

FROM SEDENTARIZATION: TO URBANIZATION:

State Policy towards Bedouin Society in Israel



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FOREWORD

The relation between the modern state and its seminomadic population is a complex one. Nomads by their very existence and pattern of living pose a challenge to the authority and discipline of the state. The process of sedentarization, if not permitted to take place gradually, is often resisted vigorously, inasmuch as it involves drastic social and cultural disruptions (Galaty et al. 1981; Horner 1982). The state sees its nomadic population as the most marginalized of its excluded citizenry, and in its welfare orientation takes upon itself the task to modernize and bring into the disciplined mainstream this unruly population (Maddrell 1990). This project is by its nature fraught with conflict, especially in cases where the sedentarization of the indigenous nomadic populations has been part of the so-called state-building process in which the issue of territorial sovereignty plays an important ideological role. It is here that the free space of the nomad comes into sharp contrast with the controlled territory of the state. There are hence few modern states that can boast of a smooth and successful sedentarization process.

One such example is the state of Israel which has not been particularly successful in transforming its Bedouin population into a modern, settled society.¹ Since the formation of the state many attempts have been made to address this problem—policies, plans, and projects varying from the heavy-handed to the wily have been devised and implemented (Boneh 1983;

Dinero 1996; Fenster 1995). And yet the essential antagonistic relation between the state and its citizens with a recent nomadic past remain as acute as ever. This paper looks at the various strategies by which the Israeli state has attempted to deal with this problem. From the imposition of forced sedentarization to the implementation of abrupt urbanization, we will attempt to show how the state has used planning as the major tool for the control of territory and people—often in contradiction with the traditional goals of planning—to bring about an advanced standard of living environments for its citizens.

SEDENTARIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SPACE

Whether one agrees or not with the thesis that the sedentarization of nomadic tribes is a normal or natural historical process, it is clear that there is nothing natural about the forced and dramatic change of nomadic space (pasture, grazing areas, and rights of way) that was induced by the modern state in its sweep to institutionalize its sovereign territory. Israel, both during the 1948 war and its aftermath, used an array of agencies—army, police, and legal/bureaucratic systems—to remove its Bedouin populations from their traditional spaces and to confine them within a clearly defined and bounded area of control and observation. In the first stage, those areas encompassed Arab places that were put under military rule immediately after the war. In the next stage, transfers of population were carried out during which tribal communities were removed from their traditional grounds and transported by the military to specially designated areas. Thus, the triangular area between Beer-Sheva, Arad, and Dimona was the so-called Siyag area into which the major remaining tribes of the south were transferred after the war.

Sedentarization does not stop at spatial displacement. The state looks upon a footloose population as a potential threat to the public order. Like all states it looks upon the “outsider” as an undesirable element (Sibley 1981) and makes every effort to “tame” this population by integrating it into the social structure. This means that the nomad has to be taught to accept as normal the relations of property and land, relations of employment and labor, and, above all, patterns of living expressed in the modern models of settlement pattern, residential life, and consumption of goods and services that are hallmarks of modern capitalist society.

The sedentarization that took place in Israel was above all a forced transformation of traditional space which involved severe displacements in the following fields. First, unbounded spaces used for movement and grazing were replaced by bounded and supervised areas. The traditional rights of passage of nomadic society were replaced by rights to fixed property and commodified space. Second, adapted and informal living areas reflecting the social relations among the tribal communities were replaced by

“modern” neighborhood patterns, that is, regimented and regularized lots of a few hundred square meters each. Extended families were forced to break up into nuclear families and live with strangers as close neighbors. Third, the able-bodied males were required to switch from animal husbandry and dry crop farming to industrial (building, land moving, and manufacturing) occupations so as to ensure a steady income. This proletarianization of the work force was accompanied by the fracturing of space that is consequential to the fragmentation of work, home, leisure, and community that the new division of labor necessitated.

The transformation of space that accompanied the sedentarization of the Bedouin illustrates what Scott terms the attempt by the state to make “a society legible,” a need to arrange the population in ways to facilitate the state functions of synoptic control (1998, 2). This presumptive and high-handed attempt to organize space and society is of course rooted in what Scott calls the high modernist ideology (1998, 4).

