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CRITICAL THEORY AND “GRAY SPACE”

Mobilization of the colonized

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Let us begin with a public speech delivered by Hussein al-Rifa’iya, Chair of the Council of the Unrecognized Bedouin Villages in the Naqab (Negev) region around Beersheba. On January 2, 2009, al-Rifa’iya was inaugurating a self-rebuilt mosque in the locality of Wadi al-Na’am, demolished a few days earlier by the Israeli authorities. al-Rifa’iya stated:

We will help rebuild every demolished house. Yes, it is officially “illegal” but our people have been here for generations and have nowhere to go. We built this mosque to show the state and the community that the Arabs of the south will not succumb ... Israel may use force and destruction, both in the Naqab and in Gaza, but we will always rebuild.

This statement, one of several speeches delivered in the inauguration rally of the modest mosque (see Figures 10.1 and 10.2), can be brushed aside as another hype of a local leader preparing for nearing elections. But it also signals the incipient emergence of a new political strategy and with it a new subjectivity developing among the Bedouin Arabs living in dozens of “unrecognized” small towns and villages around Beersheba. It illustrates the new politics of “gray spacing” – emergence from the struggle for informal development – at the “periphery of peripheries,” by the Bedouins vis-à-vis the ethnocentric Jewish state, but also in relation to surrounding Jewish communities and other Palestinian communities known in the Naqab region as “Northerners.”¹



FIGURE 10.1 Hussein al-Rafi'yah, Head of the RGUV, speaking to local community, Wadi al-Na'am, January 2009

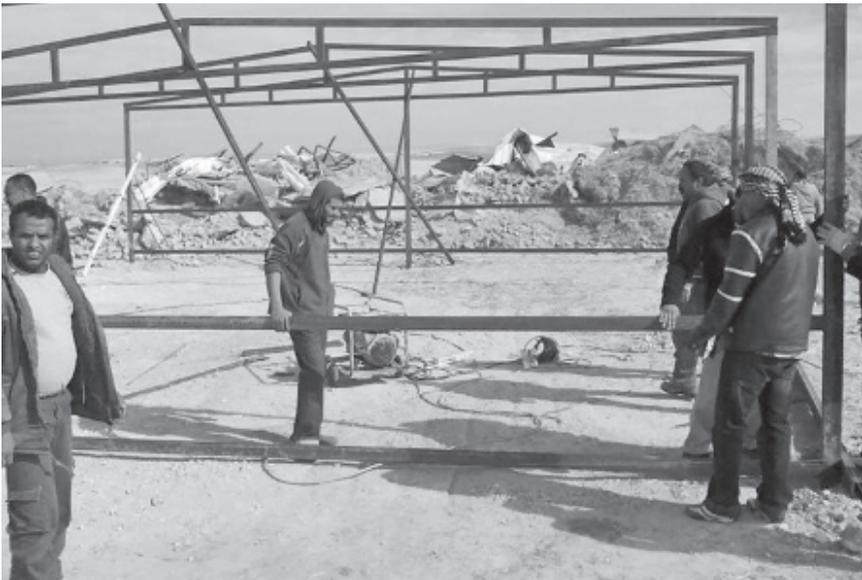


FIGURE 10.2 Rebuilding the mosque, Wadi al-Na'am, January 2009

The episode described above links to the two main theoretical arguments I wish to advance here. First, that most critical urban theories (CUT), while providing vital foundations for the understanding of cities and regions, have not sufficiently accounted for the implications of a new political geography, characterized by the proliferation of “gray spaces” of informalities and the emergence of new urban colonial relations. The new geography thrusts the politics of identity as a central foundation of urban regimes, intertwined with, but far from subsumed under, class or civil engines of change typically highlighted by CUT. Second, that this new geography is recreating subjectivities, which no longer solely orbit the state’s central power. This is illustrated below by tracing the impact of “gray spacing” on the articulation of Bedouin Arab struggle, and on the process of radicalization and disengagement in three main practices: sumood (hanging on to the land against state eviction plans), memory building, and autonomous politics.

The new politics often distance identities and mobilizations from the state, signaling the fragmentation of the apparatus of power “from below.” They often begin with struggles for “insurgent citizenship,” as identified by Holston (2008), but may go further and transform into struggles for multiple sovereignties. Such a transformation is rarely clear-cut or fully articulated, and is inevitably riddled with contradictions and tensions. Yet, there is a point in the struggle when citizenship, integration, and equality – emphasized by key scholars in the field (see Harvey, 2008; Holston, 1998, 2008; Marcuse, 2002) are no longer the dominant goals, but are intertwined with efforts to create autonomous ethnic spaces of development and identity.

This constellation illustrates a paradox – the central power which initiates “gray spacing” as a method of control, is now being undermined by this very process. Not only do political processes and identities move away from the state, they also breed political radicalism among those occupying or creating “gray space” which is channeled into alternative identity projects. In other words, the political stability sought by state oppression, in an attempt to prolong existing power relations, is now disrupted by destabilizing processes deriving from its own oppressive policies. Though still weak, the subaltern are shifting their strategies by partially (it not completely) disengaging their behavior, identity, and resource-seeking from the state, and by developing an alternative vision to civil integration as citizens in an inclusive state.

