

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FROM THE MARGIN: ZIONISM AND THE CASE OF THE PALESTINIAN STUDENT MOVEMENT IN THE ISRAELI UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: The recently emerging concept of community engagement is better conceived as a context dependent concept. However, when examining the case of native communities living in colonial situations, community engagement by universities of the colonial authorities fail to capture the level of grassroots organizing among students of the colonized communities as a form of community engagement, albeit community engagement from the margin. The Palestinian community in Israel, lives in a colonial situation in its own homeland where the Israeli universities have been established as an integral part of the Zionist colonial project in Palestine. As the Palestinian formal educational system, hegemonic and identity blurring, the Palestinian Student Movement in the Israeli universities is conceived as a grassroots form of community engagement intending to reconstruct and reassert a shared sense of collective-national identity among the Palestinian students within the Israel campuses. Furthermore, Palestinian student activists are involved in community grassroots organizing and action within their own home communities and places of residence. This form of grassroots organizing and political action by members of colonized communities, calls our attention to re-conceptualization of the conventional understanding of the concept of university-community engagement.

Keywords: Palestinians in Israel, Student Movement, community engagement, colonial education, Zionism

Introduction

The concept of community engagement has been central to intellectual debates and discussions in a number of disciplines, including sociology, political sciences and community psychology. Following such widespread cross-disciplinary focus, “community engagement” has been deployed in a wide variety of forms and contexts by a range of sectors including government structures seeking to deliberately involve communities in political processes (Head, 2007), juvenile justice systems dealing with substance abuse and delinquency (Nissen, 2011), western governments seeking

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assistance from their local Muslim communities to “combat terrorism” (Spalek and Imtoul, 2007), mental health organizations (Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1997), and educational institutions—mainly institutions of higher education (Bond and Paterson, 2005).

Around the world universities, like many other public institutions, also initiate engagement projects in support of their local community surroundings (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002), or society at large through research and service-learning which represent a broad variety of forms and projects of university-community engagement (see Bond and Paterson, 2005; Dempsey, 2010; Dulmus and Cristalli, 2012; Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, and Slamet, 2008; Smith, 2000; Thompson, Story, and Butler, 2003; Winter, Wiseman, and Muirhead, 2006). Examples include collaborative research projects involving university-community partnership, universities developing agendas to strengthen the local community, and service learning as forms of campus-community engagement.

Irrespective of the form or sector involved, engagement initiatives target community in some sort of action that is presumably beneficial to the community and the formal institution that initiates and facilitates the engagement process. Within the process of community engagement conceived in this way the official, well-resourced, powerful and mission governed organization usually takes the lead in the community engagement process.

While community engagement produces many positive outcomes, there are a number of problematic issues, in the corpus of mainstream literature focused on university-community engagement. Below I focus on three problematic areas. First, there appears to be a tendency to discuss institutions of higher education and their community engagement work as if they are ideologically neutral and operating within homogeneous and conflict-free social contexts. However some universities such as the Israeli universities were established precisely as part of a colonial process (Ben-David, 1986; Troen, 1992). The Palestinian universities, on the other hand, were established as a form of defiance and resistance to Zionist colonialism (Bruhn, 2006). In Latin America, universities have been intimately involved in the national liberation movements across the continent, and for instance, have contributed to critical sociology and community participatory action research (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991), liberation education (Freire, 1970) and liberation psychology (Martin-Baro, 1994). In post-apartheid South Africa, many university departments have been intensively involved in community engagement initiatives, devoting their academic knowledge and expertise to various community-focused development and processes of reconciliation and reconstruction in a post-conflict society (Lazarus et al., 2008).

The engagement work of such Palestinian, Latin American and South African universities seems to find resonance with Ernest Boyer’s call for “scholarship of

engagement” (Boyer, 1990). Boyer proposed a “paradigm shift” (see Kuhn, 1970) in academia that included four types of research: scholarship of *discovery* which resembles basic research and involves academics in the creation of new knowledge; scholarship of *integration* which refers to placing new discoveries within interdisciplinary perspectives; scholarship of *sharing* that entails the dissemination of knowledge and research findings; and scholarship *reconsidered* that involves reflections about the relevance and appropriateness of new knowledge for priority social problems requiring resolution and innovation (Boyer, 1995).