URBANISM: THE QUICK ROUTE TO MODERNISM

The Israeli state machinery made great efforts to bring the newly sedentarized population into planned and controlled patterns of residence. For various reasons the gradual transition from nomad to rural to semiurban to urban ways of living that characterized other more settled states was dispensed with. The settlement pattern found to be most appropriate to the new labor force was the dense urban compact form, and entire communities were moved into “towns” planned and laid out according to these principles. Denied the option to choose an agricultural lifestyle, Bedouin society was forced to leapfrog decades of cultural, social, and economic adjustment and adapt themselves to the imperatives of capitalist-industrial society. Among the reasons, explicit or implicit, in the stubborn refusal to grant the changing society the chance to experience a rural, agricultural way of life were these. First of all, since the very effort to transplant the Bedouin arose from the need to detach them from their uncontrolled traditional spaces, the rural settlement pattern was found to be too generous in land area. Agriculture requires extensive tracts of land, and creating agricultural villages for the Bedouin was considered counterproductive to the purpose of territorial reorganization. Second, the problem of water availability and deficiencies of desert agriculture no doubt supported the conviction that the rural pattern was highly inappropriate. Furthermore, an agricultural sector was bound to be in competition with the Jewish sector, thus blunting the thrust of Jewish settlement in providing the rationale for occupying the land. Third, gathering scattered tribes into one planned town gave rise to a relatively large and heterogeneous population which presumably led to the assumption that the city rather than the village was the appropriate settlement form. The concentration of services and rationalization of infrastructures both

gave the urban form clear advantages. Finally, the unskilled Bedouin workforce provided a much needed reserve army of labor in the development zones of the south. The transition from nomad to proletariat was relatively easy, and former nomads were soon absorbed in construction, earth moving, petty manufacturing, and agro-industries. The urban centers were then convenient dormitory towns for these laborers.

All of these reasons led to a consistent policy, even under different governments, to refuse an agricultural/rural alternative for resettlement. The planned towns were the only option for Bedouins forced to abandon their traditional way of life. But the promise of a higher standard of living was soon found to be a sham if not backed up by consistent state support for investment in employment opportunities, services, and access to political power.

THE ZIONIST APPROPRIATION OF MODERNISTIC PLANNING

The use of urban and regional planning as a technical and administrative means for bringing about spatial change is not unusual in developing societies. The discourse of planning offers a promise of progressive social change via technical and instrumental rationality. Professional and scientific knowledge is assumed to be the rationale behind state-initiated residential patterns, and the good of the general public is cited as the overriding principle that takes precedence over individual interests or any disruption of cultural heritage and everyday life. This representation of planning is common to all modernizing societies, including Israel, which eagerly seized on the versatile tool of planning for the control of space and people. Both formal bureaucratic statutory planning as well as proactive developmental planning systems were incorporated in state-directed spatial strategies. What was unique in this situation, however, was the Zionist orientation in planning as it was applied to the population. The ideological basis of this particular form of planning can be discerned in its practices.

First, Zionist planning is essentially paternalistic in nature. The Zionist pioneers, having been the heroic pathbreakers and builders of the Jewish state, did not bother to discuss goals and alternatives with ordinary Jewish citizens, let alone Arab citizens. The type of planning common in the early days of the state was a top-down authoritative kind of command planning. It should be recalled that after the country's leaders declared independence, they nevertheless found it convenient to continue to operate with the colonialist formal planning systems of the British mandate. Indeed, even to this day, national, regional, and local planning is remarkably lacking in participatory approaches (Law-Yone 1990). Planning for the Bedouin, indeed for all citizens, then, is and always has been paternalistic and authoritarian.

The second characteristic of Zionist planning is the versatile bifurcated planning system that developed over time. On the one hand, the bureaucratic

statutory system, inherited and localized from the colonialist system and operating according to the books, was slow and cumbersome for the ordinary citizen. Parallel to this, yet not entirely unconnected, was the developmental system. An ad hoc, entrepreneurial system of powerful state and quasi-state organizations that initiated projects and carried them out at a rapid and uncoordinated pace was the forte of this system. This dual system of planning gave the state immense power to deal with problems in an arbitrary manner, placing the citizen at a disadvantage in making his or her voice heard. Historically, the statutory planning system has consistently avoided dealing with the Bedouin, usually by simply refusing to recognize Bedouin settlements, which means that they not only do not appear on maps or in official statistics, but also are deprived of basic services such as water, electricity, roads, health, and education.