These arguments, however, must also be qualified. First, the state remains a powerful actor, as it attempts to deal with this development either by active cooptation or aggressive marginalization and oppression. Hence, the making of gray space is forever contentious, illustrating a site of political conflict and societal transformation. Second, the struggle rarely entails heroic confrontations with the authorities, nor does it produce comprehensive strategies or finely defined agendas. Most commonly, as Bayat (2007) and Perera (2009) show, gray spacing entails a “slow encroachment of the ordinary” through “familiarization” of the “cracks” in the working of oppressive power. This struggle is

made of thousands of small movements in spaces of survival and stealth, neither fully coordinated, nor fully articulated, but cumulatively significant to upset the prevailing urban order.

My analysis draws on a recent comparative research project focusing on the new political geography of ethnocratic cities (Yiftachel, 2007; Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2004), and from long-term direct personal involvement in several Palestinian struggles, most notably with the indigenous Bedouins of the Beersheba region.² Hence, the chapter attempts to use both structural and “enmeshed” epistemologies to portray the manner in which space, power, and development create new urban citizenship, classes, and identities. In this vein, it does not treat Israel/Palestine as an exception, but rather a hyper example of structural relations unfolding in thousands of cities around the changing globe.³

“Gray space”

The concept of “gray space” refers to developments, enclaves, populations, and transactions positioned between the “lightness” of legality/approval/safety, and the “darkness” of eviction/destruction/death. Gray spaces are neither integrated nor eliminated, forming pseudo-permanent margins of today’s urban regions, which exist partially outside the gaze of state authorities and city plans (see Yiftachel, 2009). The identification of “gray spacing” as a ceaseless process of “producing” social relations, by-passes the false modernist dichotomy between “legal” and “criminal,” “oppressed” and “subordinated,” “fixed” and “temporary.” As such, it can provide a more accurate and critical lens with which to analyze the making of urban space in today’s globalizing environment, marked by growing mobility, ethnic mixing, and political uncertainty.

Gray spaces have become a dominant feature of contemporary urbanism, mainly, but far from solely, in the less developed world. While the concept also covers the creation of informal spaces “from above” by powerful groups linked to the centers of power (Yiftachel, 2009), this chapter focuses on the most common expression of this phenomenon – the creation of peripheral, weakened, and marginalized spaces. Yet, communities subject to “gray spacing” are far from powerless recipients of urban policies, as they generate new mobilizations and insurgent identities, employ innovative tactics of survival, and use gray spaces as bases for self organization, negotiation, and empowerment. To be sure, power relations are heavily skewed in favor of the state, developers, or middle classes. Yet the “invisible” population of informal settlement is indeed an important actor in shaping cities and regions.

In the urban policy sphere, gray spaces are usually quietly tolerated, while subject to derogatory discourses about their putative “contamination,” “criminality,” and “danger” to the desired “order of things.” The disjuncture between actual tolerated reality and its “intolerable” legal, planning, and discursive framing, puts in train a process of “gray spacing,” during which the boundaries between “accepted” and “rejected” constantly shift, trapping

whole populations in a range of unplanned urban zones, lacking certainty, stability, and hence development. The consequences are clear in many cities – whole neighborhoods and quarters lack basic services to realize their urban citizenship, forming new urban colonial relations, as detailed later (for earlier accounts, see Davis, 2006; Fernandes and Varley, 1998).

Gray spacing is a power-laden process. Therefore, the concrete emergence of “stubborn” informalities is typically handled not through corrective or equalizing policy, but by employing a range of delegitimizing and criminalizing discourses, regulations, and violence. This creates boundaries that divide urban groups according to their status; a process of “separating urban incorporation” and “creeping apartheid” whereby the meaning of urban citizenship depends on arbitrary features such as ethnicity, place of birth, or class. The double-edged move of “separating incorporation” preserves gray spaces in a state of “permanent temporariness”; concurrently tolerated and condemned, perpetually waiting “to be corrected” (see Davis, 2006; Neuwrith, 2006; Roy, 2005, 2009b; Roy and AlSayyad 2004). I return to these theoretical aspects below.

The “gray spacing” of Bedouin Arabs

The Bedouin Arab population now residing in the Naqab/Negev desert, at the southern regions of Israel/Palestine, is the most marginalized and impoverished group in historic Palestine. It is an indigenous group, with its own history, traditions, and identity, made of the fragments of communities remaining in Israel after the 1948 Nakbah (disaster in Arabic), during which around 70 percent of Palestinians (including the Bedouins of course) were driven out of what is now Israel, mainly to Gaza, West Bank, and Jordan. The on-going sufferings, dislocations, and violence experienced by the Bedouins since 1948 have prompted a local poet, Saleh al-Ziadnah to write, “in the Naqab we breathe/the Nakbah everyday/... in the thick air of our sand/in our dust/in the violent shattering of our walls/... in our endless search to re-find/our home...” (Nakbah ceremony, al-Qrein village, May 14, 2008).

The 180,000 Naqab Bedouins of the Beersheba region are composed of three main sub-groups: (a) those living on their ancestors land (mostly in unrecognized localities); (b) those evicted from their original villages and transferred to new unrecognized towns and villages; and (c) those urbanized into modern planned towns. The first two reside in “gray spaces” and number in late 2008 around 90,000 people (see Figures 10.3 and 10.4 and Goldberg, 2008).

