

The Transgressive practices of Revolutionary Subjectivity: The Hunger Strike in Occupied Palestine (2012-2016)

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Abstract:

This paper engages theoretically with the transgressive practices of the Palestinian hunger strikers, whose subjectivity is shaped through a web of interrelationships with the colonial power and its repressive techniques within the Israeli prison system. In the context of occupied Palestine, I examine the political subjectivity of the Palestinian freedom fighters, as performed through the radical political actions of their hunger strikes. These actions aim at emancipating the captive body and destabilizing the colonial power, even though they entail painful existential experiences and a logic of self-sacrifice.

I wish to explore the concept of ‘transgression’ and its link to subjectivity in order to illuminate the lived experience of the hunger strikers. The transformation process giving rise to a revolutionary subjectivity is not a mechanical process but a complex mode of transgressive subjectivation related to severe forms of dispossession. My aim is to theorize both the structure of subjectivation and dispossession. I will also attempt to show how revolutionary subjectivity relates to Foucault’s notion of aesthetic sensibility.

Keywords:

Subjectivity, Revolution, Dispossession, Transgression, Aestheticism, Foucault.

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The transgressive framework of hunger strike resistance.

This paper is a part of a doctoral thesis which analyses the lived experience of former political prisoners in order to examine the kind of political subjectivity they perform in their hunger strikes; as radical political actions.

In light of my own interest in the notions of ‘revolution’ and ‘subjectivity’, I decided to research the hunger strike because I envisage it to be a vital site for conceptualising subjectivity from the standpoint of revolutionary practice. I conceive this form of resistance as an exceptional practice enacted by individuals who are risking life through self-sacrificial violence as a practice of resistance to achieve freedom. This exceptional practice launches a hope for eventual freedom and embodies a mode for precipitating decolonisation and ushering in emancipation.

“I love life, I did not want to die”. This sentence was mentioned repeatedly by most of the former hunger strikers I have interviewed in my research. The hunger striker does not aim at death but rather to fight and put pressure on the colonial power. They use the only weapon that they have, their bodies. However, this form of resistance necessitates risking one’s life as a mode of political action that involves the commitment to living but also the readiness to die. In this sense, it constitutes as aesthetic of existence, because it reconciles contradictory aspects of life and death.

The self-starvation entails a transgressive practice since it contradicts our understanding of the natural compulsion of self-preservation. By giving up food, the hunger striking prisoners deny the natural desires of bodily needs. They endanger the body and transgress the ‘rational’ limit of self-preservation with a willingness to self-sacrifice. For that reason, this resistance has provoked significant critical controversy and in some literature the hunger strike is depicted as a ‘self-destructive’ and ‘death fast’ struggle, (e.g) Bargu’s *Starve and Immolate* (2014).

In the Palestinian context, there is a controversial debate concerning the phenomenon of the lengthy individual hunger strike that emerged recently in 2012 and has continued in the past 4 years. Is it a rational form of resistance? Should political prisoners harm their bodies and risk their life? Are there not any other means for resistance that don’t entail self-inflicted violence? Are the hunger strikers’ motives individual subjective or collective national? To what extent has this phenomenon aimed at protesting against administrative detention succeeded in impacting Israeli policy? Did they achieve a full emancipation? What does their “victory” mean on collective level? Is it individual victory or collective one? Is it complete or partial? These are among the questions raised by the recent phenomenon of hunger strikes.

Following the logic of this debate, one of the questions I am interested in pursuing is: What determines this mode of radical resistance in the Palestinian case? Why did some detainees employ their bodies to transgress the instinct of self-preservation and go through the harsh experience of enduring months of prolonged self-starvation, suffering the slow decomposition of the body? How did they reach this transgressive moment of self-sacrifice? Thus, my doctoral research traces out subjectivity-formation in Palestinian hunger strikes by seeking to explain the processes, techniques and transformations that they involve, and which can be seen to produce a form of revolutionary subjectivity.

I will explore the concept of ‘transgression’ and investigate how the transgressive subjectivation of the hunger strikers relates to the dispossession enacted by colonial power. Foucault’s interest in transgression is explored in terms of sexuality, limitation and social and cultural boundaries. Nevertheless, I will contextualize the concept of transgression in my case study within the lived experience of the hunger strikers in Israeli prisons.

Foucault’s essay ‘A Preface to Transgression’ (1998) is an elaboration of Bataille’s work. For Foucault, the term ‘transgression’ concerns mostly moral transgression, i.e. violation of the moral norms of European society concerning sexuality. It is not the same transgression of the hunger strikers who transgress their bodily needs to aspire freedom. In this paper, I aim to highlight the Palestinian hunger strikers’ own philosophy of transgression.