Second, there seems to be insufficient examination of the meanings and definitions associated with the concept, “community.” Within the diversity highlighted by such a construct, community has been central to the interests of a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences, each discipline having its own set of definitions and theories of community and community behavior. Howarth (2001: 224) lists a number of definitions of community which are common in everyday discourse, such as:

a group of people who share a common history and set of beliefs... an area where those who live there interact on a frequent and supportive basis... a collectivity of people that share common interests and hobbies... a group of people that co-construct a common identity and a sense of difference... a body of people that are brought together through similar experiences of exclusion and discrimination imposed by wider society... a group of people that share similar work patterns and work culture... a collectivity that has common politics and economics.

Howarth (2001: 228) argues that there are four aspects of community that need to be taken into account. Community can be viewed as a “source of social knowledge, a basis for common identity, means of marginalization and social inclusion [and] as a resource for empowerment.”

Third, in situations of oppression, colonized and marginalized communities are often excluded from the mainstream and hegemonic enactments of community engagement. When marginalized groups in society are excluded from mainstream politics or mainstream community engagement practices, activist community members tend to resort to “free spaces” (Evan and Boyts, 1992), in which they organize and carry out collective actions to benefit their own community. In the process of grassroots community engagement, community activists gain greater self-respect and collective identity, and develop enhanced public skills and civic participation (O’Donoghue, 2006). This form of engagement, distinct from hegemonic enactments, is commonly known as community grassroots organizing, and is typically initiated by community members and local leadership (see Kahn, 1991). Grassroots community engagement is anchored in the concept of community organizing, and adheres to central values of “fairness, justice, empowerment, participation, and self-determination” (CDC, 1997: 4), resonating with the commonly

emphasized values inherent in community psychology for liberation and well-being (see Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2010).

In recognition of these three issues, I seek to problematize the concept of university-community engagement in the Palestinian colonial context. I argue that the Israeli universities, as formal institutions of higher education, were established by the colonizing power and have been directly and indirectly involved in the colonial project through the research they produce, the type of pedagogy they espouse, particularly in the social sciences, and the kind of community engagement in which they are involved (Al-Haj, 2003; Arar and Mustafa, 2011; Makkawi, 2004; Nakhleh, 1979; Zureik, 1979). I also argue for the broadening and re-conceptualization of the concept of community engagement to include community organizing led by the marginalized and oppressed communities who are deliberately and structurally excluded from the community engagement efforts of higher education institutions such as the case of the Palestinians in Israel. By exploring the experiences of Palestinian student activists in Israeli universities, as a form of community engagement from the colonized margin, I hope to expand our understanding of university-community engagement.

In the sections that follow, I first discuss Zionism as a colonial process while focusing on the condition of the Palestinian community in Israel. I assert that the Palestinian community in Israel is an indigenous national group colonized in its own homeland and discuss the Israeli formal education system and its role in shaping and curtailing the collective-national identity of Palestinian students. I also give critical consideration to Israeli universities that are embedded within the Zionist colonial enterprise, and perpetuate the marginalization and exclusion of the Palestinian community. In the penultimate section I discuss the activities of the Palestinian Student Movement in Israeli universities as a form of community engagement from the margins. I conclude with reflective remarks about the ideological nature of community engagement. This article is an attempt to contribute to expanding our understanding of the concept of community engagement in higher education so as to encompass marginalized and oppressed minority groups on university campus who, in consequence of their exclusion by the official establishment, take charge of their own affairs through community organizing and social action.

Palestinian Community in Israel: The Colonial Condition and Hegemonic Education

Colonialism is always a violent action perpetuated by the colonizer outsider against the native people (see Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1970). Reasserting Fanon's (1963) description of the colonial situation as violent contact between the colonizer and the colonized, Jinadu (1976: 604) writes that:

The contact occurs in such a way that the numerically inferior alien race is actually the sociologically (*i.e.* politically and economically) superior race. This is so because of its access to, and monopolistic control of, socio-economic and political sources of power. This control is made possible and facilitated by the sheer weight of military superiority and material wealth of the alien race.

In resonance with Fanon (1963) and Jinadu (1976) I assert that historical Palestine, the homeland of the native-dispossessed Palestinian people in its entirety, continues to be subjected to Zionist-settler colonialism. I also concur with Rouhana (2011: 1) who maintains that, political justifications aside, describing “Zionism [as] a settler colonial movement therefore is, at the very minimum, a description of the process in which Palestine was taken over.” This colonial reality continues to characterize the life and struggle of the various Palestinian communities not only those within Israel itself.

