palestinians’ understanding of themselves, of memory, and of their culture as associated with land.⁵

In the first chapter, the author illustrates the meaning of land and its value to colonialists by leaning heavily on Fanon’s idea of the value and function of land in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In this conception, land as a source of value is closely tied to work. The colonizer does not only seek to end the colonized people’s connection to land as a means of material production, but also attempts to make appropriation, as a psychological structure, part of their basic social and mental being.⁶ Here, the author compares Fanon’s understanding of land with the Marxist understanding before locating it solidly within the superstructure of the settlement. He describes the capitalist-colonialist nature of the Zionist movement, noting that it first entered Palestine in the form of societies and companies operating in the agricultural sector.

The second chapter, “Palestinian Land as an Object of Existential Value,” considers Palestinian representations of the value of land. Despite the distance that the author puts between himself and Marxist-materialist analysis in his theoretical framing, he nonetheless approaches the value of land among Palestinians from a Marxist starting point, even if he does not explicitly reference the Marxist literature. In order to develop his argument, he interprets various forms of social organization in the Palestinian context as rooted solidly in the relationship with land, ranging between tribalism and quasi-feudalism, with a quasi-feudal agricultural mode of production and a peasant lifestyle.⁷ The family here represents the main unit of production.

The author examines popular culture and the mythology of land in Palestine to account for the symbolic value of land. He then tries to position the various superstructural components – social relations, cultural systems, and everyday practices in Palestinian society – in relation to land, “proceeding from the idea that superstructure is an intensified expression of the mode of production”.⁸ In this process, he puts forward the historical claim that the formative period for this relationship between land and superstructure stretches from the Ottoman period through to the ethnic cleansing of 1948. But he does not provide much analytical grounding for this idea, or clearly explain how this thoroughly Marxist approach can be reconciled with the emancipatory lens that he has adopted to reposition land as an object of value in itself.

Controlling the People through the Land

In chapter 3, the author analyses the colonial control that has been exercised over Palestinians by targeting their land. Here he adopts a structural approach proposed by Raif Zureik, who understands land relations as an intensification of the history of colonial struggle in Palestine, which stretches from the Ottoman period to the most recent form of Zionist colonialism.⁹

The structure of the logic of colonial control has changed over time. It has come to incorporate ways of taming the workforce that the colonial power has found itself in need of – albeit within a colonial-

⁴ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ Revolving around peasant production and various related practices, such as production of milk, cheese, fertilisers, and animal husbandry.

⁸ Salameh, *Fī ma'nā al-Ard*, p. 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

economic framework, via a range of transfer and spatiality practices¹⁰ – and the relationship of this to the real and imagined components of Palestinian identity. This amounts to social engineering, divided by the author into four overlapping levels: spatial engineering aimed to establish control over land through land laws, border policies, and geographical subdivision; economic engineering that establishes control over the means and forces of agricultural and industrial production and of the market; political engineering based on a racist system of ethnic democracy; and biopolitical engineering which imposes colonial sovereignty onto Palestinian bodies. The author does not offer a new reading in this regard, other than a review of the Palestinian literature available on this type of social engineering. The central contribution of the author is his conceptualization of these social engineering policies, which he approaches with reference to other colonial contexts, by borrowing two concepts: “concentration areas” and “colonial lethargy”.

Concentration areas refer to “the Palestinian villages, towns, camps, and gatherings deliberately separated off from one another”.¹¹ This entails a complex policy of concentration, separation, and surveillance, whose objective result is a fragile socioeconomic structure of Palestinian existence.¹² This fragile structure, for the author, incorporates a complex and dialectical structure of despair and indifference alongside the basic components of revolution that are productive of liberation.

On the other hand, colonial lethargy is the fruit of the various practices of control over the Palestinian collective self, a sort of attenuated social death of the Palestinians, which takes place when the ties of what the author sees as the “holy trinity” (land, history, and memory) are loosened. For him, the loss of any one of these elements – and land is his focus here – leads Palestinians, particularly the political and cultural forces, to living “in flux, between political agency and resistance at times, and decay, ineffectiveness, and feelings of political impotence at other times”.¹³

Cultivating Culture and a New Idea of the Intellectual

The author presents the concept of the peasant intellectual as a significant contribution to the building of a Palestinian culture in general on a peasantry basis. This intellectual’s position is determined not by their belonging to the peasant structure, but rather by “their social function, their belonging to the broad mass of the oppressed, the marginalized, the poor, and the peasantry, insofar as the structure of Palestine is peasant-based and the primary means of production is land”.¹⁴

Salameh has a clear and explicit desire to re-centre the Palestinian peasant in the sphere of action and the formation of the overall culture of the community. The reader might ask here: to what extent has the author successfully managed to portray the rooting of the whole Palestinian culture in the peasantry? Just beneath the surface we can see the influence of the subaltern school – even if he does not explicitly engage with this tradition, preferring to draw on the local concept of the “engaged intellectual” that originated with Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972) and has subsequently developed through activism by other martyred Palestinian intellectuals such as Basil al-A‘raj (1984-2017).¹⁵ The author could have also engaged more

¹⁰ Walid Habbas, “al-Isti‘mār al-Isti‘ānī: Nahw Itār Nazarī Jadīd,” [Arabic] *Qadaya Isra‘iliyya*, vol. 17, no. 66 (July 2017), pp. 125-126. The author dedicates a subsequent book to the study of place and its role in civil resistance, concentrating on the case of Jerusalem. See: Bilal Awad Salameh, *Fī Ma‘nā al-Makān: Wahy min Durūs al-Muqāwama al-Maqdisiyya* [Arabic] (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2023).