The task of dealing with the Bedouin in Israel has generally come under the purview of the developmental system, which tends to employ military or quasi-military methods of taming the population. The major actors are comprised of committees or councils set up especially to deal with the Bedouin. Their approach is basically to resettle the population in concentrated semi-urban "towns" in conjunction with a forfeiture of land claims. Once the population moves into these towns, they enter the realm of statutory planning which then becomes one other aspect of modern living that they are required to adjust to. The entire system of initiating, preparing, approving, and implementing formal outline plans is a burden on the Arab population and the Bedouin are among those who suffer most (Khamaysi 1990)

The third aspect of Zionist planning has to do with a characteristic blindness to place of those in power which is replaced by an almost fetishistic emphasis on territory. Whether it is in planning for Jewish or Arab space, Zionism as an ideology has always brought with it a fanatic attachment to acquisition of territory while the considerations of place have been almost entirely ignored. Place often seems to pose a threat to the Zionist project. Whether it is the local place, the native landscape associated with the enemy "other," or the imaginary storied place associated with the primordial past, Zionist thinkers preferred to base their worldview on a completely new space which, in its turning away from the past and the local, had no choice but to draw upon the concepts and models of the European West.

There is perhaps no sector of society in Israel in which the clash of cultures has been as profound as in Bedouin society subjected to Zionist planning. The sedentarizing nomad has had to cope not only with the wrenching change from a movable amorphous space of desert society to a permanent local place, but also with the perpetual attempt by the state to delegitimize these places to which they have become attached. The presentation of traditional environments as backward, primitive, and unhealthy has

often forced Bedouins to disown their past. The postnomadic Bedouin are then faced with a continuous struggle to create viable and authentic living environments while buffeted by the official attempt to deterritorialize them by forcing on them empty and foreign forms of space imported from foreign and strange contexts.

PLANNING STRATEGIES OF THE STATE

Israel's overall approach to planning for the sedentarization of the Bedouin and for postnomadic society may be summed up as composed of three spatial strategies: relocation, resettlement, and restructuring. Relocation was the first strategy Israel employed in dealing with its nomadic society. As the state consolidated its territorial domain it was found to be imperative to move entire tribes from their traditional spaces. In terms of state policy, it was necessary to gather these populations and concentrate them into clearly bounded and controlled areas. These transfers of population were carried out by military personnel who also legitimized possession of the new living quarters by signing simple notes. Needless to say, such notes were not accepted as legal proof of land ownership, neither when the Bedouin applied for permits to build permanent housing, nor when later the state negotiated with the Bedouin to bring them into planned settlements.

Resettlement, the classic strategy modern states use to manage their nomadic populations, represented Israel's attempt to prevent the creation of permanent in situ living areas where the Bedouin chose to camp. The attempt to transform temporary structures into permanent ones was vigorously resisted by the arms of the state. Police, Green Patrols, and municipal officials regularly tore down these "illegal" building attempts. Simultaneously, the state engaged architects and planners to prepare and lay out residential plots in selected locations into which families were enticed to move while giving a statement relinquishing any claim to other lands. Hence the only alternative given to the population that wished to live in permanent homes with basic services was to move into these settlements.

In the 1960s, several tribes in the north were gathered into four large planned settlements (Basmat Tab'un, Ibtin, Bir-el-Maksur, and Wadi Hamam). In the 1970s five more such settlements appeared again in the north (Zarzir, Kaabiya, Salame, Aramshe, and Tuba) and two in the south (Tel Sheva and Rahat). In the 1980s, after the peace agreements with Egypt, an additional three settlements (Kseife, Aroer, and Segev Shalom) were established to free up land for a new military airport. In the 1990s, the last two settlements were set up (Lagiya and Hura). Since then no new settlements have been established, although in principle the Israeli government has stated that several new ones are on the drawing board for the south. The situation seems to be one of a standoff. Although the Bedouins choosing to move into these towns were

primarily those who had been removed from their lands in the 1950s, to this day large sections of Negev Bedouin society still living on their traditional lands vigorously resist any attempt to move them into the planned towns. Hence today there are more Bedouin living outside planned settlements than inside. Many Bedouins are clearly reluctant to be moved into a settlement that may turn out like the existing ones which, as all social scientists and researchers attest, are dismal failures as viable communities. The lack of infrastructure, services, and urban amenities together with unemployment, crime, and drugs give these towns a poor image.