The state of Israel does not have a constitution (Davis, 1987). Instead, it has what are termed “basic laws” (Davis, 1987; Rodinson, 1973), two of which illustrate the essence of its apartheid and colonial structure as far as its Palestinian citizens are concerned (Will and Ryan, 1990). First, the “law of return” applies only to Jews; in terms of this law, any person in any country who by religious-ethnic definition is Jewish, is entitled to immigrate to the state of Israel and immediately acquire its citizenship. Palestinian refugees who were expelled from the territory on which Israel was established in 1948 are denied this right. Second, the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which was established by the Zionist Movement before the creation of the state of Israel itself, and not the Israeli government, but has the full support and protection of the Israeli government, is the only authority in charge of land. According to the JNF exclusionary logic, as sanctioned by the Israeli state, only Jews can buy, own or lease land from the JNF, and consequently Palestinians who are officially citizens of the same state of Israel are excluded (Davis, 1987). These two basic laws are naturalized and justified through two interrelated myths on which the Zionist colonial project in Palestine was and continues to be based (Schoenman, 1988). The first is the denial of the existence of the Palestinian people. Some attempt was made to dispel this myth by a group of liberal-minded Israeli new-historians who documented the systematic ethnic cleansing campaign conducted by Zionist organizations, against the Palestinian people. This ethnic cleansing campaign was the direct cause of the refugee crisis where about 750,000 native Palestinians were expelled from their homeland in 1948 (Beit-Hallahmi, 1998; Morris, 1989; Pappé, 1994). The second myth is Israel’s claim to be a western democracy (Davis, 1987), even though it defines itself as an exclusionary Jewish state and it denies the existence of the Palestinians as a people aspiring for national self-determination. According to Rouhana (1989: 40), “a state that is defined as belonging to only one

people, when its population is composed of two, cannot offer equal opportunities to all its citizens.”

As a consequence of Zionist colonialism and the apartheid structure it has established, the Palestinian people today do not live together as a vibrant and cohesive community in a clearly defined geopolitical space; rather they are scattered, some living within their original homeland (1948 occupied Palestine), some in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, and the rest of the dispossessed refugees live in exile in various global locations. Of the various groups, the Palestinians who remained in their homeland after the establishment of Israel in 1948 were “granted” official Israeli citizenship as a form of community colonial control. By the very definition of Israel as a Jewish state, the formal citizenship status of the Palestinians within it is limited and renders them second-class citizens.

Despite their citizenship status, which was imposed on them, it must be recognized that the Palestinian community in Israel is an indigenous-colonized, non-voluntary, non-immigrant, non-assimilating national minority group; they are the native colonized Arab people of Palestine. They did not immigrate to the new system; rather, the system was imposed on them. They understand that the state of Israel was established to serve the goals and objectives of the Zionist movement, at the expense of Palestinian national goals and aspirations for self-determination (Rouhana and Ghanem, 1993). They live in a colonial-apartheid political arrangement that uses all means to marginalize, exploit, and manipulate their collective culture and national identity to facilitate the colonial project (Makkawi, 2000, 2004). The policy of exclusion rather than inclusion, domination rather than egalitarianism, cooptation rather than cooperation, collective identity manipulation rather than identity enhancement, and colonizing education rather than liberating education have all been central to the ethnic minority status of the Palestinian community in Israel and the problematic majority-minority relations within this prolonged colonial condition (Ghanem, 2001; Masalha, 1993; Rouhana, 1997). This repressive reality is most clearly manifested in the field of education.

Historically, Arab education in Palestine has never been under the control of the Palestinian community itself. During the British Mandate and Ottoman rule, Arab education in Palestine was controlled by colonial authorities that represented their own dominating cultures (Tibawi, 1956). Palestinian education in Israel since 1948 represents a continuation of the colonial educational hegemony (Abu-Saad, 2006). It has been systematically controlled and manipulated by the Israeli authorities in order to achieve three interrelated objectives (Makkawi, 2002; Mari, 1987).

First, the Israeli government makes systematic use of the school as a social institution for reproducing the socio-economic class structure (Jabareen, 2006) through entrenched discrimination with regard to budget, school buildings, support services, teacher qualifications and other related areas (Human Rights Watch 2001).

