

Nell Gabiam, *The Politics of Suffering: Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-253-02128-1 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-253-02140-3 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-253-02152-6 (ebook)

“What is it that makes a place a camp in the 21st century?” (p.2). Such is the overarching question guiding Nell Gabiam’s book about Palestinian refugee camps in Syria. She departs from studies which tend to define camps primarily as excluded or abject spaces (see e.g. Isin and Rygiel 2007). The author analyses refugee camps in Syria with nuances nourished by many years of immersion in the camps and with their actors. Her main argument is that the camp exists as a space of difference, “a space that, for historical and political reasons, is not able to be assimilated” (p.126) (see also Oesch 2017; Rahola 2007). Palestinian refugee camps are caught in a permanent tension between the alleviation of material suffering and the preservation of political suffering. This tension characterises the ways camps “differ” from other spaces.

Through a focus on the “development” of camps—mainly material, but also socioeconomic development—Gabiam unpacks many issues related to Palestinian camps and refugee camps more generally: their temporality, the notion of humanitarianism, suffering, questions of citizenship, and what it is that provides a camp its existence.

Gabiam’s enquiry is based on solid fieldwork (p.10-13). Her first encounter with camps in Syria dates back to 2002 when she went to Yarmouk camp in Damascus. She conducted extended fieldwork between 2004 and 2005, first in Yarmouk, then near Aleppo, in the Neirab and Ein el Tal camps. She volunteered with United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and got involved in the Neirab Rehabilitation Project (NRP—launched in 2000, the NRP is a comprehensive project of urban development implemented in the camp by UNRWA). Informed by participant observation and formal interviews, *The Politics of Suffering* presents many voices, such as those of camp residents, representatives of UNRWA (who are mainly Palestinian refugees, some of whom live in camps), Syrian authorities (a majority of whom are also Palestinian refugees working for the Syrian state), and foreign aid agencies, such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

(SDC). This material provided the basis for Gabiam's PhD thesis written in 2008 at the University of California, Berkeley. The book goes beyond this material and includes follow-up interviews and observations made in 2009 and 2010, the last time she was able to go to Syria before combat broke out in 2011. Some of her interlocutors have since then relocated to other countries. She stayed in contact with some of them, now living in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, as well as France and Sweden, both at a distance and through further fieldwork conducted until 2015. The book thus focuses mainly on the situation Gabiam was able to observe in pre-war Syria. Nevertheless, it also includes some reflections on the fate of the camps and their actors during the conflict.

In 2013, there were nearly five million registered Palestinian refugees living in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (UNRWA 2013). Providing context for her analysis, Gabiam points out that out of this number, there were approximately 500,000 living in Syria (p.19). Later figures provided by UNRWA indicated that the volatility of the situation in the country should be taken into account when reading the statistics. In 2013, about one-third were living in nine official camps, and, according to the author, another third were residing in three unofficial camps, the biggest of which being Yarmouk.

Gabiam's enquiry focuses on three of the 12 camps, namely Neirab, Ein el Tal and Yarmouk. She explains that they represent highly contrasting situations, and uses this contrast to answer the main question of what makes a place a camp. Neirab, which opened around 1948, is a densely populated camp hosting 17,000 residents (p.25-30). Situated 13km east of Aleppo, it remains until today a rather isolated place. At the camp's centre are barracks from World War II, which were once used to shelter allied troops. The refugees live in these barracks, to which they have added additional stories and built accommodations on the surrounding lands. Despite its isolation, the camp is a place bustling with city-like activity. Ein el Tal is a smaller, unofficial camp that opened in 1962 (p.31-34). An isolated place as well, it is located 14km northeast of Aleppo. In contrast to Neirab, Ein el Tal is made up of large streets and small empty fields. It is, however, related to Neirab, as it was included in the NRP. The plan was to have some people relocate to Ein el Tal from the crowded Neirab, and to allow residents of Ein el Tal to benefit

from the project as well. The third camp that Gabiam analyses is also unofficial and has an estimated population of 150,000 residents. Yarmouk was established in Damascus in 1957 to accommodate Palestinians who were squatting in various parts of the city (p.111-113). Due to the camp's rapid urbanization, it was eventually incorporated into the city and was formally integrated in the Damascus governorate. Gabiam argues that despite this integration, Yarmouk maintained its identity as a Palestinian refugee camp throughout the years. How is it that Yarmouk—a space that had become an integrated neighbourhood of Damascus—and smaller isolated places such as Ein el Tal and Neirab—where there are still old military barracks—are all to be considered as “camps”?

Gabiam suggests that from an ethnographic perspective, the camps she studied have three features in common (p.117-122). First, they are racialized spaces. They are not abject nor excluded, but spaces of urban marginality. Camps are a form of ethnic enclave where a separate Palestinian identity exists. Second, camps are political spaces. They are spaces of affirmation of the political project of return to the refugees' homeland, and this is why they remain a form of enclave. Thirdly, and this is probably the most innovative aspect picked up on by the author, a camp is “a feeling inside”. The camp is a temporal space of emotional longing that is related to return. As one of her interlocutors explains: “Whatever it is, it's still a camp from inside. Inside the people it's a camp. And [it] is the symbol of returning” (p.121).

