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Reimagining the Common: Rethinking the Refugee Experience

“Universalism” and “humanism” are monolithic terms that do not lend themselves to easy definitions. We propose to think of universalism essentially as the perpetual search and redefinition of what we, as human beings, have in common. So the question is: what is the common?¹

The concept of “the common” is different from that of “the public.” The state apparatus mediates the existence of the public, whereas the common exists beyond state institutions. The public is a space that is given to people by structures of power, whereas the common is a space created by the interaction among people. Public space can exist without people. Common space only exists if people are constantly producing it.

In Western political tradition, the public has always been associated with collective interest. However, both in colonial and postcolonial contexts, the public has often been used to expropriate the common. In Palestine, prior to its colonization, there were several categories of communal land. These lands not only existed as legal categories of communal ownership but also as forms of communal life. The Israeli appropriation of these territories led to the transformation of communal land into public state territory for the use of the Israeli Jewish population, excluding Palestinians entirely. This expropriation is evident through the establishment of Israeli settlements, the majority of which are built on what was once communally used Palestinian land. Consequently, colonization brought on not only material expropriation, but also imposed changes to the forms of communal land use, relegating Palestinian land to private use.

Reactivating the Common

The Arab revolts since December 2010 have shown various ways in which the common can be reclaimed and reactivated. In the Arab world, what is defined as public has always been regarded with suspicion; the public often has been associated with repressive political regimes and colonial history. Rarely have people felt fully represented by the public, never really owning it.

During the weeks following the Egyptian revolt that began on January 25, 2011, we observed a public plaza transform into a common space owned by the people themselves. Tahrir Square became the political space where new claims were invented, represented, and translated into political actions. The day after President Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down, protesters began cleaning the space, an act that highlighted the end of a regime and the beginning of a possible new era for the Egyptian people. The space was no longer perceived as public—the space of authority—but rather as the space of the people. Owning the space implied owning the future of the country. Cleaning the square was a gesture of reappropriation, ownership, and care. In fact, this apparently banal act demonstrated a sense of reconstituted community and collective ownership.

¹ We interpret the common as “ordinary” and “universal.” Rather than the term “commons,” more familiar in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, we prefer to use “common” in order to highlight its Latin origin *communi*, the Old French *comun* and the Italian *comune*. The common, as we intend it, applies not only to communal lands but also to a “form of government” (the Italian *comune* is also “municipality”). Reflections on the notion of the common contained in this article are an extension of those begun within Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency’s project “Return to the Common,” <http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/planning-the-common-introduction/>.

The power of people gathering and transforming public space into a constituent common space manifested itself in other places throughout the Arab world. In February 2011, people began assembling around the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, Bahrain, converting the anonymous infrastructure into a political arena. As in Cairo, this roundabout became a constituent assembly capable of undermining the political regime. Consequently, on March 18, local authorities brutally intervened, completely destroying the roundabout. This demonstrates the importance of a physical space where people can assemble and assert their rights—without it, the virtual space of social networks is ineffective.

The ambiguous nature of contemporary public space can also be observed in Western society. In Western political tradition, public spaces are sites where citizens' rights are inscribed and collective social values represented. However, today's public spaces are being occupied by institutional powers obsessed with security, surveillance, and control. During the summer of 2011, a group of protesters tried in vain to assemble and camp out in several public spaces of New York. Paradoxically, their attempts were limited by regulations and curfews imposed on these spaces. Only on September 17 were the Occupy Wall Street protesters able to set up camp in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned public space. This crack between the public and private perhaps represents the very nature of a shared collective space, what we call a common space.

Refugee camps are definitely sites where the categories of public and private enter a zone of indistinction, where neither public nor private property exists. After sixty-four years, Palestinians refugees still cannot legally own their houses (though in practice they do) and the camp is a space carved from the territorial state. Though states and nongovernmental organizations are actively participating in conceiving and managing camps, we are still struggling to fully comprehend how the camp form has contaminated and radically transformed the very idea of the city as an organized and functional political community. Thus, the birth of the camp allows for the calling into question of the very idea of the city as a democratic space. If the political representation of a citizen is to be found in the public space, in the camp we find its inverse: here, a citizen is stripped of his or her political rights. In this sense, the camp represents a sort of anti-city, but also a potential counter-laboratory in which a new form of urbanism is emerging beyond the idea of the nation-state. In order to understand how the camp as a common space may be able to articulate common rights, we need to look back at its origins and formation. We would like to begin with a historical anecdote.

Once upon a time—or more specifically, sixty years ago—a group of Palestinian refugees faced a brutal winter in Lebanon. The frigid temperatures provided them with a reasonable excuse to replace their tent with a room. After erecting the four walls, they realized they were constructing something solid: they were building a base of sorts. Instantly, the roof gained importance; everyone had an opinion on whether or not it should be built and how. The refugees, assembled together, recognized that the process of building the roof was the beginning of the normalization of camp life and would lead to the incorporation of the camp into the neighboring city. Ultimately, by deciding not to build the roof, these refugees made a decision that would become final for Palestinians over the next half century.