Since gaining sovereignty in 1948, Israel has used internal colonial policies to Judaize most areas inhabited, owned, or claimed by Arabs. A major tool in the Judaization policy has been the declaration of all unregistered lands as belonging to the state, and the parallel establishment of an exclusively Jewish Israel Land Authority to manage state lands. Most Naqab Bedouins did not register their land during the periods of Ottoman and British rule. This is due



FIGURE 10.3 Chashem Zaneh, an unrecognized Bedouin locality with the city of Beersheba in the background, August 2008

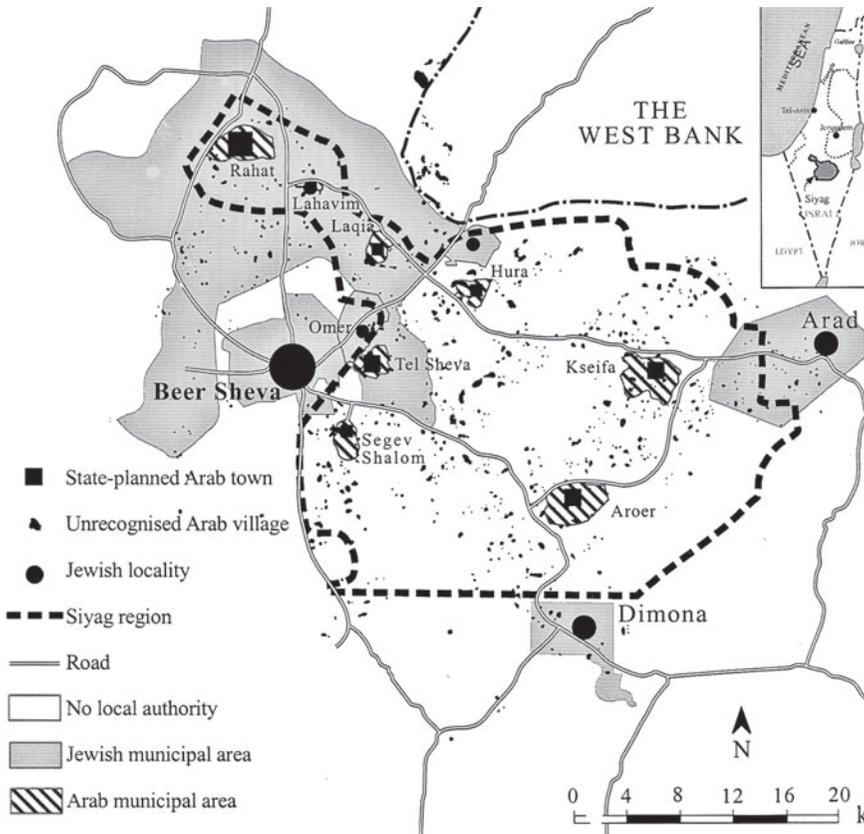


FIGURE 10.4 Human and Municipal Geography Beersheba region, 2005

Source: adapted from maps of Israel's Ministry of the Interior.

Note: most Arab localities lack recognition and municipal status.

to a variety of reasons, but chiefly due to the existence of a well-functioning customary land system and a historical view of most foreign rulers as temporary. The lack of formal registration in the pre-1948 period did not affect the manner in which Bedouins used and developed their lands (see Ben-David, 2004; Falah, 1989; Kedar, 2004; Meir, 2005).

Following Israel's independence, and the attempt to forcefully urbanize Bedouins, a bitter land conflict developed. The Israeli state denied the Bedouins indigenous land rights, and subsequently declared them legally as "trespassers" and "invaders" in their own historic localities. In an effort to force them to relocate, the state prevented the supply of most services, including roads, water, electricity, clinics, and planning. House demolition campaigns are launched on a regular basis (see abu-Saad, 2008; Meir, 2005; Swirski, 2008).

As a consequence, levels of poverty, child mortality, and crime have become one of the worst in Israel/Palestine, creating a metropolitan geography of stark ethno-class contrast with the well-served adjacent Jewish localities. The Beersheba metropolis has come to resemble many Third World cities that comprise a well-developed modern urban core, and a range of peripheral informal localities, suffering severe deprivation. It is here that the process of "creeping apartheid" and the emergence of new colonial relations are most evident.

Bedouin Arab representation in urban and regional planning affairs has ranged between non-existent and negligible. Despite being the indigenous inhabitants of the region, and constituting nearly a third of its current population, Bedouin presence in planning bodies has been meager and random. During the past decade, for example, only two Bedouins have sat on the district planning council (each in turn being one among 13 Jews in the council), and not even one Bedouin is represented on the Beersheba city council. Other relevant planning bodies such as the Israel Land Authority, Ministry of Housing, Welfare and Education have occasionally included a single Arab member, but always in a position of distinct and ineffectual minority.

