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# Note on Transliteration

There are no uniform standards for the transliteration of Hebrew and Arabic terms into English. In this book, the names of places or people are transliterated to those most commonly used in reports or newspapers. For other words and specialist terms, I follow the simplified transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES). Transliterated words have been italicised within the text. Working in a multilingual context, some expressions used in interviews or statements throughout the study may appear unfamiliar or inadequate to native English speakers. However, in order not to alter meaning, I have generally decided to leave the original expression as they appeared in their context.

# Contents

# Introduction

When do words and actions empower? When do they betray? These questions guide the reader through an ethnographic journey of the repercussions of activism. In this book, I explore what happens around campaigns against house demolitions in Southern Israeli Negev desert. I investigate what happens before and after bulldozers demolish buildings on contested lands. I follow loud demonstrations, silent meditation circles, guided tours for political tourists and effervescent solidarity festivals as well as victims, funders and activists, across connections, frictions and contradictions. How do emerging actors create new interpretative categories of the conflict? How is it possible to extend the spaces of what seems feasible within the given context of a violent and oppressive conflict? Under which conditions do the words and actions of activists empower? When do they betray their emancipatory intentions?

The interstitial spaces of Israeli–Palestinian activism are often overlooked, both in public discourses and in academic research about the conflict. This is a tendency that reifies directly or indirectly ethnic dividing lines, differences and clashes. Behind these divisions, a common space of solidarity remains often difficult to articulate. However, this study does not offer a comprehensive map of the hidden world of Israeli–Palestinian activism nor does it analyse activism in itself, as self-contained communities. Rather, the ethnographic episodes in this book narrate the consequences of activism in very specific settings. In different periods between 2004 and 2010, I carried out long-term ethnographic fieldwork of partial connections that unfold around political campaigns against house demolitions in Arab-Bedouin villages in the Southern Israeli Negev desert and in Israeli–Palestinian border zones. At the beginning of this study, I lived with an Arab-Bedouin family in a governmental planned so-called Bedouin town; a dusty yet welcoming place. Based on this experience, I started increasingly to move between different dividing lines, places and people in order to follow what might be called the 'social life' of claims of activists.

Thus, the book will explore two main aspects. First, it will set out to uncover some of the limits of the most visible forms of activism. In Part I these emerge at first through the contradictions and misunderstandings around a campaign against house demolitions in an Arab-Bedouin[1] village that is not recognised by state authorities, in ethnographic episodes that unfold around meetings with idealistic journalists, disenfranchised local elders and dreaming volunteers. Activists and media mobilised around the demolition, describing a village where sometimes eighteen, sometimes over three hundred Arab-Bedouin citizens live. However, despite this snowball-

1 The asterisk denotes terms covered in the Appendix.

like emerging activism, the 'village' itself was often lost from sight. It was not inhabited by anyone, like a 'ghost village'. Ultimately, mainstream activism failed to provide any solution for the underlying problems, while it perpetuated a series of stereotypical images, for example about helpless Arab-Bedouin citizens.

Secondly, the book will explore how, in between the lines of this more visible activism, still undefined figures of activism emerge. These find inspiration not only the more recent universalism of human rights and indigenous peoples' movements, but also in radical ecology, post anarchism or simply ordinary practices of solidarity. Sometimes, these forms rethink deeply the interpretive categories of the conflict. Other times, they may rethink human-nature relationships in conflicts. Yet not free of contradictions, they may interpret boundaries and dividing lines in new terms. Despite or because of their innovative potential, these experiments remain often less visible. The shifting paradigms of Israeli–Palestinian activism, in a glance, are those that depart at the relative decay of institutional lobbying and lead to the emergence of still undefined, experimental political subjects. Importantly, the ethnographic episodes demonstrate how this shift is not a linear process without contradictions and reciprocal contaminations.

