
Vincent Romani
For more than one reason, Caroline Abu Sada's book is seminal. First of all, her work studies the re-shaping of polity inside the Palestinian society since the second Intifada. Based on the authors' PhD dissertation, this book contributes to the limited works on political sociology addressing post-Oslo Palestine (after 2000). This book is also promising in terms of methodology, claiming to conduct a "bottom-up" approach looking at a society still over-analyzed in terms of polemology, elites and powers; Caroline Abu Sada endeavors to study local actors of development and their multi-level interactions. However, the crystal-clear quality of her writing sometimes leads to extremely elliptic assessments and flawed deductions, probably due to a fast editing of the book. Finally, one must highlight The last but not least benefit of her contribution is its innovative outlook toward a sector of the Occupied Palestinian Territories largely bypassed for years by researchers: the rural.

Palestinian rural studies had witnessed a spectacular birth and growth in the 70's, as part of the initial stages of the Palestinian indigenous academy following the 1967 Israeli invasion. The first generation of Palestinian researchers was literally re-discovering a new country, whose space and demography had been dramatically reshaped twice in less than 20 years. These new researchers, cut off from their Arab neighbors, assessed the
condition of a renewed society, influenced by developmentalist and marxist theories; rural Palestinian society was one of their central scholarly focuses. They would soon take part in the nationalist narrative of a rural and agrarian-driven society struggling for land control against a foreign invader. The Intifada-1987 pushed this research trend to its climax. This “ruralism” then declined quickly following the Oslo agreements. The fact is that the Oslo process essentially focused the world’s attention on the urban and partly self-governed Palestinian areas. The broader rural Palestinian countryside was then widely bypassed by many political actors and analysts. In this respect, Caroline Abu Sada's work bridges a gap in our knowledge of contemporary Palestine, by bringing rurality back in the Palestinian studies and politics.

In the first part of her work, the author focuses on the institutional history, role, and identity shifts of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC), the most influential rural Palestinian NGO, founded in 1983. Her material consists of extensive interviews as well as large amounts of administrative literature, collected between 2002 and 2005. Gaza is unfortunately neglected for obvious reasons of restricted access. In chapter 1, the reader is taught about the centrality of land, rural life and territory in the Palestinian history and society. Meanwhile, the reader is also updated about the specific place of the NGO sector in Palestine, that is the original status of NGOs without a proper central government nor state. The strategy and success of PARC is convincingly analyzed as a break vis-à-vis more traditional, local and notable charity organizations. PARC, with a technocratic and nationalist discourse, quickly grew and spread in size and grassroots. By stressing the fact that PARC is both personalized in its management and visibility (with the same director since its establishment), and heavily dependent on foreign funding, C. Abu Sada challenges many theories and rigid definitions of civil society and NGO. PARC indeed is a specific yet interesting object in the Palestinian society and beyond; it challenges the residual Palestinian Authority (PA) government as a real political opponent and an alternative to other political parties, because of its strong grassroots legitimacy (chapter 2).

The second part of the book is dedicated to the analysis of the broader political context and dynamic in which PARC and other Palestinian NGOs act. The author explains wonderfully the transition of PARC from politics to policy making, from a confrontational agenda to a professionalized agenda, from a grassroots-only setting to an institutionalized setting. Mobilizing established development theories and center/periphery model, C. Abu Sada elaborates interesting and novel insights related to her empirical observations. The case of the National Agricultural Development Plan demonstrates how PARC imposes itself to the PA in the definition of the national (chapter 3). This case study challenges the simple opposition between center and periphery in showing how a peripheral actor projects himself in the center. In the final chapter 4, the focus is broadened toward other actors in order to analyze what is presented as the reshaping of the Palestinian periphery; this process is determined by at least four interacting actors: the donors, the PA, the political parties and the ONGs. To which I would add Israel.

This original work comments on the relationship between globalization, third world development, and the role and place of NGOs and civil society. However, it is unfortunate that the author did not enhance her contribution to the body of literature; further bibliography and readings would have permitted to reassess and reduce the place of the "center/periphery" and civil society paradigm: polycentrism, multiple actors, raise of
technocratic policies of expertise, by-passing of central governments are acknowledged phenomena for over a decade in political science. As for the references concerning development theories: I would have liked seminal works on the "failed development" (Timothy Mitchell if not Gérard Rist for instance) being taken into account. It could have avoided once again the author to kick dead bodies. I also wonder if the paradigm of state building adds any value to the work of the author, in as much the project of a Palestinian state has never been so distant, to say it optimistically.

Violence is taken into account from a very distant point a view in this study. Although I totally agree with Caroline Abu Sada on her refusal to reduce the Palestinian society to the violence that this human group receives and nurtures, I'm struck by the discrepancy between what really happened on the ground during her fieldwork in terms of traumatic events (military re-invasion of self-governed territories, bombings, killings, curfews, general road blockades, etc.), and the institutional way she analyzes pin point consequences of the global Israeli matrix of control on her object. Her level of analysis may be the reason why: I wonder if the bottom-up approach she claims at the beginning of her book is consistently applied. The evidence she uses to support her argument, documents and elite interviews, suggest the opposite: I’m more inclined to see a top-down approach in her work. More anthropological insights would not have worked against the purpose of her wonderful and original book.

AUTEUR

VINCENT ROMANI

Abu Sada Caroline, ONG palestiniennes et construction étatique. L'expérience ...