The result is an ethicized class structure in which Palestinians are confined to working class living conditions (Al-Haj, 2002; Makkawi, 2004; Mazawi, 2011). Second, there is an obvious attempt to co-opt the Palestinian educated and intellectual elite through employment as teachers and restricting their access to other forms of employment (Lustick, 1980; Mazawi, 1994). Palestinian teachers and school administrators are hired based on their security screening and political records rather than their professional qualifications. Third, the Israeli government strives to shape the Palestinian students' sense of collective-national identity consistently with Israel's definition as a "Jewish state" (Mari, 1987; Mazawi, 2011). The formal educational system for the Palestinians in Israel is used as a sophisticated political tool in order to manipulate Palestinian students' sense of collective-national identity (Abu-Saad, 2006; Makkawi, 2004).

The de-facto objectives of such education are: "to instil feelings of self-disparagement and inferiority in Arab [Palestinian] youth; to de-nationalize them, and particularly to de-Palestinise them; and to teach them to glorify the history, culture, and achievements of the Jewish majority" (Mari, 1987: 37). Given the choice, the Palestinians would expect the education of their youth, to "preserve and reinforce Arab national identity—particularly their Palestinian identity—and to instil pride in their own culture, heritage, and nationality; and if it were up to them, the education of their youth would engage in condemning Zionism, rather than praising and glorifying it" (Mari, 1987: 37).

The research about the curriculum in Palestinian schools in Israel has been consistent in revealing that the overall colonial objective is the eradication, deformation and cultural invasion of the collective sense of national identity among Palestinian students in Israel (Mari, 1987; Al-Haj, 1995; Makkawi, 2002, 2009). In a recent analysis of the Israeli dominated formal history curriculum used in Palestinian schools, the students' perception of this curriculum, and the teachers' understanding of their role as educators, results indicated that the formal history curriculum used in Palestinian schools in Israel is a clearly colonizing attempt, is culturally hegemonic, and represents a historical narrative which seeks to alienate the Palestinian students from their historical sense of collective-national identity. The Palestinian teachers were shown to be conflicted as a result of their levels of job dependency, as well as the conflict between the Israeli educational policies on the one hand and their community's expectations on the other. Contrary to official expectations, the Palestinian students revealed an apparent level of cultural and nationalistic consciousness which they had developed outside of the school system, and so did not hesitate to defy and define their teachers as representatives of the formal education system and its objectives (Makkawi, 2009). The Israeli intention to infuse racist and exclusionary content into the curriculum is not a simple process

because the students as human agents have repeatedly demonstrated resistance to the cultural content of such education (see Giroux, 1983).

To a large extent, Palestinian students attending Israeli universities are educated and socialized within this formal educational context. Their entrance to university represents a transition stage giving a fresh momentum to the process of identity search and development within university. The Palestinian Students Movement in the Israeli universities represents resistance and community engagement from the margins in an educational context. In the next section, I present a critical assessment of Israeli universities and their role in the Zionist colonial project.

Israeli Universities and Zionist Colonialism

The inauguration of the most prominent of today's Israeli universities more than two decades prior to the materialization of the Zionist colonial project in Palestine in 1948, attests to their core mission, as higher education institutions, which are organically harnessed to this form of colonialism. The Zionist settlers in Palestine established the Technion Institution in Haifa in 1924, which was "devoted to training engineers and technical workers" and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1925, which was "devoted to the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and medicine" (Troen, 1992: 46). From the outset, the task which was assigned to these two institutions by the Zionist movement was to facilitate the process of colonialism, an endeavor the settlers defined as "nation building." The Israeli universities were not intended to be the typical type of ivory tower institution, but rather as Troen (1992: 50) argues, "they have always been and continue to be directly engaged in the process of nation building and maintaining and strengthening the State."

Commitment by the universities in their early history to the two main expectations, namely cultural "revival" and state building, led some Israeli scholars to go thus far in asserting the dominance of these expectations over other needs arguing that "in Israel, training professional people was not an important function of the university [since] immigrants brought to the country more than enough professionals" (Ben-David, 1986: 108). While it is possible to find parallel similarities and consistencies between the role of the Israeli universities and that of the international mainstream academia with regard to research and teaching, it is quite evident that with regard to the "third mission" (Bernardo, Butcher and Howard, 2012) of the university (i.e., community service), the Israeli universities are singled out as an exception. In the case of the Israeli universities this "third mission" crosses the line from nation-building or cultural-"revival" for the Zionist settlers, to nation-dismantling and cultural-invasion with regard to the Palestinian native people (Rabinowitz, 2002).

