

# Linking with Palestine

**Rachel Cohen, Nickie Charles and Nicola Pratt write about attending a workshop in Palestine:**

For two years sociologists and political scientists associated with Warwick's Centre for the Study of Women and Gender have visited Birzeit University in Palestine as part of a British Academy funded network, 'Reconceptualising gender: transnational perspectives'. The network members seek to develop normal academic discourse with Palestinian scholars, who find international collaboration difficult due to the Israeli occupation, by attending a workshop where gender scholars can share their work.

Attending a workshop in Palestine is unlike attending one anywhere else. Getting there is not easy. Israel controls all entry points into the West Bank and academics can be refused entry if, on questioning by Israeli immigration, it emerges that the reason for their visit is to go to a Palestinian university. Even saying that you intend to visit Palestine can mean that you are refused entry as highlighted by the recent 'flytilla' protests.

So when we entered Israel, despite the legitimacy conferred by our British Academy funding, we each had 'addresses' of where we were 'staying' in Jerusalem, and none of us mentioned our hotel bookings in the West Bank town of Ramallah. We left behind laptops and email-enabled phones (limiting the material available to security screening) and packed guidebooks and bikinis, the accoutrements of tourism. We breathed a collective sigh of relief when we emerged from customs without enduring the three hours of questioning a project member experienced the previous year.

Even for relatively privileged British academics, a visit to Birzeit University provides a small taste of the micro-social and political processes of life under occupation: the feeling of being monitored, the dread of not being allowed through state-controlled barriers (customs, checkpoints, road-blocks), a lack of autonomy, and the need to dissemble.

The workshop itself was fascinating. Our Birzeit colleagues, based at the Institute of Women's Studies, spoke about: Palestinian women's NGOs; victims of the geographical split of the Palestinian territory between the West Bank and Gaza Strip; the experiences of the wives and mothers of political prisoners, who are themselves metaphorically and



Professor Charles and Dr Pratt at the wall

sometimes literally imprisoned by constraints on their movement that make visiting incarcerated family members almost impossible; the pressures on Palestinian universities as a result of European and North American donor-promoted neo-liberal policies (pressures that felt very familiar to UK academics); and the development of new masculinities in the occupied territories.

In relation to this last topic, Reema Hammami turned an ethnographic lens on the everyday life of checkpoints, arguing that Palestinian men and women continue to travel through checkpoints, living through daily humiliations, but also seeking to establish micro-practices of autonomy, including ways of doing gender.

She summarised life under occupation with the phrase, 'existence as resistance', something that resonated throughout our visit: the refusal of Palestinians to stop travelling, even when checkpoints and closed roads extend 10-minute journeys by several hours; the enthusiasm of university students for education and research that is socially and politically relevant despite little available graduate work; the attempts by villagers to farm, even where this is made unsustainable by Israeli monopolisation of water resources; and simply attempting to do the mundane in circumstances where nothing is mundane. Our visit took place in the context of the Israeli government's unwillingness to allow academic visitors to Palestine.

As such Palestinians are subjected to a de facto international boycott (something that exposes the hypocrisy of Israeli government opposition to a boycott of Israeli

academic institutions as 'against freedom'). This context made us reflect upon what it is about academic visits that is so threatening to the Israeli state. Perhaps it is that Israel seeks to prevent Palestinians from enjoying the trappings of 'civilisation'. Thus the Palestinian Authority is not permitted to widen roads, dispose of the rubbish, or even direct traffic in the congested areas on the Palestinian side of the main checkpoint separating Ramallah from Jerusalem (Qalandia). Consequently visitors to the Palestinian controlled area are met with chaotic traffic jams, dusty rows of totalled cars and piles of stray carrier bags. And the symbolic point is hardly obscure – Palestine is, we are being led to believe, a wholly uncivilised place.

In contrast, the Israeli occupation utilises many of the trappings of civilisation and modernity as tools of colonisation: rapidly rising new illegal settlements, brutalist clusters of architecturally matching buildings containing tens of thousands of residents; high-tech agricultural development of (stolen) land; construction of by-pass roads in the West Bank for the use of settlers only; land expropriation in the West Bank under the guise of archaeological preservation or



Network members at a Ramallah meal

the designation of 'nature reserves'. From this perspective, the boycott of Israeli academic institutions, themselves complicit in Israel's colonising practices, is a means of challenging Israel's oppressive civilising processes.

Travelling to Birzeit is neither straightforward nor entirely pleasant. But when academics are discouraged from developing independent relations with academics in Palestine, face-to-face debate becomes a practice of resistance – an academic form of 'existence as resistance'. Moreover, visiting Birzeit is also a way of meeting and learning from scholars whose feminism is embedded in long-standing social engagement, and whose lived experiences do indeed help us to 'reconceptualise' gender. For more information on 'Reconceptualising gender' see: [www.go.warwick.ac.uk/gender/research/birzeit](http://www.go.warwick.ac.uk/gender/research/birzeit)  
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