The conflict has material and symbolic dimensions. A central flashpoint has revolved around the renowned and architecturally significant Beersheba mosque, which was built by the Ottomans to serve the region's population. Despite constant Arab demands, the city refuses to open it for Muslim worship. In this vein, the deputy mayor at the time, Eli Bokker claimed in 2003: "the mosque will never be reopened ... the region has dozens of mosques in Bedouin villages and towns ... why do they want to come here? Everybody must remember: Beersheba is a Jewish city, with the right to protect its urban character" (*Sheva* [local newspaper]), May 16, 2005).

Following a recent appeal by several NGOs, the Israeli high court ruled in favor of opening the mosque for "Arab cultural uses." Despite the latest ruling, however, the city is steadfast in its refusal, and has now condemned the building as too dangerous for human use. Several attempts by Arabs to stage public prayers were met with police violence followed by the fencing off of the

building. As a result, the Mosque has been lying idle for decades, and is now in an advanced state of deterioration. This urban conflict adds an explosive dimension to planning and development tensions and to the growing sense of on-going colonization by the ethnocentric Jewish state (abu-Saad, 2008).

Urban colonialism and the “new CUT”

A central point of this paper is the development of new subjectivities among excluded groups, particularly in urban colonial situations where such groups are out of the reach of hegemonic projects, yet within the economy and “ground” politics of their cities. This dynamic is linked to the need, identified above, for new critical urban theories – the call for a new, expanded CUT. In the current age, the new CUT would not simply replace, but rather expand the critical urban analysis to the multitude of connections between urban struggles and identity transformations, and to the manner in which these are embedded within the material, discursive, and political aspects of “gray spacing.” To be sure, several important works have begun to address this issue (Bayat, 2007; Mbembe and Nuttal, 2004; Roy, 2009b; Simone, 2006), and my suggestions here are aimed to add further weight to this type of work, while making explicit its engagement with the main discourses of critical urban theory.

To interpret the dynamic of oppressive “gray spacing” and identity transformation, I draw on a wide body of critical theories, with particular reference to Gramscian-inspired approaches, as well as theories of neo-colonial urban relations (Kipfer and Goonewardena, 2007; Legg, 2008; Mbembe and Nuttal, 2004). Gramscian-inspired approaches perceive the making of identities as part of a ceaseless political process. They differ from most Marxian or liberal theories which regard most collective identities as pre-political. The continuous remaking of identities through contentious politics, is attributed both to the bourgeoisie classes, which formulate the backbone of what Gramsci termed the “passive revolution,” as they daily reproduce the pillars of hegemony; and to subaltern groups, which respond to their persisting oppression by *articulating* anti- and counter-hegemonic struggles and identities.

Articulation is a key concept in Gramscian-inspired approaches, alluding to the process through which class position and cultural forms are combined in the making of collective identities, during the ongoing struggles and negotiations over power and resources. Articulation is a particularly apt trope to the study of peripheral and insurgent identities, due to the rise of these through resistance to subordination and oppression. Scholars such as Holston (1998, 2008), Laclau and Mouffe (2001), Miraftab (2009), and Roy (2009a) link this process to the emergence of insurgent and radicalizing identities.

Based on the Gramscian-inspired work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), we may conceptualize the process of radicalizing identities as oscillating between *agonism* (the articulation of difference within the leading value system) to *antagonism* (the articulation of difference outside the main value system). Radical articulation is

based on the development of collective antagonism against a hegemonic order which attempts to impose a specific set of values, interests, cultural orientations, while subordinating the subaltern to the desired order. Drawing further inspiration from thinkers such as Brenner (2006), Holston (2008), Jacobs (1998), Marcuse (2002), Mayer (2008), Roy (2009a), and Samaddar (2007), we can trace the link between oppression and antagonistic articulation, through various media of urban mobilizations. When marginalized groups become politically aware of the impregnable barriers to their equality and inclusion, and when they can marshal enough resources to act, their agonistic opposition is likely to shift to antagonistic radicalism, and the horizon of equal integration may be challenged by an agenda of autonomous disengagement from the societal mainstream (see also Laclau, 1994; Mouffe, 1995).

This process is particularly active as a response to urban colonial relations associated with the proliferation of gray spaces, as shown by recent critical writing on African and Asian cities, where such conditions pervasively develop (Mbembe and Nuttal, 2004; Miraftab, 2009; Roy, 2009a). This is also the case in the Beersheba metropolis, where – as shown above – Israel has persistently sought to Judaize and de-Arabize land and development, creating a process of urban colonialism under the monopolistic Zionist development order. Significantly, “colonial” in the current analysis does not relate necessarily to European (capital “C”) Colonialism, or to the subsequent “postcolonial” relations. Rather, I draw here on earlier scholarship on “internal colonialism” (Hechter, 1975; Zureik 1979) and on a deeper historical understanding of the term, as elaborated by the likes of Anderson and O’Dowd (1999), Agamben (2006), and Kipfer (2007). These scholars relate to colonial processes as denoting multi-faceted formations of power which facilitate appropriation and domination. A colonizing urban political economy is thus characterized by several key dimensions:

- expansion of dominant interests (spatially or otherwise);
- exploitation of marginalized groups;
- essentialization of identities;
- hierarchical and coerced segregation.