## The Crisis of institutional Movment and Merging Forms of Activism

Many voices acknowledge a deep crisis or the end of the institutionalised peace movements after the failure of the Oslo Peace Accords became evident. For instance, Tamar Hermann (2009) describes the decline of the peace movement Peace Now as a 'shattered dream'. However, this book contends that in between the lines of this shattered dream could be the incipient of something different. This implies an often-evoked ethnographic 'critique' of both more static and self-referential writing on activism and conflict (cf. Bartos and Wehr 2002; Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2008). The most creative moments of this incipient were often those of apparently little importance. For instance, a silent peace walk to visit demolished buildings, inspired by the methods of Mahatma Gandhi. Or the establishment of an eco-village in Israeli–Palestinian border zones that serves as a meeting point for facilitators. These forms of activism may be less visible as their media-centred, well-organised counterparts, but their strength lies in their ability to redefine the interpretative categories of the conflict, eluding the logic of zero-sum games and creating new crosscutting or cosmopolitan forms of belonging. These were moments of a desire to break with the existing situation; moments that seem able to change ways of thinking and collective consciousness; may be the incipient of shifting paradigms.

The vitality of these forms of mobilisation becomes most tangible in very ephemeral moments for instance a group of youngsters who suddenly begins to dance on the dusty earth of the desert, while they went on foot far into the desert to rebuild an abandoned well along with a Bedouin family. A philosophy

professor picks up a megaphone to ask participants of a demonstration to drop money in his hat for the reconstruction of a demolished building. Three Israeli and Palestinian adolescents sit around a fire until dawn, discussing their dreams and future projects once peace had come. Two previously unknown persons hug each other while missiles fell nearby. A few moments later, this vitality may have faded away behind destruction, divisions or frictions. These moments were often spontaneous expressions of something unexpected; a vitality that seemed to me to be incommunicable, even to those who are very familiar with the reality of Israeli–Palestinian relations. I became aware of a certain fragile cultural ferment, like breathing fresh air in the middle of an often cynical and cruel conflict, like the yawning thirst for change and innovation on the part of ordinary people. In *The Fragility of Things*, political theorist William E. Connolly (2013) writes: 'The experience of vitality involves oscillations between moments of accented imbalance and the temporary recovery of precarious imbalance, with the latter sometimes set on a new plateau' (143). With this book, I hope to contribute to keep alive the vitality and innovative spirit of some of those moments.

Ethnographic research, with its long-term fieldwork and direct involvement of the researcher in the activities, events, and people in the field, constitutes a unique approach of social inquiry, especially when it comes to the study of activism and mobilisations. First, the personal ties, the friendships and its social obligations that the researcher develops over the course of the fieldwork create a stronger sense of the ethical implications of the study. This is often less evident in generalising theory elaboration that takes place in distant environments, such as for example statistical research. Thus, questions of self-positioning become salient, almost inevitable and immediate. In addition, ethnographic inquiry is unique in the sense that its open-end approach is often misunderstood in other forms of social science inquiry that starts off at detailed hypothesis or tightly defined research objectives. Ethnography, by definition, follows the flow of events as they appear, without relying on the strict hypothesis of a tightly defined research problem. Ethnography aims to overturn initial expectations and considerations; probably not many other forms of inquiry are projected so thoroughly towards the unexpected, the hidden and the undefined.

## 'Down in the South'

At the centre of this book are episodes of dense entanglements. For instance, I was waiting with one activist in the hospital in Be'er Sheva in order to visit an Arab-Bedouin citizen. A few hours earlier, he was shot by a Jewish farmer as a supposed 'trespasser'. Silently we sat in an anonymous waiting-room. Then, suddenly, my activist friend became nervous, probably by the overwhelming experiences of violence or my naive questions. She shouted:

> Everything is political down here! You think about it all the time. Here down in the South it is too strong: the poorest Jews live among the poorest Palestinians,

> and the poorest Jews are Arabs as well. So no one can escape the other: they have the same streets, the same hospitals, even the same prisons. In Tel Aviv it works differently. There we have the 'good weather activists'. When the weather is nice, you go on a Saturday to the [Occupied] Territories. You reconstruct some demolished houses in Palestine and in the evening you can have a drink on the beach in Tel Aviv. Here, in the Negev, you cannot escape.[2]