I will employ the notion of what Foucault calls ‘transgressive practice’, conceived as a practice that brings us to the limit of our normalized subjectivities. According to Foucault we have to look for experiences that open new zones of existence for the first time and take the subject to that point within life which lies as close as possible to what Foucault calls “the impossibility of living”. In this sense, transgression is defined as crossing-over the limit and going beyond any law. It instigates the idea of boundaries crossing and moving from a ‘rational’ state to an ‘irrational’ state which takes the subject to a zone of impossibility of living.

The interesting thing is that Foucault’s project models an aesthetics of existence. In this sense, revolution as a style of existence is capable of giving a new form of existence. The transgressive practice is vital for the creation of new forms of subjectivity or as I will argue later, the enlargement of the orbits of subjectivity. The subject of the transgressive act is the one who is crossing boundaries to experience the impossible, as Foucault puts it, “in the sense that the inner experience is, throughout, an experience of the impossible (the impossible being both that which we experience and that which constitutes the experience)” (1998: 71). In this regard, Foucault’s notion of transgression provides me with a helpful framework to explore what mode of revolutionary subjectivity is produced in the hunger strikes.

The structure of dispossession: Dispossession of humanity

Transgressive subjectivation of the hunger strikers is produced through the interrelationships with others, mainly the colonizer/jailor. The transgression is constituted through the interaction with colonial dispossession. As one of the research participants explains:

Mohammad: “Who said the hunger strike is a rational act? it is not rational at all but it is produced through irrational conditions. Therefore, the equation is ‘irrational + irrational = rational’”.

Ashjan: “Do you mean the practices of Israeli authorities against political detainees are not rational as well?”

Mohammad: “Thank you because you understood my point. Yes, something irrational was born due to the irrationality of the occupation practices against us. The Israeli crime led me to undertake the illogical thing. Do you think depriving me of my children and devastating my life and my work (as a journalist) is logical? Therefore, my persistence to go on hunger strike is not logical too. Yes, there is no sense of rationality residing in the idea of martyrdom and self-sacrifice. It is not rational to endanger our bodies (there is a probability to lose some of our bodies’ organs), or to cause suffering to our families and children either during our starvation or perhaps death (as there is a probability to die). However, the irrationality of my hunger strike became a very rational act because I wanted to emancipate myself and achieve my freedom. Freedom is logic, all revolutions which have happened in the world prove that the irrationality becomes something natural for emancipation” (Interview, Ramallah 2016).

The above quote shows how the irrational transgressive mode of subjectivation that transgresses the rules of self-preservation is constituted in relation to severe dispossession. From the hunger strikers’ standpoint, what led the Palestinian detainees to engage in such transgressive practices

is a transgressive practice as well. The colonial violence and technologies of power inflicted on captive subjects deprive prisoners of normal life. The research participants describe the colonial dispossession:

They want to dispossess the Palestinians of their human essence. Prison is dispossession of humanity (Interview, Ramallah 2015).

They want to destroy the human Palestinian (Interview, Bethlehem 2016).

The Palestinian detainees are dispossessed of the basic needs of human existence. Prison is an extreme state of deprivation since the detainees are physically fully controlled. The captive subject is not like other colonized subjects who live in social space outside incarceration. Imprisonment is one form of administration of death by the colonial regime in the sense that it is a practice of “social death”, a concept used by Erving Goffman (1968). Goffman discusses the processes entailed in the mortification of the self in what he describes as the “total institution”, including prison. The prisoner’s self is destroyed through degrading and humiliating circumstances purposefully designed to undermine any form of individual identity.

The former hunger strikers I interviewed describe colonial violence, particularly the practice of administrative detention as “crimes against humanity” since it demonstrates absolute domination over their life. The Israeli Prison Authorities (IPA) use degrading treatment and a range of different forms of violence from psychological to physical against hunger strikers. The colonial power invents new means to control prisoners’ bodies. The accounts of research participants describe the violent practices of the Israeli authorities as “barbaric”, “criminal” and “non-human”. Some of them liken the Israeli forces to a ‘vicious animals’.

In this extreme mode of dispossession prisoners are subjected to severe technologies of power and become vulnerable to injury and loss of basic aspects of humanity such as deprivation of social bonds and relations with their beloved ones. Through the practice of administrative detention, they are deprived of a future and dispossessed of hope. Administrative detentionⁱ is a policy used by the Israeli authorities whereby Palestinian detainees are held without charge or trial for unidentified reasons, justified by ‘secret files’. The detention order is frequently renewed and this process can be continued indefinitely. It is an exercise of power to control the future of political detainee prisoners on the basis of secret evidence.

The structure of dispossession could be categorized in three forms of dispossession: dispossession of love, of dignity, and of hope (that is, of a future). These three forms of dispossession are devastating in their effects. When these different aspects of dispossession are inflicted on prisoners, they encounter assault and injuries. The assault is caused by threatening and damaging those sensitive areas. The radical transgressive mode of subjectivation springs from a mode of severe dispossession.

