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Urban neoliberalism vs. ethno-national division: The case of West Jerusalem's shopping malls

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ABSTRACT

Most research on ethnically and nationally contested cities posits that urban spatial segregation trends will remain decisive so long as the macro level national conflict persists, and assumes that the neoliberalization of urban space would only strengthen such trends. Over the last decade however, and despite the ever deepening national conflict, Jerusalem has seen the emergence of neoliberal spaces of consumption that serve as resilient spaces of intergroup encounter between Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian-Arab populations. In this article I will examine and compare two such neoliberal spaces in Jerusalem, and show how under certain conditions, privatized urban spaces can undermine processes of ethno-national segregation. I argue that interactions between members of the two rival groups are challenged and reshaped by neoliberal spaces and that the relocation of the ethno-national intergroup encounters to privatized spaces of consumption could represent a temporal shift to a class based encounters.

1. Introduction

Jerusalem is commonly described in the literature as a deeply segregated city, with a clear geographical boundary separating Jewish-Israeli from Arab-Palestinian areas. Yet over the past decade it has seen a growing trend of daily encounters between Israelis and Palestinians taking place primarily in the city's new neoliberal privatized spaces of consumption. Between 2005 and 2014, the number of Palestinians from East Jerusalem crossing into West Jerusalem increased significantly. Their growing presence in West Jerusalem has created new spaces of encounter not only in commercial centers (Shtern, 2010), but also in the public transport system (Greenberg Raanan & Shoval, 2014; Nolte & Yacobi, 2015), parks and even in residential areas (Yacobi & Pullan, 2014). These spatial desegregation trends are a far cry from any kind of "urban coexistence". In many ways they are forced on the Palestinians, driven as they are by long-term structural inequality and the severing of East Jerusalem from the West Bank following the construction of the separation barrier (Cohen, 2013). Yet, they have had a significant impact on increasing daily encounters between Palestinians and Israelis in West Jerusalem.

The summer of 2014 marked a new phase in Jerusalem's urban conflict. The latest round of violence began with the abduction and killing of three Israeli settler youth and a Palestinian teenager from East Jerusalem and concluded with Operation Protective Edge, Israel's most recent operation in Gaza. In Jerusalem, these events reverberated in a series of violent incidents, police oppression and a wave of fear and mistrust.

One of the results of the violence was a mass Palestinian boycott of West Jerusalem retail areas, which was almost absolute throughout July and August but gradually tapered off in the latter months of 2014 (Nasrallah, 2014). However, not all of West Jerusalem's commercial areas suffered to the same extent from the absence of Palestinian customers. While the largest mall in Jerusalem – Malha Mall – suffered from a near total decline in the number of Palestinian shoppers (Pundaminsky, 2014), in Mamilla Mall any visitor would have been none the wiser. Even at the peak of the urban violence, Palestinian and Israeli Jerusalemites still came to shop side-by-side in this Israeli luxurious open strip mall. Despite the fact that prior to the events of the summer of 2014 both malls were highly popular among Jerusalemite Palestinian customers, only Mamilla Mall showed a high degree of resilience as a site of intergroup encounter throughout this extremely violent period.

This example illustrates the role of commercial centers as spaces of encounter in the context of a violent ethno-national conflict. It shows how neoliberlism through processes of privatization and consumerism can influence intergroup spatial dynamics in various and particular ways. This paper will analyze the role of neoliberlism in the daily life of a contested Jerusalem and the way it manifests in privatized spaces of encounter. I will also try to explain how different patterns of interactions and ethnic inclusivity have been created in each of the malls. To this end I offer an in-depth examination of the patterns of interaction in the two shopping centers, the Malha Mall and the Mamilla Mall, in the years 2008–2014.

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Between 2007 and 2014, Palestinian Jerusalemites constituted on average 25% of the visitors to the Mamilla and Malha malls.[1] Based on the research, I argue that market forces, consumerism and processes of globalization relocated the intergroup interactions from national spaces to the privatized commercial sphere. These new spaces of encounter challenge the spatial sectarian logic of the nationally contested city. In comparing the two malls, I will show how differences in location and security policies create different patterns of intergroup interactions.

In what follows, I will first review the political–geographical patterns of spatial segregation and the conditions under which interactions take place in contested Jerusalem. I will then provide an analytical framework to demonstrate how the literature on divided cities and the study of the neoliberal urbanism can be used to understand the nature of intergroup encounters in colonial contexts. My contribution to the research on divided cities will be to demonstrate how a pattern of desegregation can emerge in a nationally contested city even under conditions of deepening conflict, national resistance and with no political resolution in sight. My second conceptual contribution will be achieved through juxtaposing the post-colonial discourse on mixed cities in Israel/Palestine with ideas related to neoliberalism and the city. I will show how even the most persistent ethno-national divisions can be temporarily undermined by privatization and the growth of commercialism which give rise to a new mode of daily encounters. Based on combined quantitative and qualitative detailed field research, two case studies will follow in which I will discuss how the particular characteristics of the two sites shape the nature of the encounter. I will conclude with theoretical understandings about the economic and geopolitical dynamics that are involved in creating spaces of encounter in the malls of western Jerusalem, and how these transform the ethno-national logic of space into the capital logic of class-based divisions.