This comment demonstrates what means engaging with everyday experiences in a borderland. Down in the Southern periphery, the *Negev (or Naqab, in Arabic) desert constitutes a unique Israeli–Palestinian 'borderland'. As a zone of contacts, it offers opportunities for interaction that is impossible elsewhere in the Israeli–Palestinian space. The episodes of this book report events in specific locations of the Southern periphery, but an investigation of why and how these things happened cannot be confined to one place. Funding guidelines elaborated in oversea offices shape local projects. Human and indigenous rights discourses circulate globally. National politics shape regional decisions; 'political tourism' and media-activism interacts within a 'global infosphere'. As an out-of-sight place of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Israeli–Palestinian activism at the *'internal frontier' highlights the fact that dividing lines do not correspond with national boundaries or the borders of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. What makes activism at this 'internal' frontier illuminating is that it demonstrates dramatically the limitations of the mainstream approach to conflict resolution based on the maxim 'two states for two people'. The two-state approach frames the conflict in dichotomous terms, assuming the existence of clear-cut boundaries and overlooking those interstitial spaces that are at the centre of the book.

The Negev desert has been a part of the Israeli state since its independence in 1948. After the creation of the state of Israel, an unresolved dispute between the government and the Arab-Bedouin citizens remained. Arab-Bedouin citizens are denominated those citizens whose ancestors have been semi-nomads. While the majority fled or were expelled to the West Bank or Gaza as Palestinian refugees, a minority remained in villages that became known as so-called *'unrecognised Arab-Bedouin villages'. The unresolved legal status of these villages contributed to a progressive polarisation along the Israeli–Palestinian divide. Arab-Bedouin citizens can be considered as part of the *Palestinian citizens of Israel who hold formal Israeli citizenship, yet increasingly define themselves as Palestinian. Their presence in these unrecognised villages are the liminal geopolitical manifestation of the unresolved conflict. Making up about one quarter of the current Negev population, about half of the Arab-Bedouin citizens live in these villages, the other half lives in so-called planned 'Bedouin towns'. Activism in the Southern periphery is concerned with the fast evolving development policies and has significant common points with other mobilisations of indigenous people throughout the world. In recent years, the rise of a neo-culturalist discourse in

2 Fieldnotes, 12 February 2007.

terms of 'indigeneity' described as a 'cultural renaissance' (Van Mejil 2006), brought a re-emergence of claims about the access to resources and justice framed in terms of indigenous collective identities, or in cultural and ethnic terms. This dynamics creates new fictions.

But entanglements do not stop here. The Negev desert's different factions of Israeli, Palestinian, Arab and Jewish collective identities are not only intersected with transnational connections, they also constitute an 'internal frontier' where the struggle to settle the Israeli homeland continues (Rabinowitz 1997; Yiftachel 2006). This struggle, as we will see, is not simply a struggle of a powerful majority against a powerless minority. A standard division based on realist assumptions about ethnic identity distinguishes between two main blocks of collective identities. On the one side are the 'Palestinians' of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and refugee camps in other Arab states. On the other, 'Israelis' (Jewish immigrants, divided between hegemonic *ashkenazim* or Jews of 'European' origin and marginalised *mizrahim* or Jews of 'Oriental' origin) and 'Arab-Israelis' (the 22 per cent of Palestinians who live within the borders of the Israeli state and hold Israeli citizenship). Arab-Bedouin citizens in the Negev are considered a separate social group and form with other groups, such as Druzes, a minority of Arab-Israelis. In this perspective, the Israeli–Palestinian divide overlaps widely with a Western/Arab or Occident/Orient dichotomy. As we will see in this volume, these common-sense categories are overthrown or renegotiated in specific situations.

