Places vs. Spaces for Palestinians and Jews

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During the height of the Algerian revolution against French rule, Albert Camus, the celebrated writer, philosopher, humanist, and tenacious foe of fascism, was asked why he did not forcefully condemn the atrocities committed by OAS ultras and French military torturers against Algerian Muslims. Camus was a *pied noir*—born and raised among the European settler community in Algeria. "I love justice," he answered, "but I love my mother more."

Camus's response shocked his admirers on the left, who felt their hero had failed them. Politically their disappointment is understandable, but Camus was making a profoundly important point. There is a difference in kind between attachments to principles, images, doctrines, or large, and necessarily abstract, groups—however passionate—and attachments to particular things or particular people.

If I lose my mother, the pain of that loss is not assuaged by the availability of another woman of her approximate age. The attachment that has been broken is not substitutable. It was an attachment, not to "motherliness," but to a particular person who was my mother. On the other hand, the pain of injustice "there and then" can be lessened by justice "here and now" because the abstract attachment to the principle of equity entails a wide set of equivalent attachments spread over time and space. Camus did not so much love his mother more than justice, as much as he stood in relation to the two in fundamentally different ways.

Deep understanding of the dynamics, polemics, and frustration of the prolonged conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine can begin where it seldom does—with this same distinction between abstract and particular attachments.

In his seminal work, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner showed most effectively how the age of large agrarian literate empires—think the Roman, Mughal, Chinese, Persian, Austro-Hungarian, Tsarist, and Ottoman empires—gave way to a historically strange world of monarchical and then largely national states. Until the early modern era, the vast majority of human beings lived and died within the domains of these empires, even as the vast majority of that vast majority—peasants in villages or isolated valleys and inhabitants of small hamlets or towns—lived separated by great geographical, social, and cultural distances from ornate and completely alien imperial centers. Ordinary people knew nothing of imperial politics, spoke only local unwritten vernaculars, and loved, or hated, only the scores or hundreds of human beings inhabiting the same particular place that was their world.

The particularity of a peasant's attachments to places in his world—to the gnarled oak tree, the ancestral burial ground, the cave where haunted whistling sounds could be heard in the winter, the mountain whose silhouette shadowed all below it, and the stream with familiar tendencies to flood at particular times—was the foundation of the amazing stability of these enormous, hierarchical, and supremely exploitative political systems. It was this vast mosaic of particularities that enabled the imperial center to implement systematic "divide and rule" strategies leveraging the connections they had to regional strongmen, and through them local chiefs, priests, and elders. The simple folk obeyed those with whom they had direct contact; who were familiar in their particular world. None felt themselves linked to wider, non-encountered, orders, classes, "nations," or territories. None "imagined" larger political communities. None honored a "map image" of a territorial space attached to hundreds of thousands or millions of other human beings to whom they could feel a constructed kindredness. None experienced, to use the hoary phrase of Rupert Emerson, a "terminal community" of people for which they were willing to sacrifice their lives larger than the small group of people they knew personally.

In short, for nationalism and national states to exist, people had to learn to identify abstractly and to take those abstract attachments—to groups of people they did not know and spaces they did not visit—so seriously that they would be willing to sacrifice for them, as the saying goes, their "lives, their fortune, and their sacred honor." Gellner saw this as an immensely difficult task, but one absolutely crucial if the potential for technological advance, industrialization, and the intricate division of labor required by industrial society could be realized. States with borders large enough to encompass sufficiently large markets for the regularized circulation of labor, capital, and commerce, meant that single languages had to supplement if not replace local vernaculars. That required state schools for imparting simple discipline and simple reading and arithmetic skills. This immensely expensive mass educational apparatus, along with the rest of the public infrastructure of an industrial state and society, had to be paid for and protected by armies of soldiers and taxpayers ready to comply with state directives because they identified with the "nation" that state claimed to represent.

For masses in both Europe and the third world, the disorienting processes of "social mobilization" that replaced what Gellner calls "agrarian" with "industrial" was a long, jagged, and painful process. Jews, and in particular European Jews, also experienced these processes, including the wars associated with them, as destructive of an old medieval order that had both sheltered and oppressed them for centuries. But in one particular respect, Jews, regardless of the strength of their attachment to traditional rabbinic authority, were more prepared for this "modern" world of abstract political loyalties than were non-Jews. Their place in Christian society was one of alienation and exclusion. As both Marc Chagall and early Zionists pictured the situation, Jews were *luftmenschen*, floating in the world, unattached to gentile institutions or the fundamentally foreign places over which they hovered. The Jewish strategy of constant migration—moving from erstwhile refuge to possible shelter—was directly related to this sociological and psychological condition. All this meant Jews did not experience as intensely an attachment to specific places that ordinary folk around them naturally felt. More than that, their own cultural celebration of a not-actually-known-or-remembered land—the Land of Israel—gave them centuries of practice in the cultivation of an abstract attachment, not to a "place" of irreplaceable individual meaning, but to a "space" of collective, abstract, empathic focus.

Zionism, as a nationalist movement seeking to mobilize a dispersed population and move it to a land inhabited and controlled by others, faced more challenges than most.

