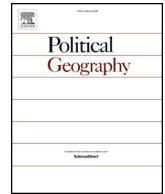




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## Checkpoint 300: Precarious checkpoint geographies and rights/rites of passage in the occupied Palestinian Territories



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Bethlehem: Sunday, 17 July 2016, 4am–8am. I am at Checkpoint 300, observing the people passing through on their daily commute. The main lane moves quickly, but the humanitarian lane has been closed most of the morning. After a couple of hours, the queue in the humanitarian lane is very long, including women, old men and children, but also young men. Young men are generally excluded from this lane, but some are given a special permit. The private security guard on duty suddenly gets angry with these young men, shouts at them in English through the gate that they do not belong to this lane, and that, due to their presence, the lane cannot be opened. I hear people shouting back, complaining that there are women and children there, that these people have the right to pass. The ID of one of the men in cut front of the row is checked by the security guard, but he is told that, being 63 years old, he is too young to use this lane. The man replies that he was allowed to pass last week, but the guard does not listen and walks away. I leave with the impression that, at Checkpoint 300, no rule seems to be implemented twice in the same way.

(first author's field notes excerpt, 17 July 2016)

Checkpoint 300, in Bethlehem, is one of the most intensively crossed checkpoints in the West Bank, used mainly by Palestinians hailing from the south of the West Bank on their way to Jerusalem and Israel. According to ActiveStills, an NGO involving Israeli, Palestinian and international reporters, an average of 15,000 Palestinians pass through Checkpoint 300 each morning (ActiveStills, 2018). Checkpoint 300 has been categorized as a 'terminal checkpoint' by the Israeli army in 2005 (Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem Society, personal communication, 2017) – a term used for large checkpoints that are meant to function as official, 'neutral', airport-like border crossings – although the majority of the terminal checkpoints, including Checkpoint 300, are not located on the Green Line, but inside the West Bank.<sup>1</sup> Checkpoint 300 is an example of a new generation of installations described by

Daniela Mansbach (2009) as an attempt to 'demilitarize' the checkpoints and normalise the Israeli control of the mobility of Palestinians. The field notes excerpt suggests that different categorisations are at play at Checkpoint 300. While some individuals, classified on the basis of their age and/or gender, may normally afford the privilege of using a special 'humanitarian lane'<sup>2</sup> to avoid the pressure of large crowds, in practice this 'privilege' is not always granted by the soldiers/security guards. Even when granted, however, the passage may be affected by close (possibly emotional) interactions with the soldiers/security guards and their related 'moods'. At the same time, these categorisations are performed by Palestinians when interacting with each other and with the soldiers/security guards, with men allowing women to pass before them, the elderly being assisted through the gates, but also with young men trying to skip the queue by climbing the steel-barred fences, something that precisely age and gender seem to make possible.

Numerous analyses of 'the Wall', the (planned to be 750 km long) separation barrier built by the Israeli government in the West Bank (see, among others, Weizman, 2007; Peteet, 2017), have provided valuable insights into the workings of the spatial regime imposed by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Some research is focused, for example, on the rhetoric used to legitimize the Wall (Bowman, 2007; Jones, Leuenberger, & Wills, 2016), while other work discusses its impact and that of the occupation regime on the lives of Palestinians (Handel, 2009, 2011, 2016; Azoulay & Ophir, 2009; Eklund & El-Atrash, 2012) or the different ways in which Palestinians resist the restrictions imposed on their mobility (Amir, 2011; Parizot, 2012; Parsons & Salter, 2008). However, while passing through checkpoints is a daily experience for most Palestinians travelling within the West Bank and to Israel, this specific experience has been analysed by a relatively limited number of studies. There are in fact numerous academic interventions in which checkpoints have been investigated as part of the broader geographies of occupation (see, among others, Parsons & Salter, 2008;

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<sup>1</sup> The Green Line, also called the 1949 Armistice border, was recommended by the UN in 1947 as the border between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Although its legitimacy as a border remains debated (see, amongst others, Bicchi & Voltolini, 2017), it is, internationally, the most recognized border between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This border situates East Jerusalem inside the Palestinian Territories ([unispal.un.org](http://unispal.un.org), 2017).