Resettlement of course is not simply a question of moving one's family into a new home. The spatial layouts, the shape of the houses, and relations to neighbors that were determined by the plans proved to have a traumatic effect on the residents. Hierarchies of space based on tribal social structure were replaced by repetitive lots of uniform size, shape, and orientation. Gradations of proximity, enclosure, and openness of the desert were replaced by the spatial logic of the European urban form. New and strange definitions of private and public spheres were grafted onto a society that had its own norms, which were no longer considered valid. It is no wonder that in the first waves of resettlement families refused to move into lots in close proximity to other families, public spaces remained empty, and cases of families setting up tents in their own lots next to the modern concrete buildings were common. It bears repeating that this drastic change of communal living did not go through an intermediate rural stage as in other societies that became urbanized. This was a forced and rapid change that demanded much in terms of versatility and adaptivity of the sedentarizing population. There is no doubt that the disruption of society brought about by this urbanization is reflected in the representations of space. Anyone looking at these planned settlements cannot but be struck by the poverty of the models and formulas underlying the structures and spaces proposed as forms of living for residents, as well as by the proliferation of the resulting non-places expressing the alienation of everyday life from the officially mandated designs of community. The contrasts between the natural layouts of the traditional tents typically adapted to terrain, landscape, and climate, and the monotonous industrialized buildings are striking.

Restructuring is the corollary to resettlement, for settlement forms are based on ways of life and ways of life are practices emanating from social structure. The complex social relations of Bedouin society had to be subordinated in a very short time to the exigencies of modern urban industrial society. This meant disruptions of traditional authority and hierarchies, relations between the sexes, familial and tribal networks, and community organization. The forced nuclearization of families destroyed much of the previous social cohesion and loyalties in addition to creating inter-neighbor tensions. The

work and consumption patterns of the surrounding society to which the Bedouin had to adapt also caused breakdowns in social mores. Above all, the rapidity with which such adaptations have come about have shaken traditional Bedouin society to the core. The wish to slow down change and try a rural pattern of transition may seem nostalgic but understandable in view of the losses already suffered in traditional Bedouin societal values.

CONCLUSION

The state of Israel has been deficient in dealing with its Bedouin citizens. Above all, its planning policies and practices, rather than bringing progress and improved standards of living to this loyal population, have brought them poverty and environmental degradation. It has made these citizens the main component of the nation's underclass. In the south, where sedentarization is relatively recent, more than half the population is considered to be living in "unrecognized" villages and is outcast for all official intents and purposes. Slowly they are being forced to move into dismal planned towns, which are planning failures. The overt discrimination underlying government policy can be clearly seen in the contrasts with the Jewish sector. The Bedouin towns are overrepresented in the list of settlements hardest hit by unemployment. As the reserve army of employment, they are first to feel the effects of economic slowdowns. In terms of grants, subsidies, infrastructure investments, delegation of political power, and so forth, Bedouin society is still greatly excluded. Ironically, in a recent nationwide survey of socioeconomic and environmental quality, it was found that the settlement with the highest quality (Omer) as well as the lowest (Tel Sheva) are both located in the south, one Jewish and the other a planned Bedouin town, located almost next to each other.

The processes of sedentarization and urbanization in Israel have been exacerbated by state spatial policies directed at the Bedouin. The imperial manner in which the state has used planning as a spatial manipulation tool has caused Bedouin society much harm and suffering. The anomie which Durkheim spoke of as characterizing urban society can be observed today in the semiurban slums of planned towns of the south. Planning, as initiated by the state, has shown its dark side (Yiftachel 1995). The social consequences of official planning are all too obvious, sad commentaries on the idealistic discourse of modern planning. It seems that Israel will have to change its planning agenda and practice towards the Bedouin drastically if it wishes to fulfill its original promise of ensuring a better future for the ordinary citizen.

Note

1. Since almost all the true nomadic population in Israel have become sedentarized, it is technically incorrect to call them Bedouin. Indeed some would consider the use of the term to be either patronizing or an attempt to divide the Arab population. While aware of the potential misuse of the term, I nevertheless feel that it is still necessary to adopt it here if only to preserve the historical aspects of social change.

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