2. The terms of engagement: occupation, inequality and violence in Jerusalem

Power relations between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem are uneven on many levels. On a basic level, the inequality between the two populations stems from their different civic status. Soon after the 1967 war, the Israeli government granted every Palestinian Arab that lived in Jerusalem permanent residency. This quasi-citizenship status created a two-tiered citizenship system within Jerusalem. While Israelis are full citizens whose status and residency cannot be revoked, Palestinians are only eligible for social benefits and their permanent resident status is contingent upon proving continuous physical presence in the city. In practice, Palestinian permanent residencies are frequently revoked (Lapidoth, 2011).

The official Israeli national and municipal planning and development policies for East Jerusalem and its Palestinian residents further reflect and drive this inequality. Two principles underline these policies: maintaining a Jewish majority and preempting any likelihood that the city could be divided (Amirav, 2007). Bollens (1998, 2000) termed these policies "partisan planning", while Yiftachel and Yacobi (2003) describe them as those of an urban ethnocracy.

The result is acute inequality between the two populations in almost all spheres of life, but particularly in physical infrastructure, housing and education (Rom, Tatarsky, & Maimon, 2014; UNCTAD, 2013). Basic infrastructure in Palestinian East Jerusalem neighborhoods such as roads, sewage systems, schools and water systems suffer from tremendous neglect. Discriminatory zoning policies have made it almost impossible for Palestinians to acquire building permits, thereby creating a severe housing crisis and leading to the widespread phenomenon of unregulated construction. This, in turn, has given rise to the widespread practice by the Israeli authorities of demolishing Palestinian homes (Chiodelli, 2012; Braier, 2013). As a result, the percentage of poor families in East Jerusalem grew from 64% in 2006 to 84% in 2011 (Alyan, Sela, & Pomerantz, 2012).

The Second Intifada from September 2000 to the end of 2004 left the city in a state of trauma and fear. In West Jerusalem, the 26 suicide attacks resulting in 173 deaths (ISA, 2009) led to a rise in Jewish emigration from the city and caused many Jewish residents to cease contact with East Jerusalem Arabs. In East Jerusalem, Israeli military action left 64 people dead (PCBS, 2006). The Israeli authorities systematically closed down all Palestinian political institutions, arresting or deporting most of its local leadership (Cohen, 2011).

Another dramatic step was the construction of the separation barrier, officially called the "Defense Barrier". Completed in 2005, it was built to stop the infiltration of terrorists from the West Bank into Israel. One of the key results of the wall was a brutal physical severing of East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank. It had a crucial impact on the functional and economic viability of East Jerusalem as a regional metropolitan center. The wall left approximately 80,000 Palestinian residents of Jerusalem in neighborhoods which are trapped outside the wall but within the municipal border (Chiodelli, 2013; Shlay & Rosen, 2010; Kimchi, 2006). Overall, the aftermath of the Second Intifada left Palestinian society in Jerusalem "divided, weak and confused, with a hybrid political identity and a question mark hanging over its political future," (Cohen, 2011, 129). This is the context for the current phenomenon whereby large numbers of Palestinians are crossing the invisible border into West Jerusalem on a daily basis and co-habiting spaces with local Jews. The unequal civic status and vast disparity in material conditions are two of the basic themes underlying intergroup spatial dynamics between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. The presence of Palestinians in the parks or malls of West Jerusalem is not a sign of voluntary social mixing because it is primarily driven by the lack of decent recreation and consumption facilities in East Jerusalem (Nasrallah, R., personal interview, May 18, 2009).

3. Conceptual background

Research on nationally contested cities has shown how intergroup encounters are charged with symbolic meaning and are dictated by the sectarian logic of the macro level national conflict, thus deepening spatial segregation (Bairner & Shirlow, 2003; Boal, 1996, 1999; Romann & Weingrod, 1991; Peach, 2000; Shirlow, 2001; Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006). In many divided cities and societies, the political hegemony of the dominant group results in policies of forced spatial segregation, which are unfavorable towards the subordinated rival group. Driven by nationalistic or racist motives, these policies are manifested in structural discrimination at the local and national government levels (Lemon, 1991). The dominant group, seeking to minimize intergroup encounters in order to create "purified" spaces (Sibley, 1988), erects social, cultural and physical barriers to exclude "unwanted" elements. On a broader level, the lack of secure and diverse transnational topographies in contested cities (Pullan & Baillie, 2013) limits the possibilities of reaching conflict resolution by sustaining and emphasizing intergroup cultural differences, promoting separate social networks, elevating mutual prejudice, and reducing the likelihood of positive encounters (Peach, 2000). It also damages urban vitality and sustainability by maintaining dual urban community facilities and reducing the size of the local employment market (Boal, 1999).

In Israel, structural segregation is manifested in government housing policies that give rise to separate Jewish and Arab neighborhoods, cities and settlements and limit Arab urban development in mixed cities (Yiftachel, 1992, 1994; Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003). As Yiftachel and Yacobi write, "the production of urban space in Israeli mixed cities stems from the exclusionary Israeli-Jewish national identity, which works to essentialize and segregate Arabs and Jews," (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003, 673). In Jerusalem, this approach was reflected in the local outline plan by the City Planning Department, titled "Jerusalem

[1] The numbers are based on estimations and market polls done by the management of both malls: O. Bar Zvi, CEO Mamilla Avenue (2009), S. Ben Shmuel, CEO Mamilla Avenue (2014) and G. Avrahami, CEO Malha Mall, (2008 & 2014).