

PRACTICING CITIZENSHIP IN CONSTRAINED POLITICAL SITUATIONS

AN ALTERNATIVE WAY TO FOSTER
CIVIC MEMBERSHIP

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SUMMARY

Alienation and marginality of underprivileged minority groups is a pressing global problem that can lead to both inequality and political instability. Drawing on a historical analysis of colonial Palestine, I argue for a new approach for fostering simultaneously empowerment, prosperity and stability. Instead of addressing security issues directly, which researchers find often strengthen estrangement, I propose to focus on fostering practices of citizenship that begin with small, benign and material interactions between potential to bypass constrained political situations and promote social membership.

By looking at the issue of social and political inclusion through the lens of the everyday, and not ideology, the actual agency of the underprivileged is revealed, providing lesson for constructive dialogues, especially in volatile situations in which a direct discourse of pacification is not feasible.

CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEM

Far reaching global consequences have resulted from state institutions all over the world struggling, crumbling or becoming unstable due to different social, economic and cultural factors - a process that affects both democratic and non-democratic regimes (Rotberg 2003). One common underlying feature of the weakening of the nation-state is a widening estrangement between state institutions and underprivileged minority groups, be it religious, ethno-national or socio-economic. These developments are troubling because social detachment and limited civic involvement of members of minority groups has been shown to have a destabilizing effect on civic apparatuses, and if manifested violently pose a serious threat to states' stability and peace. It is therefore imperative that society and policy makers focus on increasing political belonging on the part of marginal communities.

CRITIQUE OF CURRENT COMMON POLICY

A common way to tackle the problem of political alienation is to focus on formal political discourse. This stance, which emphasizes ideas and ideology, tends to result in strategies and policies which rely upon direct and explicit messages of political inclusion. For example, conveying to underprivileged communities and individuals the message that they should feel and behave as part of the state, or that they are legally entitled to the same civil rights as members of hegemonic groups. Such straight-forward and rigid approach highlights the political nature of belonging and its stakes, does not leave room

for ambiguity or flexibility, and treats political membership and involvement as a zero-sum game. Based on a reductionist view of citizenship as a legal-political construct, and with its focus on conscious, grand-scale change, the ideological-based approach is disposed to fail itself and lead to greater antagonism between marginal groups and the state.

My research on the civilian Home Front in WWII British-ruled Palestine paves the way towards a different and more fruitful policy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

My research explores the myriad ways in which various people in Palestine experience, conceptualized and challenged their interactions with British rule in WWII, a time of global and imperial emergency. Through the conceptualization of imperial and colonial citizenship (Banerjee 2010, Gorman 2006, Jayal 2013), I examine daily and material wartime interactions between state agents and local population, mostly tied to the colonial emergency regime. Buying a government-subsidized clothing, carrying and using a ration book or fleeing into a public shelter when an air-raid siren is heard - these embodied acts, among others, tell a story of a constant, reciprocal and multi-layered relationship between colonial rule and the people it administered during the turbulent years of WWII. While this complex relationship contains aspects of everyday resistance (Scott 1987), I discovered that it cannot be reduced to a binary dichotomy which posits an oppressive rule against an oppressed local population. Locals living under strained circumstances have in fact been vocal, active and creative in their claims and negotiations vis-à-vis the British Government and the Government in its turn was a complicated, multi-faceted mechanism, comprised of people with various interests, ideologies and conceptions of civic responsibility. The web of localized, street-level and minuscule interactions between individuals and state agents had in fact a mitigating effect on the high-profile and explosive conflicts, both between ethno-national communities and with the colonial rule, which seem to define the Mandate period in the history of Israel/Palestine. The idea of colonial/imperial citizenship, which focuses on the non-legal aspects of citizenship, since in a colonial setting a complete citizenry status, with broad civil liberties and tights was not guaranteed, allows for a specifies attention to the usually neglected range of valuable and meaningful everyday practices.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings some policy strategy can be discerned for addressing the problems of political alienation. The underline principle of this strategy is the **acknowledgment of the political potency of social welfare policies, and their subsequent prioritization as serving a dual-end cause**. The findings of my research suggest that a positive impact on belonging and membership of marginalized groups in the civil sphere is achievable via public policies which are **small-scale; material; and recurring**. Thus, public policies which are connecting the individual to state institutions on the street-level, have a concrete, tangible and material effect, and have a performative everyday component are a key to fostering belonging and reducing alienation, even though – and in fact because – they do not have this end as a formally articulated political meaning. Bypassing the volatile questions, it is suggested, can in fact dismantle and resolve them.

An example of such public policy is the IDNYC – a government-issued, city-wide identification card for all NYC residents, launched in early 2014. Although the identity card as a social institution is often perceived as oppressive and invasive, it offers a point of interaction between the citizen and the state, which can have positive outcomes, when coupled with cultural benefits as in the case of the IDNYC, and designed to enhance access of residents to public services, regardless immigration status. The IDNYC, as a material object (a card), that is carried on the body and used daily in order to access public libraries and cultural institutions or as an identification measure for various means, fulfills the criteria listed above and thus has a positive potential not only on the well-being of individuals, as intended, but also on civic membership. It is therefore recommended to expand such programs, and to cast light upon their overlooked political potential, as performative and everyday ways of enhancing political belonging and inclusion of minority groups without ideological or symbolic excess.

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