The roof debate appears to represent the Palestinian adoption of a universal image, a preconceived notion that was handed over to them after the Nakba, the 1948 Palestinian exodus. It was the world that decided what this image of a “refugee” would be: he or she must look and act poor while fulfilling other imposed expectations related to the term. Palestinians had no choice but to accept this blanket representation. They were forced to adopt it and, in some ways, even embrace it. The need to maintain an image placed certain restrictions on their lives: losing

this image would mean losing their identity and, with it, their universe. A change in their means of representation would signify the loss of their refugee status and possibly the loss of their right to return home.

The 1950s marked the first decade of the Palestinian refugee existence and the first decade of a strategy that has persisted to this day. Official discourse hinges on impermanence; no improvements in the refugee camps or in self-representation are acceptable as these changes “weaken” the rote refugee image. The persistence of this strategy, along with its problematic elements, is evident in an exchange that occurred on a recent afternoon in the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem. Abu Khalid al-Lahham, one of the leading members of the Palestinian Council, dropped in on a ladies’ coffee gathering at the camp:

“Abu Khalid, when will we return home?” one of the women asked as they chatted.
“We don’t have enough transportation to take you all home at once, do we?” he joked.
“But we have already bought the bus of return, which could take us all home,” the woman persisted.

Quietly, with a mournful look on her face, another woman asked, “Abu Khalid, can we take Dheisheh with us to our villages?”

This brief conversation exemplifies the problem of sixty years of exile: the challenge of maintaining a “universal refugee” image is intensified by the idea that people can simply pick up and move back to their villages.

Those of us who are or who work with Palestinian refugees use the phrase “right of return” fifty times a day. And yet, despite the rhetorical repetition, we still do not have a clear image of this repatriation. The right of return is often imagined as a kind of Wild West scenario, with everyone galloping off on his or her horse to reclaim land. This image is problematic because it assumes that all Palestinians would be able to return, en masse, on a specific day.

One could argue that the Palestinian image of the right of return is now an adaption of the Zionist concept of repatriation. By imagining the return in this way, and only through numbers and statistics, we effectively ensure its impossibility. Is it feasible to imagine four million Palestinians returning home all at the same time?

Thus, after sixty years, the colonizer’s vision of Palestinian rights has been accepted. In so doing, the impossible image of return has become a gift of sorts for the colonizer. What better gift can a refugee offer other than the reinforcement of this imposed limited image?

There are some spaces, however, that do not fall into these limited conceptions of refugees and the common. Dheisheh shatters the universalized image of a refugee camp: forty NGOs are actively involved in addressing the needs of the refugees. Al-Finiq Center reflects the unique character of the camp: in recent history this site has housed a British colonial prison, a Jordanian prison, and an Israeli civil administration office. The Palestinian Authority planned to imitate its colonizers and began building a prison on the hilltop. In response, Palestinians occupied the space, demanding a say in the use of the land. After a protracted standoff, the Palestinian Authority surrendered the site that became al-Finiq Center, a multifunctional institution that refutes the traditional refugee image. With a large conference hall, a library, offices, a women’s gym, and a guesthouse, the center is rebuilding collective self-esteem through the creation of a new self-image.

Prior to its construction, discussions on building the center were riddled with accusations: by improving the camp, some said, the refugees jeopardized their right of return. Responses to such accusations have always been defensive: Yes, we want our children to play sports here, but we would happily leave al-Finiq and return home. Although they had not been asked about the right of return, people automatically resorted to refugee rhetoric. This cognitive association reveals the effects of sixty years of a monolithic conceptualization of the refugee experience.

The construction of al-Finiq Center signifies the construction of a new kind of common: it creates a new common language among refugees, a new image. The right to a healthy life belongs, as many Palestinians say, to the healthy refugee. In other words, regular access to bread and necessities would ensure time and energy to fight for the right of return.

By creating a new language, Dheisheh's refugees are creating a new image through their actions. Through the process of colonization, the first loss for the colonized is the ability to imagine one's own future. The negative effect is immediate: one's future lies in someone else's hands. Thus, these refugees are reversing the effects of colonization by taking their futures in their own hands and reshaping them to create a new common.

Recently in Dheisheh, during a session of Campus in Camps,² the participants discussed how their actions could challenge an image that has persisted so strongly in the camp for over sixty years.

Mohammed: I would like to engage with people in the camp, interviewing them in order to mobilize people and create a community ready to take its destiny in its own hands and not wait for the Palestinian Authority to negotiate its rights. It has become clear to us that we are alone in the negotiation and we need to begin negotiating for ourselves and defending our rights, our own way.

The architect: In which way? How would you negotiate differently? How would you shift the narrative?

Mohammed: I would convince people that we refugees need to do it ourselves, to negotiate ourselves.

