

Changing Landscape

By Khaldun Bshara



Three factors have been contributing to the dramatic changes in the Palestinian landscape. The first factor is related to the modes of production and relations of production. The second has to do with the space of dwelling and its relation to the first. The third is the public space and the notion of the commons and its relation to the first two. These three interrelated factors have shaped the Palestinian landscape as we live in it today.

Reading into the modes of production and relations of production in Palestine one notes that Palestinian society has been moving quickly from being agrarian self-sufficient communities to being absorbed



Ramallah, old city centre, early 1960's.

into the market economy that relies mainly on imported merchandise. This move was not made abruptly; rather, in a long process that started near the end of the Ottoman rule with the emergence of the *petit-bourgeoisie* class (semi-autonomous peasantry and small-scale merchants) born from its preceding feudal system (of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Palestine). Parallel to this phenomenon, and mainly under the British Mandate rule (1917–1948), the Palestinian peasants went through a process of skilling (more accurately de-skilling) and integration in the average wage-labor market (*avodat aravit* = Arab labor), and at very best, in the emerging government jobs. One reason for such a move was the incapacity of agricultural land to sustain the growing young population. It is noteworthy that agricultural production did not drop, but the surplus of manpower in the extended family was used outside the household and its undertakings. The deployment of surplus manpower outside the household found its way outside the village – the self-sustained territorial unit. As a result, the kinship livelihood system that had long depended on the close network of relatives as a social

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capital deployed to achieve the welfare of the group was at risk/compromise. On one hand, social mobility was loosened to allow for moving up in the society without depending on the familial ties and one's family location within the social structure. On the other hand, this loosening of the familial ties liberated young generations from the patriarchal social structures/obligations that held the members of the extended family bound to the social norms and behavior. Spatially, these changes in modes of production (from self-employed, peasant, or otherwise in the village) and the relations of production (from household unit of production to the master in the factory or the boss in a bureaucratic web, off-the-village, in the urban center) were manifested in the growing townscapes and urban centers at the expense of rural populations/landscapes. One notes that villages that were not urbanized constituted the periphery to the villages/towns,



Old photo of match factory, Nablus.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

which were getting on board with the urbanization processes. I am using the term urbanization to refer to the growing size and the population of inhabited centers, coupled with commercial, industrial, and administrative activities that serve territories beyond the village/townscape itself. In Palestine, no village comes to mind that grew into an urban center without having its production (including culture, education, leisure, health, etc.) and administration capabilities reach beyond the territory of the village itself. Here and only here, I am ignoring the civic and cultural offerings of the setting, which constitute the urban, because I will be returning to them later.

Once the modes of production and the relations of production changed, the dwelling structure changed. The courtyard house, that is both the spatial manifestation of kinship relations and

the social representation of power, class, and gender division, was no longer suitable for modern modes of production and its relations. This move implied the transformation of the Palestinian communities from extended-family structures to nuclear family systems in which the close family – the husband, the wife, and their offspring – lives independently, away from the extended family. Spatially, this was manifested in the movement from the historic centers towards newly built neighborhoods and modern buildings. In Mandate Palestine and later on during the Jordanian rule era, one could see on one hand the rabid urbanization of some small villages into towns (good examples are Ramallah, Al-Bireh, Birzeit, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour) and on the other hand one could sense the urban sprawl of towns towards its rural surroundings (good examples

are Jerusalem during late Ottoman era to the Jordanian rule, and Jaffa during late Ottoman era and the British Mandate). This urbanization would not have happened had the traditional dwelling, the representation of the social and economic unit, persisted. Of course, we are not to neglect the geopolitical circumstances of colonial-era Palestine as well as the 1948 catastrophe that encouraged, or to be more precise accelerated, the urbanization of Palestine, a process that can be related to the post-reforms of the late Ottoman era, as Salim Tamari's book *Mountains against the Sea* thoroughly investigated.

Ironically, the urbanization did not bring about a renewed city structure or a renewed commitment to the notion of the civic and the common, which brings us to the third and most important change in the Palestine landscape: the diminishing of the public space as a representation of the civic life and democratic coexistence of classes, gender, or what have you. In a way, public space, which is also a representation of the social, has been legally and politically altered to represent the state and state power rather than the public sphere that speaks against hegemony in a multitude of ways (civic and religious ceremonies, political rallies, jokes, and gazing at the public space). Although one could see a vibrant civic public space by the end of the Ottoman rule (of course interrupted by the state powers and towers: the architecture of government buildings such as the governor headquarters, prisons, clock towers, and hospitals), this same public space in the periods that follow had become the par-excellence space of control, scrutiny, and torture. This can be seen in the crackdown on the political rallies and demonstrations against the regimes in control, as well as the staged hanging of rebels in public. This repressive aspect of landscape is the one that was played out over and over by the end of nineteenth century, and I will risk suggesting, until our days, without major changes if we, for the sake of the argument, ignore the social media as a new mode of communication in the public sphere and as a virtual landscape, the proliferation of which could be indicative/representative of the repressive forces and their success in controlling the real/material space.

While one may understand the first two radical transformations of the Palestine landscape as a result of the first two factors that may sound like an/the inevitable social and spatial representation of modernity, the third transformation that hit the public space and the commons is not merely a representation of the former two. As a matter of fact, the changing mode of production, its relations and their relation to dwelling space, is frequently encountered in newly urbanized areas. *In short, the human individual has become responsible for*



Ramallah City. Photo courtesy of Riwaq archives.

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The third factor is by and large the greatest transformation in the negative sense because it is not only a false representation of the first two (which ought to imply the increase of the civic), it is also a brutal representation of power, the par-excellence representation of the despotic.

If one asks me what has changed in the Palestine landscape, I would say that it is not the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns during the 1948 catastrophe, nor is it the hundreds of Jewish settlements and plantations constructed over the wreck of wildlife and Palestinian diverse flora and fauna covers, nor is it the hundreds of kilometers of bypass roads that cut

through fragile natural landscapes, nor is it the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of olive trees to construct the miserable and *miserabl-ing* Wall, nor is it the use of finite water resources for finite settler's pleasures, nor is it the loss of heritage in Palestine to build high-rise dwellings or commercial centers, nor is it the abandoning of orchards and farms... Rather, it is the absence of a public space that once allowed (or was about to allow) people to negotiate, sometimes peacefully and sometimes violently, their present and future. I may only be longing/searching for an inclusive, tolerant, democratic, and secular theater, café, sidewalk, or plaza, or a decent prison, hospital, or playground that my father, God bless his soul, once told me about.

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