Colonial Israeli universities (Technion Institute established 1924 and Hebrew University in 1925) followed the German model of higher education with strong emphasis on scientific research and teaching and with secondary attention to community service in the traditional sense of the word. This is not a surprise since both universities were established during a colonial process (Troen, 1992: 107) when the Jewish community was still a small minority in historical Palestine. Ben-David succinctly puts it this way: “when the Hebrew University was established in 1925, it was intended to serve as a world center for Jewish science and scholarship.” Being so obsessed with the scientific research enterprise, Israeli universities have been criticized by their own supporters for their failure to facilitate the development of the Hebrew language as an important aspect of the Jewish cultural identity they were expected to develop (Kheimets and Epstein, 2005). Earlier research and publication were conducted in German, only to be replaced by English following the Second World War and the global expansion of English as the dominant language of science.

The community engagement, or community service as one of the three pillars of the university in the modern world (Watson, 2008) has been understood in the case of the Israeli universities as an active involvement in the colonial process through “reviving” Jewish culture in Palestine and pragmatically helping to colonize the land and establishing the infrastructure for the emerging state. The social functions of the Israeli universities were described as “contribution to reclaiming the land... cultural contributions to national revival... contribution to national security” (Troen, 1992: 50-55).

Founding Israeli academics in the social sciences were actively involved in the cultural colonization process as well, without which the entire Zionist colonial project would have been meaningless and less enduring. The task of “nation building”—or more specifically creating a new collective identity and culture from sparsely diverse groups of Jewish settlers arriving from over 80 countries—demanded at the same time the de-legitimization, marginalization, “othering,” and deeming primitive and backward a competing indigenous identity and culture claiming national rights to the same land, that is the Palestinian people.

Israeli anthropologists were notoriously involved in creating “colonial scholarship” about the native Palestinians and their culture as it stands in direct negation to the supposedly progressive and western-type Jewish culture in colonial Palestine. Dan Rabinowitz (2002) critically reviews the work of seven of the most prominent “first generation” Israeli anthropologists on Palestinians which was produced over the first 25 years of the state’s existence. The contrast between the features of Palestinian culture, as constructed by these Israeli anthropologists, and their supposed opposites in Jewish culture, were succinctly summarized in Rabinowitz’s (2002) critical

review. As the oriental “other” contrasted with Jewish culture, Palestinian culture was constructed and described as such:

... peripheral, dependent [vs.] metropolitan, independent; traditional family, based on material logic, no individual freedom [vs.] modern family, based on personal choice; traditional structures dominate social life [vs.] transactionalism and meritocracy, social innovation; escapism, unrealistic politics, uprootedness [vs.] resilience, rootedness, common sense and pragmatism; subordination of public life to the culture of honor and shame and self—promoting individuals [vs.] political leaders are committed to serve communities; traditionalism, stability and ancient structures and customs [vs.] dynamism, social innovation, willingness to change; and inequality before the law, misfit between rhetoric and action [vs.] all are equal before the law, practice and theory are one. (Rabinowitz, 2002: 318)

Community service, as the third function of universities, in addition to research and teaching, was from the outset intertwined with the process of colonization for the Israeli universities. If colonization means creating a *new* society and new political-economic system in a land captured from others—all forms of colonialism have historically involved existential conflict between the colonizers and the indigenous people—then the Israeli universities were involved in a bidirectional process from their inception: to facilitate the building of Israeli Jewish society in Palestine while simultaneously helping to dismantle the already existing Palestinian-Arab society in Palestine. Simply put, the existence of the Arab-Palestinian people aspiring for national self-determination stands in sharp contradiction with the Zionist colonial project. This distinction is important for our discussion of the role of community engagement for Israeli universities in relation to the native Palestinian community.

From a review of the literature about higher education and community engagement in the global context, one comes against a striking fact: when the Israeli universities are involved in community engagement they are actually involved only with the Israeli-Jewish communities to the extent of deliberate marginalization of the Palestinian community within Israel. Furthermore, Israeli universities are systematically repressing Palestinian student activism as a form of grassroots community engagement within the universities themselves. From here the thesis of this article emerged which could be summarized as such: Palestinian student activists in the universities are leading community engagement from the margin (i.e., against the general policy of the formal establishment both university and government) and conduct community activities among their fellow Palestinian students (as a community of minority students within a predominantly Jewish campus) and they are also involved in community organizing and action in their original hometowns.