¹¹ Salameh, *Fī ma‘nā al-Ard*, pp. 45-46

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁵ Salameh roots this in a deep and critical reading of the conditions of social action given the critical challenges that the Palestinian question offers to the question of the social agent and their position. See: Bilal Awad Salameh, “al-Fā‘il al-Ijtīmā‘ī: Ru‘ya Naqdiyya fī Ḍaw’ Taḥaddiyāt al-Mashhad al-Filasṭīnī,” [Arabic] *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, vol. 37, no. 431 (January 2015), p. 54.

with the broader Arab contemporary literature on the role of the intellectual in the Arab context given recent developments.¹⁶

The author's argument about the role of the intellectual has been stated many times before. In fact, he attributes a whole list of values essentially to peasant structure without any analytical grounding that would root this attribution in the theoretical tradition of peasant studies. He attempts to link the various stages of Palestinian resistance to the colonial regime and interpret them in such a way as to uncover their hidden and marginalized peasant elements, from al-Buraq Rebellion (1929) through to the Return and Murabata mobilizations.¹⁷ Here it might be worth noting the importance of broader regional cases whose structure, with respect to land relations and their subordination to the Ottoman vilayet system, overlaps with that of Palestine.¹⁸

At the same time, the author draws out the turning-points in the anti-colonial resistance whose place in the scheme of peasant values should be investigated through Palestinian art and literature in their role as a repertoire of collective memory and a field in which Palestinian selfhood and identity develop.

Critical Discussion

Initial criticism levelled at this book is that the theoretical framework needs to engage with other theoretical approaches. The all-encompassing approach adopted by the author eludes other micro-level considerations focusing on the ways in which land is articulated within power relations in the colonial context, such as studies that see land as "space" and investigate the ways in which power relations produce and control this space. This is not to mention the many Foucauldian insights on how power operates in space through strategies of surveillance, categorization, and subdivision.¹⁹ Nor does the author enter into a broad debate with the Arab theoretical literature.²⁰ His review of the existing Arab literature could be characterized as selective.

Furthermore, there is no serious engagement with the literature from which the author borrows his central theoretical concepts. This is particularly clear with respect to the adoption of Naomi Klein's concept of "shock doctrine"; the author never clearly and analytically explains how Palestine could be a completely neoliberal context.

Another aspect of this lack of analytical justification is Salameh's tenuous and superficial use of Marxist-materialist analysis, which reflects an approach to Marxism that treats it as a given. The exception here is his use of Fanon, which escapes this unjustified approach to theoretical literature. Nonetheless, the author could have benefited from greater engagement with the intellectual tradition that has followed Fanon, which has been taken much further by contemporary decolonial thinkers, who have linked capitalist modernity to colonialism.²¹

¹⁶ See for example: *Dawr al-Muthaqqaf ft al-Taḥawwulāt al-Tārīkhiyya* [Arabic] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2017).

¹⁷ Salameh, *Fī ma' nā al-Ard*, pp. 138-142.

¹⁸ Such as Hanna Batatu's study of the peasantry and the social makeup, in particular the part on the link between Sufism and the peasantry. See: Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ For example, the various studies on biopolitics, surveillance, and the apartheid wall in Palestine, such as: Umut Ozguc, "Beyond the Panopticon: The Separation Wall and Paradoxical Nature of Israeli Security Imagination," paper presented at the Australian Political Studies Association Conference, "Connected Globe: Conflicting Worlds," University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 27-29/9/2010.

²⁰ For example, Ismail Nashef has written on "return" among Palestinians as an act rooted in the survival instinct, a strategy of resistance to social death as represented by society's inability to manage its own necro-affairs. See: Ismail Nashef, *Ṣuwar Mawt al-Filasṭīnī* [Arabic] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015).

²¹ See: Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, The Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3 (2007), pp. 449-514; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the development of Concepts," *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3 (2007), pp. 240-270.

With respect to the empirical question – the meaning of land in the Palestinian context – Salameh approaches the theme of land as a silent mass that produces a homogenous and static meaning. In the book, time and generational change within the Palestinian community does not shift the meaning of land. Nor does this concept of land change much between the different areas in which the highly spatially differentiated Palestinian community exists. The author rather assesses land relations from Ottoman Palestine, to Mandate colonialism, to Zionism using the same analytical tools. The different spatial contexts (the Palestinian interior, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the diaspora) that make up the space of Palestinian society barely feature as an analytical variable, rendering it simply closed structuralist thinking.

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