Notably, colonial relations are strangely absent from the main corpus of critical urban theories, which often take the basic condition of formally equal citizenship and political membership as a point of departure. But given the growing prevalence of colonial-type relations in a vast number of cities, and the amplification of gray spaces, it clearly appears that a “new CUT” is now needed, expanding its previous foundation to include the forces shaping the new colonial order. This is because critical theorists, whether associated with the Frankfurt School, French and Continental philosophy, neo-Gramscian scholars, or the recent Anglo neo-Marxian and neo-Weberian scholarship, have generally overlooked the centrality of colonial relations in the formation

of urban social relations. Under such settings the very notions of membership and citizenship are deeply ruptured. Rather than inclusive, they become the very tool of exclusion and denial.

Gramsci’s discussion on the “Southern Question,” which portrays a process of involuntary incorporation and exploitation of an outlying region, comes close to describing a process of internal colonialism. However, the concept of hegemony itself, with its fundamental assumption regarding the willingness and ability of dominant strata to incorporate the peripheries, has notable limitations when dealing with colonial settings, in which the working of power is premised on structural, impregnable, exclusion. This weakness also pervades through other leading critical theories, be they Frankfurt-inspired, Foucauldian, Lefebvrian, or neo-Marxian, which brilliantly, but only partially, explain the ability of upper strata to discipline, subordinate, and manage social relations “within society.”

Colonial settings are characterized by the permanent presence of groups existing outside the limits of “society,” and hence beyond the nets of imagined incorporation and control cast by hegemonic or governmentality projects. This is a structural element in most ethnocentric states (Yiftachel, 2006; Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004), as well as the growing metropolitan regions mainly, but not only, in the global South-East (Roy, 2008; Simone, 2006; Yiftachel, 2007). There, the mechanisms of co-optation and governmentality often lack the intention, will, or capacity to incorporate colonized groups.

The critical literature includes an abundance of insightful critical concepts accounting for the power of elites to assimilate, co-opt, and tame the subaltern. These include the Gramscian concept of “transformismo”; Foucauldian “discipline” and “governmentality” or neo-Marxian “neoliberalization of Empire” (Hardt and Negri, 2000; AlSayyad and Roy, 2006). Yet, these concepts fall short of explaining the development of group relations and collective subjectivities, in colonial settings, where subaltern groups are often cast as too different, too hostile or too geographically distinct, to be included within the limits of societal hegemonic projects.

A new articulation may find inspiration in the much talked about concept of the right to the city (Brenner and Elden, 2008; Harvey, 2008; Kipfer, 2007; Lefebvre, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; Yacobi, 2006). Despite its wide appeal, the notion is rather vague, noting a legitimate claim to appropriate urban space and participate in the shaping of its future. Lefebvre (1996) further argues that the right to the city entails a just claim to “centrality and difference.” Although he never developed his theory academically or practically, the concept he coined does create an opening to mobilize against urban oppression which entails of course the denial of the right to the city.

But as recognized by a group of critical scholars, much more work is needed to put “flesh” on the bones of Lefebvre’s concept, academically and – more importantly – materially and politically. Substantiation of the concept must also steer away from the common, liberalized, and mainly legal or moral notion of

“rights,” extracted out of its historical and material context. Instead, as argued elsewhere (Yiftachel, 2009), the right to the city should be buttressed by more materialized and politicized notions such as “planning citizenship,” urban sovereignty, and group’s self-determination, in order to respond to the very material deprivations and exclusions experienced in gray space, against which a rights-based approach may not suffice (Kipfer and Goonewardena, 2007; Mbembe and Nuttal, 2004; Tzfadia, 2008; Watson, 2002).

Space, identity, class, and power must therefore combine to sketch the limits of hegemony, and such limits invoke dominant powers to impose ghettoizing, often violent, forms of colonial control, rather than legitimizing types of power. The need for a new and expanded CUT begins by recognizing the limits of groundbreaking, yet bounded critical approaches which have unproblematically assumed the prior existence of a “society,” whose membership, at least in a formal sense, is not questioned sufficiently. Groundbreaking in this line was Marcuse’s work on the black ghetto (Marcuse, 1997, 2002), in which he engaged with economic, identity, and spatial regimes to provide a landmark account of the transformation of the ghetto from “classical” to an “outcast” urban space and community, later to be “softly” encroached and weakened by neoliberal gentrification. Other examples, such as Kipfer’s work on colonialism and the city (Kipfer, 2007), Watson’s critical analysis of planning theory (Watson, 2002), Roy’s reflections on planning and subjectivities in the age of neoliberalism (Roy, 2005, 2008), Robinson’s sensitive yet critical analysis of the development of Southern cities (Robinson, 2006), and Simone’s work on the new spaces of informality in African cities (Simone, 2006), illustrate clearly that such an approach is not only possible but highly worthy.

Radicalization and the Bedouins

How does the processes of articulation actually take place “on the ground”? How do indigenous Arabs change their struggle and subjectivity in the face of their long-term existence in gray space? Here, the central conceptual elements of the dynamic I described above are weaved together – the consequences of colonial relations, the new articulation of class and collective identity, and the critical role of informal spatialities, all lead to a gradual, yet conspicuous, process of radicalization (abu-Saad and Yonah, 2000; Meir, 2005; Yonah et al., 2004).