Palestinian Student Movement as Community Engagement from the Margin

Student political activism refers to the engagement of students in non-institutionalized political activities (Whalen and Flacks, 1989). It is a worldwide and age-old phenomenon, though its degrees, forms and manifestations vary from country to country and from one historical period to another. Most of the research on the subject of student activism has focused on student activists in western societies, and in particular their protests during the 1960s. Students were a major force in the revolutionary movements of 1848 in Germany, played a major role in modern Chinese nationalism in 1919, and led the most influential university reform movement in Latin America in 1918, and emerged in North America as a major force in political action in the 1960s (Altbach, 1989). A brief comparison of the North American Student Movement during the 1960s and the Palestinian Student Movement in Israel reveals the risk involved in generalizing from one situation to the other. First, while American students of the 1960s were significantly more active than any other student generation in American history (Altbach, 1989), we can find that the successive generations of Palestinian students have maintained their organizations and activities at the same level since their first organizational endeavor in 1958 (Makkawi, 2004). Second, American student activists were the offspring of middle class, college educated and politically liberal parents (Walen and Flacks, 1989), whereas the Palestinian students' parents were members of a colonized national minority group that was cut off from the rest of its people after they were expelled in 1948 (Ghanem, 2001). Third, American students are in conflict with their own national state. Palestinian students, on the other hand, are protesting against a system that was imposed on them, and they perceive themselves as outsiders to the Israeli colonial political system (Makkawi, 2004).

The investment by individuals and communities in higher education has two domains of values: socioeconomic and sociopolitical (Mari, 1979). The economic values prevail when higher education provides the individual with potential chances for upward socioeconomic mobility, while politically; higher education is valued when it is relevant to the sociopolitical needs of the individual and society. According to Mari (1979: 435), "non-economic values of higher education seem to have special significance to developing societies as they try to develop national and political identification with their respective nation state." The gloomy picture of unemployment among Palestinian university graduates is a well-documented reality (Arar and Mustafa, 2011; Al-Haj, 1988, 2003). However, lack of economic reward is not the only reason behind the low ratio of Palestinian university students in Israel. The poor level of high school preparation and the university entrance exams create an additional set of structural barriers to their enrollment at university

(Arar and Mustafa, 2011; Al-Haj, 2003). Graham-Brown (1984: 57) argues that the Israeli university entrance exam “has been criticized in some quarters in the West as containing inbuilt cultural assumptions which favor those who come from the dominant culture or social class.” Cultural biases in this exam are consistent and have been reported in more recent studies (Arar and Mustafa, 2011).

Despite slight improvements, relatively speaking, the ratio of Palestinian students to the total (mainly Jewish) student population continues to be significantly low. In 1989/90 Palestinian students composed 5.4 percent of the general student population in the Israeli universities, whereas the Palestinian community composed 16 percent of the total population (Al-Haj, 1995: 193). Today, when the Palestinian community is about 20 percent of the total population, Palestinian university students make up only 8.3 percent of the total student population (Arar and Mustafa, 2011: 213). Universities are the only educational institutions in Israel where Palestinian and Jewish students are fully officially “integrated.” Nonetheless, the academic life in Israeli universities “reflects [the] power relations in the wider society, and this serves to reproduce the stratification system and deepen the cultural hegemony of the majority” (Al-Haj, 2003: 351). Despite repeated attempts and initiatives made by the Palestinian intellectual leadership, the idea of establishing an Arab university in Israel has been vehemently and repeatedly rejected and suppressed by the Israeli authorities (Abu-Alheja, 2005). It is because of this colonially imposed student “integration” that the Israeli universities find it difficult to halt and repress Palestinian students’ political activism while allowing Jewish students the freedom of political organization. Hence, the relationship between the Palestinian students and the university authorities is conflictive and corresponds to the government’s colonizing policy towards the Palestinians at large. Palestinian student activists relentlessly exploit various spaces in the system to conduct and sustain their community political involvement both among their fellow Palestinian students within campus and in their home community as well.

Palestinian students are socially and politically alienated due to the educational context of the Israeli universities being in contradiction with their national and cultural aspirations. Nakhleh (1979: 113) argues that “the Israeli universities are dominated by Jewish-Zionist ideology, and this ideological basis frequently gets reinforced by rituals... such context places heavy sanctions on an Arab nationalist expression.” Andre Elias Mazawi, a Palestinian scholar and critical theorist of education, reflects back on his own educational experience in an Israeli university: “My Tel-Aviv University undergraduate education (French language and Literature, and Education), as formative as it was, offered little curricular content that would facilitate a meaningful and critical understanding of those aspects of Palestinian society I was observing and experiencing on a daily basis” (Mazawi, 2011: 223). For the majority of Palestinian students in the Israeli universities this peculiar

educational context is both challenging and inspiring for resistance and engagement in the student movement which in turn, illuminates their sense of national identity and critical political consciousness. This form of community engagement from the margin, is not only neglected by the university authorities, but is systematically sanctioned and repressed. Despite the low proportion of Palestinian students in Israeli universities, their existence as a minority community within campus is intensely noticeable due to their high level of grassroots political engagement (Makkawi, 2004).