## Methodology and Research Process

My ethnographic episodes around activism intend to reveal what, according to Walter Benjamin (2003: 147–9), distinguishes storytelling from information: its 'living immediacy', the accuracy of details combined with an openness to interpretation, its 'amplitude' of possible readings. Thus, for Benjamin, narratives are capable of producing 'wisdom' (2003: 146) or, in the case of this volume, to raise reflections on issues of broad concern for the paradigms of social justice activism in conflicts. In my version of story-telling, an investigative and self-reflexive approach to what happens around activism, I follow events across boundaries and differences, avoiding monolithic perceptions.[3]

3 The focus on this dimension is certainly also reminiscent of Geertz's (1973) concept of 'thick description' and critical, self-reflexive strands in ethnography (Beatty 2010; Behar 1996). While this approach does not inherently relate to a concept of how fieldwork might move beyond the image of relatively stable sites and the protagonists, recent ethnographic interest has shifted attention to the multitude of individual subjectivities in contexts in which environments are changed, uprooted or displaced by various political and economic forces, creating new forms of subjectivity become possible (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007; Waterston 2011).

In 2004, I spent a period of several months with the Arab-Bedouin family of Rasha in Rahat. This period opened many doors when I came back to the Negev in 2006–2007 and 2010–2011. After almost two years of absence, I still had some familiarity with the unusual life conditions of Arab-Bedouin citizens in Israel, some old friends and plenty of informal contacts.[4] It was relatively easy to develop an understanding of the frictions and cultural differences within the broader field of activists. After studying Hebrew and attempting to obtain a broad overview of political activism, I decided to systematically follow the frictions, connections, and contradictions around the village of Abu Saf, which has been demolished by the police and rebuilt by activists over a two-year period. However, I also centred my attention on the most experimental and marginal activist figures, who seemed to break more profoundly with existing patterns, categories and forms of mobilisation. During this period, I also undertook extended life-story interviews. Some of them took place over several meetings, with activists from various backgrounds, as well as entering into important conversations and interviews with key-stakeholders such as international foundation officers, academics, and leading civil society figures. Working in a mixed Arabic, Hebrew and English context, the focus on activist networks made Hebrew and English the most useful languages, since most public events were either in one or another of these languages and the local Arabic dialect rather complex.[5] Certainly, these multiple languages complicated the work of the ethnography, but also that of many activists. The ethnographic attention to practices rather than mere discourses offered particularly fruitful insights. Over the years of fieldwork, I kept systematically a detailed field-diary of all activities, public meetings I attended, and personal encounters. Especially in the beginning, I attempted to describe what 'happened' beyond the spoken word. Certainly one cannot be everywhere and follow up with every contact or event as systematically as might be useful. Nor can one hide one's own role in the fieldwork setting.

As it is with ethnography, my aim is not to illustrate objectively representative data, but to provide deep subjective insights into specific micropolitical dynamics. The diary grew over time and became a source for reflection on dynamics in informal meetings, unexpected events, marginal comments made in the evening over a drink or a tea. This diary constitutes undoubtedly the richest material associated with my work. It aims to offer a detailed view behind the

4 In the context of my graduate thesis in Ethnology in 2004, I realised fieldwork regarding cross-boundary interactions in an Arab-Bedouin family involved in various strands of coexistence activism. Thanks to the 'Michela Roma' award, the thesis has been updated and published as a volume based on reflexive methodology (Koensler 2008).

5 Both Hebrew and Arabic are the official languages of Israel, although Hebrew remains the dominant communication language. In private settings, Arab-Bedouin citizens in Israel often speak a local Arabic dialect, frequently also using Hebrew words. However, through their daily interactions with Israeli public officials, their second language is Hebrew. In addition, more highly educated Arab-Bedouin citizens, especially those who work for advocacy organisations, usually speak perfect Hebrew and English.

scenes and beyond official discourses. The significance of this specific view behind the scenes became evident in the main events accounted in this book and allowed me to question many interpretations that otherwise would have been simply taken for granted, or that would have remained invisible. In this volume, however, I can only offer a very small selection of those descriptions. This detective-like journey across alliances and boundaries also has wider theoretical implications for the remodelling of ethnographic knowledge. Moving beyond the traditional ethnographic focus on local communities, I ground my analysis in often fragmented and often global cultural connections. These accounts aim not to represent a culture or a community, as it has been the case with earlier ethnographies. Far from being an obstacle, I show how these fragmented and contradictory connections are vital to the mobilisation and the formation of networks of activism, much like the energy produced in 'zones of friction'. As Anna L. Tsing (2005: 5) states, 'as a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power'. In short, the methodological focus on 'friction' points to the importance of interactions for the establishment of such movement. From this perspective, understanding the complex dimension of power relationships in a conflict beyond a specific local situation, understanding such global friction becomes increasingly important. Activities are funded by European organisations, journalists come from the US, activists travel by bus from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and stories circulate globally on news blogs and web pages. Global human rights discourses and ideas about mobilisation shape specific events. Transnational relationships are evident in many aspects. The very place itself is subject to different interests, desires, and power relationships; in different localities multiple and contradictory 'realities' of the story come into being.