Notably, Bedouin radicalization appears more as *anti*, than *counter*-hegemonic, principally because this peripheral community has no ability to imagine challenging, let alone replacing, state hegemony. It is hence mainly radical in the sense of drawing agendas which radically departs from state goals, as well as “searching for the roots” (root = radic), as a foundation for setting new communal agendas. It is thus a “non-heroic” struggle, aimed at survival in the personal and collective sense. The Bedouins are constructing a new collective identity through the discourses and materiality of physical development. This identity is formed despite inevitable tensions and divisions, not only vis-à-vis the oppressive Israeli regime,

but also with the multitude of coterminous belongings – the tribe, the region, Israel, the Palestinians in Israel, the wider Palestinian people, and the Arab and Islamic worlds.

This complex process of articulation and radicalization is composed of dozens of practices, movements, discourses, and mobilizations. I chose to highlight three here – “sumood,” memory building, and autonomous politics. Obviously this list is not exhaustive, and can be supplemented by other important practices and initiatives in the spheres of economics, criminality, gender relations, and cultural production, to name but a few. Yet, these three practices can sketch the main dynamics of identity construction, and the ways in which it is related to place, materiality, history, and power. Let me briefly attend to each.

Sumood

Sumood is an Arabic term denoting perseverance, patience, and quiet determination. The term has come to symbolize the Palestinian attempt to mentally overcome the consequences of the 1948 Nakbah, during which large numbers of Palestinians were driven out or fled in fear of war, and have subsequently lost their lands and villages. Sumood is widely practiced by the Naqab Bedouins, who have remained on their land, refused forced urbanization, and have preserved many of their traditions.

Sumood is closely linked to the “gray spacing” phenomenon. Most unrecognized Bedouin localities existed before 1948, but the state’s denial of their land rights placed them in a legal category of “trespassers” on their own land (Amara, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2008). The disputed land status has also been used by the state as a “reason” to deny recognition of dozens of villages and towns. Hence, over the past six decades, the state’s legal and planning decisions deliberately created a process of “gray spacing,” in which all developments, even for the most mundane reasons such as family expansion, are deemed “illegal.” At the same time, there is no realistic exit option because movement to planned towns is often impossible due to chronic lack of available building blocks, but it is also threatening in terms of losing land possession and collective identity (abu-Saad, 2008).

Sumood, therefore, has been translated from a general national ideal to the art of surviving in the criminalized zone of planning illegality, and to a set of tactics for developing the villages, bit by bit, to meet basic needs such as water, electricity, mobility, education, and health. Nowhere is this strategy more evident than in the collective efforts to rebuild demolished homes. The magnitude of this phenomenon are revealing: during 2007, for example, Israel demolished some 197 homes, and by the end of 2008, nearly all of them were replaced by new structures (see <http://www.dukium.org>).

The failure of the state to convince or coerce people to leave their land, and the subsequent discrimination, criminalization, and suffering is at the heart of the process of radical articulation. During this process both deprivation and

identity have combined in the struggle to construct a new orientation. In this context, note the testimony of Atiya al-Athamin, committee head in the locality Chashem Zaneh, in a public hearing staged in June, 2008, about future plans for Beersheba:

in our rightful “*sumood*,” we have no choice but to break the law ... because the law and its plans came to this place and tried to erase it many years after we were here ... our community belongs to this place, and the place belongs to our community ... even if our houses are demolished again, we shall remain on our land ... we cannot ever accept the plan that destroys our only community.

(protocols of special committee to hear planning objections,
Southern District, 28 June 2008)

Memory building

In parallel to the practice of *sumood*, Bedouin Arabs have begun to cultivate their collective memory as a foundation of rebuilding their identity. This process followed decades of erasure of Beersheba’s and Naqab’s Arab past, expressed in both popular and state discourses, as well as a myriad of physical practices. Most conspicuously, the names of all 45 Bedouin Arab villages around Beersheba (many of which existed before the state of Israel) have never been included in any official document or map, making this population invisible. In addition, Arab names of the topography and historical sites have almost entirely been renamed in Hebrew (Benvenisti, 2001). Beersheba’s Arab city is widely called “Turkish” by the Israeli public, as are all City and District documents. Various histories written for the city tend to minimize its Arab past by emphasizing the “Ottoman” or “British” regime (while ignoring the region’s population), and generally leap over the 1948 war and the eviction of the city’s Arab population (for typical examples see Cohen, 2006; Gradus, 1993, 2008). In planning terms, the city offers no Arab cultural or communal facilities, and no mosques, as highlighted earlier, despite being the center for the entire regional Bedouin population, and the direct place of residence for around 4,000 Arabs (abu-Rass, 2006).

The official erasure, as well as a tide of Palestinian mobilization to reconstruct national memory during the last decade, spurred Bedouin cultural agents to begin to cultivate their own historical memories. These appear in three main forms: traditional, Islamic, and Palestinian. It is not easy to gauge the relative strength of these coterminous practices, but they are all very present in Bedouin discourse, though not mutually exclusive. It appears as if memory building in general has increased markedly during the last decade, and that the Islamic and most recently Palestinian varieties are gaining popularity, thereby creating the foundation for a new subjectivity which gradually draws away from any normative attachment to Israeli citizenship, let alone emotional solidarity with the Zionist state.