Return, and thus time, is an important part of Gabiam's focus. Central to the Palestinian refugees' struggle is the “right of return” to their home as stipulated in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 adopted in 1948. The author suggests approaching “return”, and the development of camps, through what she labels the “politics of suffering”. She uses this term to describe the ways in which suffering becomes a means of “attaining political legitimacy and rights” (p.9). For Palestinian refugees, suffering testifies to their right of return. Suffering is politically loaded, as it attests to the dispossession of the refugees' homeland, until an agreement on their return is to be found. Moreover, the very existence of camps, and elements such as the “barracks”, are material witness of their suffering (p.91). From a politics of suffering perspective, and as evoked by the voices of many camp residents as well as other actors, the

development of camps must take into account political claims of return. The author notes that, at first glance, suffering is opposed to the “politics of citizenship”. From this perspective, development must lead to the incorporation of citizens understood in a “westernized” nation-state-centred way. This is in part the conception that has guided UNRWA-sponsored development initiatives in the camps (p.9). Going beyond this opposition, Gabiam explores throughout the book the efforts to “come up with a vocabulary and a set of practices that transcend the apparent dichotomy between the politics of suffering and the politics of citizenship” (p.10).

Gabiam argues that “the place occupied by Palestinian refugees in Syria’s sociopolitical landscape defies assumptions about citizenship and belonging in the 21st century” (p.24). She explains that even though they lack formal citizenship, refugees are “informal citizens” (p.18-25). Since Law No. 260 was passed in 1956, Palestinian refugees in Syria have had access to public education, employment, and health care. By giving Palestinians some rights associated with citizenship, the Syrian authorities have included them in the state project, while preserving their status of refugees (p.42). They are in this sense marginal, but not excluded. The author notes that this status has also functioned as a means of domination and control of Palestinians by Syrian authorities (p.40).

The remaining chapters of the book are dedicated to the exploration of the tension between suffering and citizenship in urban development projects in camps. This is probably the first book which addresses such issues in Syria. The major part of Gabiam’s fieldwork was carried out between 2004 and 2005 in a time of important shifts, directly following the UNWRA conference organised in Geneva in 2004. The event, organised with the help of the SDC, gathered many of the UN agency’s donor countries who discussed future strategies of UNRWA. Among these was a focus on improving the lives of refugees through development projects (p.53-54). Until the late 1990s, changes in camps were mainly piecemeal, most of the time driven by residents, with some help of UNRWA. All attempts at large-scale camp planning and construction projects had failed. This failure was mainly due to the “refugees’ early insistence that their camps maintain an aura of temporariness” (p. 88). Comprehensive development

projects were often perceived as undermining the temporary character of the refugees' stay in their host countries. However, the initiation and subsequent failure of the Oslo peace process contributed to a shift in the attitude of refugees as well as host authorities, who became more open to the idea of developing the camps (p. 46-50). The "Oslo Accords" signed in 1993 between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) stipulated a timeframe to attain a settlement of all components of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but were jeopardised due to a subsequent deterioration of Israeli-Palestinian relations (Al-Husseini and Bocco 2010). Against this background, the NRP was thus a pilot project for testing the revival of large-scale development in camps (p.2).

Gabiam subtly shows that attitudes did not transform into a straightforward acceptance of these projects. She rather emphasizes the "complex and contradictory ways in which Palestinians react to camp improvements" (p.7). The many voices she mobilizes allow her to show the multiple perspectives and engagements associated with the discourse and practices of development. At the centre is the question of the temporality of development. Is development meant to last "forever" or is it "circumscribed by the possibility of return" (p.68)? According to Gabiam, refugees' insistence on linking development to return "should be seen as a form of everyday resistance (Scott 1985) to the apolitical ideology of development promoted by UNRWA and its donors" (p.85). The existing resistance to the NRP was thus not "an outright rejection of material improvement", which was most of the time desired, but a refusal of the downplaying of "the political *and* the material dimensions of Palestinian suffering" (p.85). The main challenge for residents and the Syrian authorities became the necessity for the camp to maintain its distinctiveness. The issue thus became to determine what kind of change, and how much, is possible in order to keep the camp as a space of difference (p.103-104). The author explains that while refugees insisted on a political framing of the NRP, "there was no platform for residents to fully debate these issues with all project stakeholders" (p.107).

By 2010, Neirab's accommodations were improved following an approach that "enabled the camp to keep much of its original layout as well as [its] distinct character" (p.133). It contributed to a greater integration of the camp into the host country, while keeping the camp as

a space of difference, that is, a space which still represents the political struggle for return. This form of improvement is an expression of the tension between the politics of citizenship and the politics of suffering which impacts the development of camps. Gabiam's conclusion is that this tension "cannot be fully transcended" (p.144). However, we are left to wonder if it has not been transcended after all, as according to the author the NRP process is the expression of a "way for refugees to reconcile changes to the landscape of their camps with ... the right of return", by increasingly delinking Neirab's material conditions from political claims (p.124-125; see also Jamal 2009). By 2012, the project came to a halt following the start of the war in Syria.

The Politics of Suffering, written by an anthropologist, is a significant contribution to the field of "camp studies" (Minca 2015). If several articles have already been discussing the relations between the material development and political significance of camps, especially within geography (see e.g. Abourahme 2015; Ramadan 2013), but also beyond (see e.g. Misselwitz and Hanafi 2010), Gabiam's full-length piece captures meticulously the ambiguity related to the material development of refugee camps, insofar as it is accepted (because material suffering is undesirable) and simultaneously rejected (because political suffering, as part of the project for return, is desirable), while discussing critical implications on the question of citizenship. Within geography, *The Politics of Suffering* will therefore not only be of interest to "camp geographers", but also to urban geographers (on issues of urban development), political geographers (on issues of citizenship, humanitarianism, and development), and cultural geographers (on issues of identity and affective spaces). The book will also be of interest to practitioners who are interested in a critical perspective on humanitarian and development aid. A pleasant read, the book is an excellent resource for anybody interested to know more about Palestinian refugees.

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Lucas Oesch
Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning
University of Luxembourg
lucas.oesch@uni.lu

December 2017