<sup>2</sup> In the design of Checkpoint 300, a separate lane and gate were added to function for humanitarian purposes. However, this separate gate was closed during the first author's two fieldwork periods in 2016 and 2017. The people entitled to the humanitarian lane now enter the checkpoint through the 'exit lane', still avoiding the large crowds of the regular lane. Here, we therefore use the term 'humanitarian lane' to indicate this use of the 'exit lane'.

Ophir, Givoni & Hanafi, 2009; Handel, 2009, 2011, 2016; Grassiani, 2013), but only few of these have focused specifically on checkpoints. Most recent research concerning checkpoint experiences in the West Bank has been conducted by members of Machsom Watch, an Israeli all-women organization that opposes the occupation of the Palestinian Territories (Keshet, 2006; Kotef & Amir, 2007; Kaufman, 2008; Mansbach, 2009, 2012, 2015; Braverman, 2011, 2012; Kotef, 2011, 2015). However, as stated by Palestinian anthropologist Rema Hammami (2010, p. 37–38), their otherwise valuable work tends to underplay the agency of the Palestinian commuters passing through the checkpoints. Other authors, such as Hammami herself, have incorporated the experience of Palestinians passing through checkpoints in their work (Tawil-Souri, 2010, 2011a, b, 2009; Hammami, 2004, 2010, 2015; Peteet, 2017; Razack, 2010), but they largely refer to the years of the Second (or al-Aqsa) Intifada (2000–2005), when the checkpoint system currently in place was not yet fully operational. In this article, we try to fill this gap – in a dialogue with the existing rich body of literature on the Wall and the West Bank – by analysing checkpoint practices from the perspective of Palestinians passing through Checkpoint 300 in Bethlehem, one of the most important checkpoints in the region.

Inspired by Eyal Weizman's spatial analysis of the occupation of the Palestinian Territories presented in his influential *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (2007), we consider checkpoints as (bio)political technologies aimed at producing a set of selective, arbitrary and mutable geographies of mobility affecting the people subjected to them. Furthermore, in line with Reviel Netz's (2004) understanding of barbed wire as a spatial political technology, we focus on how the assemblage of biopolitical categories, material devices and barriers, procedures of control, calculative rationalities and selective practices that we call 'checkpoints' *do things*. We treat checkpoints as geographical formations capable of producing spatial effects that respond to specific strategies of control and limitation of the mobility of people and things. Elsewhere we have looked at how the checkpoints' materialities affect the bodily performances of both Palestinians and Jewish settlers in the Bethlehem area – when forced to pass through them. Here we address in particular the biopolitical categories used by the 'managers' of Checkpoint 300 to classify and qualify Palestinian individuals and their related mobility during their passages. More specifically, we reflect on how the categories of 'gender', 'age' and 'ID card status' adopted by the Israeli authorities to qualify Palestinians are key to the everyday implementation of the checkpoint (ir)rationalities. In the following sections, we first comment on existing research on the West Bank checkpoints and introduce the broader context of our research. We then discuss in detail the workings of Checkpoint 300 and the methodology used to analyse it. The three following sections are dedicated to how the categories of gender, age and ID card status are respectively incorporated as biopolitical technologies in producing selective rationalities of mobility (or lack thereof) related to the checkpoint. We conclude by reflecting on how the somewhat inconsistent, arbitrary and selective nature of such categories, together with the ways in which the Palestinians engage and negotiate with them, are constitutive of a set of specific checkpoint geographies of power. The interplay between the calculative rationalities incorporated by these biopolitical categories and the endless 'exceptions' implemented via everyday interactions between soldiers/security guards and Palestinians at the checkpoint, we argue, is at the origin of the unstable and unpredictable geographies produced by this powerful political spatial technology.