The architect: Using the same narrative? During the Arab Spring, I always asked myself, what would drive a Palestinian woman or a Palestinian youth to demonstrate in the streets? The only answer that continually came to mind was that the main request that all Palestinians have, refugees and non-refugees alike, is the desire to return to the Mediterranean. I would gather everyone together in the street, with umbrellas and swimming suits, asking the world, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel to let us spend a day at the beach, as a first step toward the return to the Mediterranean.

² Campus in Camps is an experimental educational program based in Dheisheh. Every year, Campus in Camps brings together fifteen participants from the West Bank's refugee camps in an attempt to explore and produce a new form of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of victimization, passivity, and poverty.

Giuliana: In a normal situation, it would seem like something everybody should be able to do, “go to the beach”—this is what turns things upside down.

The architect: I think that the world has a lot of difficulties identifying with the right of return, which is very specific to the Palestinian cause, while everyone is able to identify with the desire to go to the beach—such a desire is an essential part of the narrative of the right of return.

Qossay: Actually, schoolteachers used to talk about it all the time. They used to ask us all, when we were at school, which of you ever visited the sea? And among forty students, normally three or four would raise their hands to indicate that they had.

Aysar: I’ve got to be honest with all of you: I don’t like this idea at all!

Qossay: Aysar’s problem is that he needs to disagree with what everyone agrees on.

The architect: It is only a suggestion of a way to shift the narration around the idea of the return.

Isshaq: But I would like to ask Aysar why he opposes the idea.

Aysar: Imagine if the people of Bethlehem would act the same way. What would the consequences be?

Isshaq: I would stand in a place that is located in between the city and the camp. This is a demand for all of us Palestinians, refugees and non-refugees!

The architect: Strategically speaking, it is wrong to think that the right of return is exclusive only to refugees. I think it is time to enlarge the circle of people engaged with the right of return. I think it is time to stop relating the right of return to the loss of private property. To go to the Mediterranean is a common right that all of us Palestinians, in any part of the world, have lost. I think this is the way to expand the right of return to the common and not only to private property, of course without undermining the importance of the private aspect of such a right.

Aysar: I’m not convinced about this shift of strategy—“narration,” as you call it—only for the sake of going to the beach for one day! There are many other priorities to protest for—and the beach is certainly not one of them.

Isshaq: What are these priorities?

Aysar: I think it’s time for us to take our chance, as a young generation, to create different demands than those that our grandfathers and the older generations put forth. As a first priority, I need to figure out my position in our lived contradiction between the right to return home and the right to live here and now and settle in the camp. This is my main priority, not going to the sea. I think that if instead of asking for my return home, I ask to go the beach, that’s a very stupid demand. First of all, settle the contradiction I mentioned, get to know yourself better, and then choose the right strategy that represents you!

The architect: I believe that you have a good point. You are trying to tell us that if we do not first have answers for who we are, what the camp represents for us, what our position toward the settlement and normalization of the camp is, and how this will affect the right of return—if we do not have clear answers to these questions, then we will not be able to handle a one-day action like going to the beach and fitting it into our overall strategy.

Qossay: We all agreed on the right of the refugees to return—but how then would we return in practice? What will we do once we return? Are we going to go and sit under a tree, as we always claim? It is not about mass return; it's about how and what to do once we return. Then comes the second question about how we could gain the right of return through actions. Then, through this, we will gain the support of our people because they will see how they can stand by us through practical actions. Political statements alone are no longer sufficient.

Isshaq: I would like to comment on Aysar's point. Actions such as inviting people to go to the sea together would give people the chance to liberate their minds from the occupation. It would create the kind of atmosphere where people would begin interacting with each other and seeing exactly where they stand, here and now, regarding the solution and the right of return. When you act, you think.

Aysar: Do you think that people didn't have the chance to go to the sea at least once in the past fifty-five years? And then, whom do I need to show how nice I am and that all I want is to go to the Mediterranean for one day?

The architect: It's your people that you need to get on board, and not the international community. You need to convince people that there is something worth their attention!

Murad: We are five million people. I always think what the effect would be of having that number of people on the street, and what we might have in common. We are all divided in one hundred fractions. My goal is to go to the street with five million people sharing one idea. Aysar, if the idea would be that five million Palestinians want to go to the Mediterranean, then this might be the first step toward our goals.

Aysar: This is full of contradictions for me. Do you want to return home or go to the sea?

The architect: You are asking for your right to return to the common!

Aysar: No, we would be asking for permission from Israel and from the international community to go to the beach for one day!

Isshaq: No, my message is: The right of return is not to return to the single family house, the single property in Beit Jibrin, but to return back to the common—to return to the sea and the city.

Aysar: For me, this is a request for permission for one day in Israel, exactly as if I were asking for a visa to Canada.

Ibrahim: I agree with Aysar! I'm not sure that what we need is to shift our narrative. I personally do not like going to the beach; I feel that it's a romantic idea. We can't agree on the idea among fifteen of us—how could we convince the rest of the people to go?

Qossay: We don't know in which direction we need to move—we have a wall in front of our eyes. What are we going to do? This is the main question; it is not about permission and romanticism. I don't need to go the same way my dad decided to go. His way is obvious today—I need to invent my way.