Traditional agents attempt to cultivate the Bedouin tribal and “desert” culture. They have commonly worked in co-operation with state or regional authorities in the establishment of museums, tourist centers, and some educational facilities. The state sees this as an outlet for the minority which may be compatible with the distorted and Orientalist perceptions of most Jews and Westerners who view the Bedouins as exotic and nomadic people. This also supports popular “truths” about Bedouin modern tribalism and the putative rule of “tribal elders,” which further splits and weakens the Bedouin community, and enhances traditional, often chauvinist, and reactionary elements (abu-Rabia-Queder, 2008). Nevertheless, even with this partially co-opted memory generation, Bedouins have been developing an alternative consciousness, identity, and subjectivity that is gradually moving away from the notion of equal and assimilated Israeli identity.

The Islamization of memory and identity has been popular among local political leaders and their followers, and facilitated by the well-established Islamic Movement in the Naqab. Local leaders have sought a path to mark their distinction from the Zionist state, without openly building a Palestinian counter identity. They hope to increase their popularity while avoiding criminalization by the often racist and anti-Palestinian authorities. This has been a powerful strategy, during which new discursive and institutional links have been built between Bedouin communities and the newly-constructed Islamic past. Its expressions are everywhere – in textbooks, street names, the rapid development of mosques around the Naqab, and the increasingly religious dress and family codes, including pervasive polygamy. Subsequently, in recent years the mosque has become an important focus for shaping Bedouin identity and a sense of historical Islamist consciousness (Ben-Yisrael and Meir, 2008; Luz, 2008).

Most politically controversial is the Palestinization of Bedouin memory. Yet, it is historically and geographically natural since the Naqab Bedouins have been present on the land from the early twentieth century as part of the budding Palestinian nation. The lines distinguishing Bedouins from other Palestinian ethnicities are blurred and constantly shifting (Parizot, 2004, 2005). Here, the most notable memory practice is the growing use of the Palestinian Nakbah. The Bedouins have “discovered” the Nakbah in recent years, devoting growing space in public speeches, media discourse, and local commemorations to the traumatic past (abu-Rabia, 2008; abu-Mahfouz, 2008). As noted from the outset, for many Bedouins the Nakbah is not just a distant memory, but a living reality, given the state’s persisting policies of dispossession and forced removal.

The Nakbah increasingly appears as a repeated trope on a variety of issues, such as the plight of the distressed villages; the status of the “internally displaced” (Kedar, 2004); the loss of lands and houses; and the prevention of Bedouins returning to their original pre-1948 locations. With the Nakbah also appears the *‘awdah* (the return) which signals for most Palestinians the hope of historical correction. In this context, note the following words from ‘Ali abu-Shcheita, committee head of the village of al-Qrein, during the first ever public



FIGURE 10.5 Day of Nakbah commemoration, al-Krein, May 2008

Nakbah commemoration held in the Naqab in May 2008. The ceremony was held adjacent to the ruins of a recently demolished home, and featured a march of 45 children carrying large signs of all the 45 unrecognized communities around which the Bedouin struggle is waged (see Figure 10.5). The event was opened by abu-Shcheita:

As you can see, we are standing near one of our homes, demolished by the authorities. Thirteen more homes, including our mosque, are under demolition orders. We never moved from here, but were suddenly declared “illegal” six years ago. For us, the Nakbah is well and truly alive ... but look at these kids and the way they return our villages to the public eye, to the plans and maps ... this is the beginning of our *‘awdah* (return).

Autonomous politics

The third aspect of changing Bedouin subjectivity appears clearly in the realm of political organization and mobilization. A conspicuous trend is the development of autonomous institutions which develop their agendas in close connection with the communities. Several active NGOs, as well as organizations related to political parties and Arab local governments have been established during recent times. Most notable was the 1997 establishment of the Regional Council of the Unrecognized Villages (RCUV). The Council was formed as a response to constant claims by the authorities, typified by the previous powerful head of the ministry of the Interior Southern District, Shalom Danino, who noted in 1994: “it is well known that the Bedouins have no leadership ... one can never tell what they want ... they speak in 100 voices” (*Sheva*, May 24, 1994, p. 7).

This common Israeli approach simultaneously reflects and recreates the age-old colonial practice of “divide and rule.” Accordingly, Israel has attempted to deepen tribal, class, and locational divisions among the Bedouins, and then exploited these divisions to weaken opposition to its control policies. The establishment of the RCUV attempted to combat this practice, by setting a representative body not only to represent the Bedouins vis-à-vis the authorities, but to initiate a democratic process for self-managing Bedouin space. The council consists of elected representatives of the 45 unrecognized villages, who in turn elect the council Head. This was reduced to 36 members, as nine localities have been recognized since 1997. So far three elections have been held (1997, 2001, 2005), each producing a different leadership, ensuing a relatively (though not entirely) smooth transition of power.

Importantly, the RCUV carves out an autonomous zone not only against what they perceive as a hostile state, but also vis-à-vis “Northern” Arab and Palestinian influences which have tended to dominate, and at times appropriate, the Bedouin’s campaign. This reflects long-standing tensions among Palestinian communities, but also a sense among southern Arabs that they exist under double colonization, Jewish and “Northern.” The RCUV general manager, ‘Atwa abu-Freich, recently claimed, “the RCUV is the authentic voice of southern Arabs, and it is theirs only” (Rebuilding Ceremony, Wadi al-Na’am, January 2, 2009).