But a typical problem for national movements of self-determination that it did not face was overcoming the highly parochial attachments traditional peasant and village society bred deeply into its laboring masses. Although huge tasks of assimilation faced a society determined to absorb Jews from very different countries and classes, and speaking different languages, Zionism faced one unique problem. It needed to make the new country, so different, so alien, so unknown for most of its Jewish inhabitants, feel familiar. This meant great emphasis on mapping the terrain of the "Land of Israel," marking and hiking trails, and exploring as much as possible about its springs, mountains, caves, small rivers, wadis, flora and fauna, and changing thousands of place names to invented Hebrew designations. All this activity can be understood as a strong effort to establish some sense of "place" to complement the ideological attachment to the emergently defined "space" of the country.

How different was the challenge facing Arabs in Palestine seeking to rouse their countrymen as members of the "Palestinian nation" to defend, not the villages and locales that were the intimate framework of their lives, but a "space" called Palestine carved out of the Levant by the outcome of battles between European and Ottoman imperialists. This was a more typical assignment for a nationalist movement; one that in Europe and elsewhere took generations if not centuries to accomplish. As Eugen Weber as shown, in *Peasants into Frenchmen*, "France" was still a congeries of separate provinces ruled from a quasi-colonialist Parisian center until the early twentieth century. When the *Nakba* destroyed the settled life of the 950,000 or so Arabs living in what became Israel in 1948, hundreds of thousands of refugees huddled in forests, fields, and makeshift camps. Whether in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, or Jordan, they did not yearn to return to the "space" of Palestine, but to the "place" of their village, their farm, their fields, and their homes. The keys they treasured were to the doors of their actual houses, not talismans of a space promised and celebrated but unremembered. Unlike Zionist immigrants, these refugees needed no maps of where they lived or how to get there. Indeed one reason why tens of thousands of refugees were able to surreptitiously return and remain in Israel is because they knew the back roads and trails so well. Maps are for unfamiliar spaces, not for homey places.

Although the "two state solution" may well never be achieved, its emergence as a plausible target for a negotiated settlement entailed a difficult struggle among Palestinian nationalists to transfer attachment to place to attachment to space. This required considerable finesse, along with a good deal of deception and disingenuousness. On the one hand, Palestinian leaders evoked the heartbreaking stories of refugees expelled from their homes and the homes of their ancestors, and then refused permission to return. On the other hand, those committed to the "Palestinian state" option set about transforming the Palestinian pathos into a nationalist ethos focused on "Palestine" as a space, with indistinct borders encompassing parts but not all of the country. That meant using the phrase "right of return" ambiguously, to mean—perhaps, but only perhaps, and only for a very tiny number—return to specific homes, fields, and villages, and yet also to mean return from spaces that were not in Palestine to locations in a "space" by that name that would not be those "places" of actual, original, attachment.

This is a difficult political task for any nationalist movement, and particularly difficult for the Palestinians, where the spaces involved are so small, and therefore where the distances to specific yearned-for places, so near and yet so inaccessible, are so tantalizingly short. From the Israeli point of view, the continued evocation by Palestinians of the "places" they were forced to abandon signals either their adversary's inability to be satisfied with a Palestinian "space" as a basis for resolving the conflict, or their dishonesty in pretending to accept partition when really expecting that to be a stage toward eventual liberation of all the "places" in historical Palestine.

Indeed we may use this analysis to gain a fine appreciation of one of the most difficult points in the seemingly endless and almost certainly fruitless negotiations that have been going on between Israelis and Palestinians. When Palestinians accepted the "two state solution" they did not explicitly accept it as corresponding to two peoples—Jewish and Palestinian. In their eyes that would have been equivalent to recognizing the right of the Zionist movement to have dispossessed Palestinians from their homes and their country. Instead, a Palestinian Arab state would live, side by side, with an Israeli state, containing an "Israeli people" comprised of both Jewish and Arab citizens. This position has been softened to the extent that Palestinians have offered Jewish settlers in the West Bank the opportunity to remain as law-abiding citizens of Palestine.

Meanwhile, however, Israel has escalated its demand. Originally no Israeli leader asked for or ever expected to receive Palestinian or Arab recognition of Israel's "right to exist as a Jewish state." But beginning with Ariel Sharon's premiership, this became a constantly repeated demand. It is now often identified by top Israeli officials as the single most important requirement before Israel can make its own "painful compromises" for peace. In their categorical refusal to accept this formulation, Palestinian leaders and negotiators have objected to the opening that acceptance might give to Israeli policies of persecution or even expulsion of Arab citizens, and to the injustice and emotional impossibility of Palestinians, as victims, granting approval to their own historical victimization. But another obstacle to Palestinian acceptance of this demand also looms large. To name Israel as a "space" that is "Jewish," would categorically foreclose the dream of re-establishing Palestinian refugee attachments to places in that space by confining Palestinian political ambitions, now and forever, to the "space" of the pieces of whatever mini-state of Palestine emerges from the agreement.

Because of the different trajectories that brought both national movements into collision, most Israelis cannot imagine the pain of giving up attachments to places as part of building an attachment to a space. At the same time, most Palestinians can only understand the Israeli demand that such attachments be explicitly abandoned as reflecting the brutality and inhumanity they have come to associate with Jewish power in the space of Palestine.

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