Subjectivation structureⁱⁱ: Decolonizing dispossession of humanity

Via the political prisoners’ stories, I analysed the interaction between the technologies of power (Israeli repressive practices) and the technology of the self (prisoners’ resistance) which constitutes turning points shaping resistant subjectivity. Technology of the self is a Foucauldian

term that refers to the practices by which subjectivity constitutes itself (Foucault 1988). I use it because I focus on the mode of self-fashioning/formation and the processes of subjectivation.

In my discussion of the turning points I explained how the violence exercised on hunger strikers' bodies dispossesses them of their humanity and leaves them with injuries and damages. However, they can decolonize dispossession and transform themselves into "active victims". I choose to develop the concept of 'active victim' since the word victim suggests that prisoners have been assaulted, hurt, and affected by violence and dispossession. Yet adding the word 'active' to victim suggests that detainees did not stay in victim position or merely internalize a victim identity but were able to decolonize victimhood and constitute themselves as resilient subjects.

Butler and Athanasiou's *Dispossession: The performative in the political* (2013) suggests that being dispossessed produces vulnerability and suffering. In this sense, dispossession refers to 'losses', but it also refers to the privation of bodily self-determination in people whose bodies deserve a liveable life. In this sense, dispossession gives rise to resistant actions as an effect to protest injustice. When the prisoners reject dispossession, and decide to become an engaged active victim they go through a decolonizing process.

The prisoners refuse to conceive/accept themselves as victims. One of research participant states:

Despite all the material power that the Israeli forces possess, and despite all the violence they inflicted on me I think they are the weak and I am the strong. I was subjected to horrible and brutal violence during arrests, interrogations, imprisonment, and hunger strike (Interview, Bethlehem 2015).

The dehumanization which aims at assaulting the prisoners, instead strengthens them in relation to their oppressor. In some cases, violence creates victims and in other cases it produces resistant subjects. In the case of Ayman, the failure of Israeli violence lies in the fact that it failed to create him as a submissive subject/oppressed victim. He went on hunger strike to decolonize subjection.

The colonized belonging to humanity is bound up with the violent acts of the colonizer, and accordingly strengthens the 'oppressed' on human level. Ayman's account reflects this argument as he conceives himself as the strong and his oppressor as the weak.

The effect of dehumanization on the colonizer is analyzed by Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Memmi's portrait of the colonized is preceded by the portrait of colonizers; he states:

Oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity. It diverts and pollutes the best energies of man-of oppressed and oppressor alike. For if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizer (2003: P13).

In their decision to perform the hunger strike, the political prisoners decolonize dispossession of humanity by risking death to recreate and actualize their human subjectivity that has been dispossessed.

As one of the former hunger strikers puts it:

By violence, they aim to dispossess us of our humanity but on the contrary this violence creates our humanity. By their inhuman practices, our humanity is created, such humanity might take us to death, however this risk of death maintains our humanity (Interview, Ramallah 2016).

Through close engagement with Frantz Fanon's writings on colonialism, anti-colonial resistance, and the concept of/the idea of humanity, I discussed the transformational mode which leads to the creation of new moment and a new aspect of their subjectivity. In the *Wretched of the Earth* (1963) Fanon's theory of decolonization is based on self-creation and recovers the lost humanity of those who have been colonized. The struggle for freedom through decolonization is a struggle for self-possession and a step to create a new form of life and humanity.

The decolonization moment emphasizes the emergence of a 'new' humanity from revolutionary struggles, and the emancipation of the revolutionary subject. For Fanon, political subjectivity is about struggle and persistence, and this persistence means the negation of the present and engendering new forms of being and becoming.

The transgressive practice of hunger strikers becomes a necessity to regain self-ownership and decolonize the dispossessed subjectivity and victimhood state of being. In other words, the hunger they restore the lost humanity and consequently cultivate the revolutionary subjectivity.

The aesthetic of the transgressive subject: The existence of the different

The hunger strikers as transgressive subjects introduce a transgressive philosophy of freedom as a way of life not simply as a theoretical doctrine. In its essence, the hunger strike is self-denial that stems from the prisoners' philosophy of freedom, as one of the research participants expresses it in one sentence:

I would choose my freedom even if the cost is my flesh (Interview, Bethlehem 2015).

It illustrates why freedom fighters employ their bodies as a vehicle steered by the will and passion for freedom as some of them put it:

I want my freedom; I don't want to lose my life. By this strike I wanted to end my detention, honestly, I engaged in hunger strike because I want to go back home but I don't want to die (Interview, Bethlehem 2015).

I don't want to hurt my body, I want to emancipate myself (Interview, Nablus 2016).