Palestinian students maintain their right to organize themselves in independent frameworks separate from the General Student Union (GSU). Embedded in the dominant culture of the Israeli universities, the GSU is “dominated by the majority Jewish students who do not cater to the specific needs of Arab [Palestinian] students” (Zureik, 1979: 176). Despite their legitimate argument that as a national minority group, they have different national and cultural needs, which are not on the agenda of the GSU, the university authorities intensely refuse to recognize their student organization. This strange situation of being neither illegal nor recognized was illustrated in a statement by the head of the National Union of Arab Students (NUAS): “the national union is not formally recognized by the university authorities, but there is de-facto recognition: they approach us when there are problems, and we approach them” (Machul, 1984: 61). Recognition of Palestinian students’ organizations by the university, implies de-facto recognition of their collective identity as a Palestinian national group; a reality which is systematically denied and suppressed by the authorities of the Israeli universities and the government at large (Makkawi, 2004).

Palestinian student groups have linked themselves with political organizations and parties throughout the community who share their political references and ideological affiliations. More accurately, they are the student branches of the various Palestinian political organizations on the community level. Hence, their link to community level political engagement. The central goals and stated objectives of the student organizations have been to maintain and affirm their national and cultural identity as part of the Palestinian people within the parameters of their social and political reality. As such, student activism as a form of community engagement from the margin is conceived as one of the most comprehensive political educational processes Palestinian youth experience. These students are active and organized in small groups who share similar ideological perceptions and belief systems. Psychologically, student activists construct their collective-national identity and express it through their membership as active group members, not as isolated individuals.

There are two interrelated levels of community engagement in which Palestinian student activists in Israeli universities are involved. First, they are involved in action among Palestinian students in each university as an oppressed minority

community within the larger body of an Israeli campus. They are also organized on a national level in an umbrella organization (NASU) that represents the various ASUs in all universities. Second, they continue to play an active role through their community level political parties through which they create a minority university-community engagement (as opposed to the official Israeli university line of community engagement). Erdreich (2006: 128), in an ethnographic work describes the activities of the ASU as an “instructive ritual” for a minority group within an alienating educational context. She writes: “In compensation for the suppression of Palestinian national communities within Israel and for the lack of socialization by the schools, the rites of the ASU ritualized community are instructive.”

The interconnectedness between the student movement and the general Palestinian political movement in Israel is so potent. Community level political involvement of Palestinian students is generally integrated with the political movement at large; only on campus we can identify forms of political protest as purely student engagement or led by the student movement for that matter.

We can roughly divide the activities of the Palestinian Student Movement into two categories: Student rights and daily issues on one hand, and political activities related to the national cause on the other. In fact this dichotomy has characterized the levels of engagement of the different political parties’ organizations that have been active among the Palestinians in Israel for decades. The question of the civic rights as citizens of the state and the national cause and the dialectical relationship between them seems to be in the center of the political discourse among the Palestinian political leadership and their student branches as well (Rouhana, 1997).

Erdreich (2006) observed a wide range of ritual activities conducted by the ASU at the Hebrew University. These include the distribution of posters with nationalistic character and content, the invitation of guest speakers, the organization of student day activities for Palestinian students only, the celebrations of a wide range of national occasions. All of these activities directed towards the revival and maintenance of the students’ national identity through cultural activities. Furthermore, Palestinian students were in the front lines in the wide range of community protests and political action in their own home community during the eruption of the second Intifada where 14 youth were murdered by the Israeli police (Lowrance, 2006).

College experience in general and involvement in extracurricular activities in particular have a positive impact on the student’s social and psychological development (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Extracurricular activities in the Israeli universities cater mainly to the Jewish students’ culture and for the most part are not only irrelevant, but also antagonistic to Palestinian students. This essential component of the campus social life experience is made available to Palestinian students through their involvement in their own political organizations. Reaching the great majority of Palestinian students on campus in order to increase their

involvement in such activities is not only fundamental to their national awareness, but also their psychological development as individuals.