At the same time, the research underpinning this book remains rooted in some firm elements of more traditional ethnography: the long-term, personal relationships with specific persons, the attention to the micro-political dynamics of everyday life, often apparently insignificant, and the look behind the official version of things. Since the 'crisis of representation' in anthropological writing, anthropologists have been considering experimental ways of dealing with the relationship between their self and their informants. The ways in which I expose references to personal experiences in this book is part of this reflexive realm of anthropological writing. Exposing the 'vulnerability' of the observer, the work of Behar (1996) aims to disrupt the expected role of the anthropologist, reappraising the role of the 'unexpected' in anthropological research. In this sense, the humility of the ethnographic perspective focuses on the empirical relationship between the practices of single individuals and the observer, rather than offering objectivistic accounts. In this way, it becomes possible to highlight the significance of those social realities that often remain invisible. This is true not only by most external observers, but also by a substantial part of the current literature on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Rather than giving definite answers

to circumscribed problems, this form of open-ended ethnographic writing aims to allow multiple readings and alternative conclusions.

## This Book

The book, then, follows the logic of discovery, similar to the ethnographic journey itself. It unveils, chapter by chapter, more elements. Part I strives to offer novel insights into the understanding of Israeli–Palestinian activism. In dialogue between social movement studies and ethnography, Chapter 1 outlines five propositions for an analytical lens that focuses on the social life of claims. These propositions conceive activism within its broader field of social forces, following partial connections across boundaries. Moreover, innovative cultural expressions are often elaborated in peripheral or marginal cultural circuits, which can be grasped through open concepts that go beyond the focus of well-established movements. The second chapter aim to reveal the hidden world of cross-cutting Israeli–Palestinian relations behind the apparently fixed dividing lines. Setting the context for a more detailed analysis of Israeli–Palestinian mobilisations, I explain the identity politics of the Bedouin-state conflict in Southern Israel as both a unique and emblematic aspect of Israeli–Palestinian relations.

Part II centres on ethnographic encounters that unfold around a campaign against house demolitions in an 'informal' Arab-Bedouin village build on contested land. Over the period of fieldwork, the twenty shacks and huts are frequently demolished, yet reconstructed by activists. The place became soon a hotspot of institutional lobbying, striving for public visibility. Chapter 3 reveals contradictions, misunderstandings and the way in which the story travels among different strands of activism. Importantly, despite circulating accounts of homeless people, the area in question is not inhabited by anyone; it turns out to be a 'ghost village'. The chapter follows journalists, activists of the Islamic movement, local and national politicians through the rubble of the site of demolitions and, from there, through other episodes of their lives. Chapter 4 investigates episodes that reveal the underlying conditions that produce the frictions, contradictions and connections around the case. In particular, it focuses on interpretative categories such as 'local community' and 'grassroots activism' that reproduce dominant dividing lines and create new, second-order conflicts. The fifth chapter shows how these contradictions are part of a more general process related to a decline of the framing of claims in cultural and ethnic terms.

Part III explores experimental, more fragmented forms of mobilisation. Chapter 6 illustrates activism that overcomes existing dividing-lines by creating new interpretative categories of the conflict, inspired by repertoires of Mahatma Gandhi's struggle. Chapter 7 examines forms of mobilisation inspired by emerging *ecosophies*, which rethink human-environment relations. Often invisible for the mainstream public, these experiments elude the zero-sum games of institutional lobbying and create new synergies.