### Architectures of occupation

After the occupation of the Palestinian Territories, the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, restrictions on Palestinian movement were gradually put in place by the Israeli state (Weizman, 2007, p. 142). All Palestinians were granted a general permit to enter Israel and East Jerusalem, with the exception of people convicted of crimes or considered a

security threat. This permit could be revoked at any time but, due to the lack of a comprehensive system of material barriers and checkpoints, the mobility of Palestinians was still relatively free. This changed after the start of the first Gulf War (1990–1991), when the first permanent checkpoints were built and individual permits were required for Palestinians to enter Israel (Keshet, 2006, p. 13). Since the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000 (Ophir, Givoni & Hanafi, 2009), the number and the locations of checkpoints has grown exponentially. Today, it is estimated that about 100 checkpoints operate inside the West Bank (an area of 5,640 km<sup>2</sup>, including East Jerusalem) and on the 'Israeli border' (btselem.org, 2017). Next to these checkpoints and the Wall, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has registered in 2015 an average presence of 543 physical obstructions in the West Bank, a situation that has been relatively stable since the end of the Second Intifada (ochaopt.org, 2017). This apparatus of barriers is a key element in the 'architecture of occupation' of the West Bank described by Weizman, consisting of a combination of road blocks, checkpoints, fences, the Wall, illegal Israeli settlements and the related bypass roads. Weizman's analysis (2007) shows how this multiplicity of barriers splinters the border between Israeli and Palestinian territories into a multitude of ever-changing borders, and contributes to a series of geographical practices aimed at controlling the daily lives of Palestinians.

Checkpoints play a particularly important role in this architecture of occupation in the West Bank (Hammami, 2015). They represent material barriers through which 'Israeli-only' spaces are created, spaces from which Palestinians are fundamentally evicted and which are the main grounds for the expansion of the state of Israel via the development of new illegal settlements (see *Fourth Geneva Convention*, refworld.org). These settlements materialise on Palestinian land precisely by being fenced off through the construction of the Wall, multiple checkpoints and 'settler-only roads'. The checkpoints are a means of surveillance as well, since they represent key spatial technologies to monitor, discipline and/or selectively limit the mobility of Palestinians. As noted by several authors (Handel, 2009, 2011, 2014; Amir, 2013; Hammami, 2015; Kotef, 2015), blocking the movement of Palestinians is not the purpose of these checkpoints. Instead, the checkpoints are rather porous barriers, and the deliberately arbitrary management of this porosity appears as one of their main functions (Parsons & Salter, 2008). Although checkpoints may be closed, or temporarily restricted to specific groups of people – something regularly happening – they work precisely as a field of possibility (or impossibility) by providing limited and relatively unpredictable 'openings' in a broader system of repression and control, created through many closures *and* selective 'windows' (on the strategic porosity of 'walls', see Minca & Rijke, 2017).

This does not mean that the West Bank checkpoints are in place to simply monitor and somehow routinize Palestinian lives (Hammami, 2015). On the contrary, they are one of the technologies used by the Israeli occupation forces to ensure that the capacity of Palestinian residents to reach their daily destination is never entirely predictable. The checkpoint openings, the sudden closures, the long queues, the swift passages, the alternation of violent outbursts and quiet days provide a permanent sense of arbitrariness, chaos and uncertainty that has become an integral part of life-under-Israeli-occupation and is in line with its 'strategy of obfuscation' (Weizman, 2007, p. 8). Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir have carefully detailed the way in which this arbitrariness, connected to withheld violence, is used by the Israeli occupation regime to create an unreliable, and thus punishable, subject. This subject is unable to internalize the rules of the regime as these rules change too often and in an unpredictable way. Checkpoints are in their view exemplary sites in which this kind of interaction between the occupier and occupied takes place, where the only thing Palestinians can internalize is their submission to the Israeli sovereign power (2009, p. 115). In analysing the impact of such arbitrariness on the lives of Palestinians, Israeli geographer Ariel Handel (2009) has engaged with the concept of 'use value'. By adopting this concept, he has qualified the difference

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