Ironically, the Israeli universities as academic institutions are still controlled by the political system and the dominant Zionist ideology. As such, they take upon themselves the mission of protecting the status quo from the “threat” stemming from Palestinian students’ national identity. Palestinian student organizations are still not recognized by the universities and their activities, and especially those addressing their Palestinian national identity are still to a large extent censured and repressed by the university authorities. It is because of this repression of their national identity by the university authorities that Palestinian students persist in their activism. A strongly committed Palestinian male student activist puts it this way: “problems like these motivate us to work even harder. Indirectly, by creating these problems they give us incentives for more resistance and work against them” (Makkawi, 2004: 51).

Conclusion

With reference to institutions of higher education, the recent movement called community engagement, holds promising and widely optimistic views regarding genuine community involvement, social justice, the collective alleviation of human misery, and an ideal set of values that underpin our work with the marginalized, excluded, socially, economically and politically oppressed groups in the larger society. This picture might be accurately reflective of the situation in mainstream situations where the state, the official political authorities, the formal institutions of higher education, the larger society, and even marginalized groups within this larger society share common interests and identification. The premise of this conceptualization of university-community engagement falls apart once we examine it in a colonial context where the universities themselves have been established as part of the colonial process.

This article attempted to unpack the concept of community engagement and by its application to the situation of a colonized native community expand its boundaries to account for community based grassroots organizing as a form of community engagement when the basic idea of community engagement by the university excludes and marginalizes the community in question. Similar to the lack of agreement among the scholars of community on a unified definition of the concept of community, it might be more appropriate to describe the concept of community engagement as context specific rather than a generalized notion that can hold across contexts. We may have different understandings of university-community engagement depending on the specific context within which universities operate.

Unlike classic forms of colonialism, the Zionist colonial-settler project in Palestine had intended from the beginning to settle in a land which was, to the disenchantment of the settlers and their leadership, relatively developed and fully populated by its native population aspiring for national self-determination. The inevitable clash between the settlers and the native people resulted in the fragmentation and disposition of the native Palestinian population. The Palestinians who remained in their homeland and reluctantly were granted Israeli formal citizenship were never intended to be included in the composition of the Jewish state and its national goals and aspirations. It is within this peculiar reality that the Israeli institutions of higher education have never intended to serve the collective needs of the native Palestinian community in the state.

I argued throughout this article, that historical Palestine in its entirety is subjugated to a classic form of colonialism where the colonialist authorities employ all means in their capacity to fragment, control and exploit the native people who have been involved in a prolonged struggle for self-determination. This critical discussion attempted to uncover the colonialist exploitation and hegemony of formal education among the Palestinians in Israel as a means of identity distortion, socioeconomic class reproduction and cooptation of the intellectual elite. Formal education for the Palestinian community in Israel lacks relevance, it is non critical, and has never been transformative. As Palestinian students graduate from this educational system and enter university, they find in the Palestinian Student Movement in the universities an ideal and “safe space” for community engagement as a way of compensation for their earlier identity blurring education.

The Palestinian Student Movement as a specific form of community engagement within the general college experience for Palestinian youth has been most helpful for the development of their collective-national identity. This is very important in light of the fact that the formal educational system continues to do exactly the opposite; blurring rather than developing Palestinian national identity. Since Palestinian formal schools in Israel are politically controlled and rigid against any attempt at transformation, it would be safe to argue that the student movement in the universities constitutes the most important educational context within which Palestinian students are engaged in collective identity development where domination and repression prevail. Having little chance to influence policy in the formal educational system, the target for change and development must be the Palestinian Student Movement as a valuable national educational context.

The concepts of community engagement and community grassroots organizing work almost in diametric opposition. While in community engagement a formal organization such as the university takes an initiative in the process of engaging the community, community grassroots organizing is a process initiated by community activists. The distinction between the two concepts becomes sharper when colonized

native communities are deliberately marginalized and excluded from the process of community engagement run by the dominant institution. Recalling the core values dwelled upon by proponents of community engagement, and putting them to test in a colonial context, one is left puzzled by the hypocrisy of applying these values to members of the colonially dominant community where repressing and excluding the colonized is the norm. Although they operate in different directions, community engagement and community grassroots organizing should not be separated and discussed as two different social processes. If institutions of higher education are genuinely committed to the set of values that underpin their community involvement, then the incorporation of grassroots organizing and community action that comes from the marginal and excluded communities should be incorporated in their core mission of community service and community engagement.

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