The reception of RCUV by Israeli authorities was initially hostile. The state refused to recognize the representative council, and instead strengthened a bureaucratic body known as “The Managing Authority for the Advancement of the Bedouins” (MAAB) – an Orwellian term for a body renowned for its persistent attempts to remove and resettle Bedouins. In 2003, for example, the government launched the Sharon-Livni plan for “finally managing the Bedouin problem,” in which it trebled the budgets for “law enforcement” through the MAAB, but offered no new hope for recognition of villages or towns. Neither did it allow the Bedouin communities participation in the determination of their own future. Later new state projects, such as the “Daroma” (southward) plan, the Metropolitan Plan for Beersheba and the Goldberg Commission Report,⁴ all stressed law enforcement, with only scant official attention to the claims articulated by the RCUV.

Yet, despite official non-recognition of the RCUV, the government began to include the new leadership in unofficial consultations, and even began to compromise on the long-standing hard-line denial of village recognition. This followed a persistent campaign by the RCUV (aided by other key organizations, such as the Association for Human Rights, Coexistence Forum, Adalah, and Doctors for Human Rights) for recognition of villages and towns, and for the establishment of Arab local governments in the Bedouin region. In 1999 the RCUV published a “blueprint” document demanding the recognition of the 45 villages and towns it had identified and named in their original Arabic names.

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Over the years, the RCUV published maps and reports about the 45 communities seeking recognition, and showed that all of them were viable, each accommodating at least 500 people – well beyond the minimal limit of 40 families determined by the Israeli planning authorities for recognizing (Jewish) localities. The RCUV plan was widely dismissed as “unprofessional,” “wild,” and “ridiculous,”⁵ but the public pressure bore some results: by 2008, the government recognized nine of the 45 localities, and began to draw plans for legalizing homes and providing some infrastructure. The government also established a new regional local government named “abu-Bassma” to provide municipal services for the newly recognized villages. Although the new municipality is still headed and managed by Jews, it forms a possible foundation for a future Arab local government in the area.

The place of the RCUV as leading the indigenous struggle for recognition, and the intense internal and external conflicts that surround its existence, naturally warrant a far more detailed analysis. The main point here is to demonstrate the rise of informal and autonomous leadership “from below” against an ethocratic hard-line policy of denial and forced removal. The RCUV involvement in the recognition struggle has given the dispersed communities a political and professional framework to continue their *sumood*. It has thereby gradually institutionalized their long-term future in gray space, while setting the foundations for incipient forms of indigenous sovereignty.

Conclusion

In closing, let me return to the site of the mosque rebuilding in Wadi al-Na’am quoting the address made by ‘Atwa abu-Freich of the RCUV.

We know this is a long haul, and that this new mosque will probably be followed by further demolitions and legal penalties ... but we also know that the attempts to remove us will never fully succeed, like the failure in burning and resisting Gaza. This is because we are sons of this soil, and we know how to survive on it, and we will ... the state calls us “criminals” just for living in our localities ... this does not matter, as we’ll always remain the people of this place, not for the state, but for our own communal future.

Abu Freich’s words echo the colonial settings, the enduring deprivation typical to gray space, the subsequent rise of antagonism, and the radicalization now evident among the suffering peripheries. All the above, as argued throughout this chapter, must be incorporated into new versions of CUT, to credibly account for urban struggles, their materialities, politics, and articulations, and for the remaking of urban societies in the current neo-colonial age.

Notes

- 1 The term “Bedouin” is used here with caution, mainly because the local population widely uses it. It must be remembered from the outset that this term denotes a sub-identity within the larger Palestinian and Arab nations, and that the boundaries between those entities are fluid and porous.
- 2 Since 2005 the author has worked as a planner for the (unrecognized) Regional Council of the Unrecognized Bedouin Villages (RCUV).
- 3 While most readers would associate Israel/Palestine with exceptionalism, ceaseless conflict, and political drama, I argue that these are the surface expressions of the pervasive forces of ethno-nationalism, capitalism, governmentality, old and new colonialism with its ensuing class, identity, and gender politics; Israel/Palestine is constructed in the world media and politics as an exception, although the above forces are evident in most non-Western cities and states, quite often with similar ferocity, and increasingly so in the Western world.
- 4 “Daroma” is a development plan adopted by the Israeli government in 2005 to hasten investment in the Negev/Naqab region; the District and Metropolitan plans are statutory land use documents, which steer future development into planned zones; the Goldberg Commission was appointed by the government to submit a plan to “resolve the Bedouin planning, settlement and land problems”; its report was tabled at the Government meeting in January 2009, and a new committee was set-up to draw a plan for its implementation.
- 5 Protocols of District Planning Committee, where the plan was debated during 2000 and 2001 reveal a range of derogatory comments, disqualifying the plan on professional, legal, and substantive grounds. Apart from occasional RCUV intervention, no even one of the 14 Committee members supported the plan, fully, or partially.

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