This lived experience introduces a unique conception of freedom through the interaction with dispossession in the colonial hard reality. From an existential and humanistic perspective, political prisoners are risking their lives to struggle for freedom. This is because of existentialist urge to ensure their human agency through changing their injustice reality and imprisonment. They have undergone an exceptional and transgressive praxis because they think differently in their existence. The very rupture between their subjection by colonial power and their subjectivation as revolutionaries introduces a philosophy of transgression as a way of life for the sake of freedom. They actualize a particular style of life as specified by determination to transform themselves into free subjects.

Foucault gives particular emphasis to aesthetic forms of self-cultivation as a means of refusing the type of subjectivity that has been imposed on us. The hunger strikers' mode of transgressive subjectivation implies a rupture with the prior self. It is a shift from the structural moment of generative loss and dispossession of humanity to another state that goes beyond these structures to reach a point where something is born. The transgressive subject emerges through the separation of the self and the "other". According to Foucault the transgression opens zone to existence for the first time. Foucault argues for transgression that

its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise. Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirm the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time' (1998:74).

As I mentioned in the introduction the transgressive practice is vital for the creation of new aspects of subjectivity. It expands the range of our subjectivity and enlarges its circles by going further and transgressing borders to open new areas of existence in an infinity of spiral movement.

In this regard, Badiou (2005, 2006) theorizes the subject as a creation of new existence that entails both change and transformation. He focuses on subjectivation as a process where an individual enters into a new form of existence by becoming a subject through being faithful to an event. Badiou's aim is to find a way of describing the presence of the genuinely new 'subject of truth'.

In his clarification of what this zone of existence affirms and opens for the first time, Foucault writes:

this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it. Perhaps it is simply an affirmation of division, but only insofar as division is not understood to mean a cutting gesture, or the establishment of a separation or the measuring of a distance, only retaining that in it which may designate the existence of difference (1998:74).

Hence, transgression is an affirmative movement opening the possibility of difference, but only at the limit, not outside. The mode of transgressive subjectivation undergoes transformation that

opens the door for the different, a practice that requires nothing less than a change of one's way of life.

What is striking is that respondents in my research at some points can't give interpretation to their transgressive experience. They actualize the cultivation of their revolutionary subjectivity through the performativity of hunger strike without completely rationalizing their transgressive actions. It is connected to the ambiguity of the act of transgression and the ambivalence of the transgressive subject. In this context, Foucault confirms the impossibility of language to capture the freshness of the transgressive experience that crosses the limits. He writes:

In effect, do we not grasp the possibility of such thought in a language that necessarily strips it of any semblance of thought and leads it to the very impossibility of language? Right to this limit where the existence of language becomes problematic? (1998:78).

In my doctoral thesis, I acknowledge the unfathomable nature of both hunger strike phenomenon and revolutionary subjectivity. However, I think the literature on the hunger strike misses some crucial dimensions of the phenomenon of 'lived experience' and self-understanding of self-sacrificing participants. My project is at very heart of the mystery of responsibility, belonging, sacrifice, and love. I would argue that the complexity resides in the transgressive subject who has undergone complicated interactions within the self which have led to structural transformations in their subjective/intersubjective experience. In this regard, the theme of aesthetic self-construction emerged. Aesthetic self-fashioning for Foucault involves the transformation of self into piece of art, the recreation of life in terms of self-stylization and aesthetic experimentation.

The aesthetic of the transgressive subject is that by transgressing the borders, one creates a sort of a new and different construction of subjectivity and opens new zone of existence. When the idea of freedom illuminates within the resistant subjects, they spiritualize their act to transcend their crises in the material reality and go further to metaphysical trajectories.

This inner experience leads to the transgressive moment where one crosses the boundaries to experience the impossible. The way in which one goes beyond oneself, relate a self to something grander than itself. The subjectivity is an aesthetic work of art which permits a myriad of potential contradictory aspects. Thus, it exemplifies an aesthetic: it brings together in a perfect unity the contradictions of hope and despair, love and hate, war and peace, life and death. This characterizes the Palestinian hunger strike, a constellation of resistance that challenge for freedom and emancipation.

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Biography:

Ashjan Ajour is a PhD student in the Sociology Department at Goldsmiths. She is currently working on her doctoral thesis, which analyses the lived experience of Palestinian hunger strikers in the Israeli prison system.

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Endnotes:

ⁱ See *Administrative detention in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: A Legal Analysis Report*, Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, report published November 2008 and updated July 2010. See also *Administrative Detention in the Occupied Palestinian Territory between Law and Practice*, Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Right Association report, December 2010.

ⁱⁱ To conceptualize the structure of the subjectivation of hunger strikers I developed some concepts: ‘*turning-points*’, ‘*active victim*’, ‘*zero mode of being*’, and ‘*transformative jump/leap*’. All of them are tied systemically to illuminate my analysis of subjectivation in relation to dispossession. In my thesis, I explain these concepts at length.