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"Human Rights, Local Plights: The Implications of Rights Discourses in the Struggle over Arab-Palestinian Bedouin Land in Israel"

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ABSTRACT

A widely diffused, engaged approach understands human rights as an opportunity to enhance moral progress. Less visible has a critical realm of research that reveals the often-ambiguous social life of human rights discourses. This article draws on a specific case study from the intricate issue of how activism for Arab-Palestinian Bedouin citizens in Southern Israel engages with the global human rights discourse. It follows the implications of mobilization, focusing on events related to a campaign against house demolitions in informal, unrecognised settlements. The case shows how human rights discourses tend to silence the agency of political subjects, victimizing and patronizing those who seek emancipation. The ethnographic insights emphasize the role of a range of carnivalesque and spontaneous acts of resistance, which subvert the patronizing implications of the human rights language.

Keywords: Human rights, activism, Negev desert, Israel/Palestine, resistance

Introduction

At sunset, black toxic smoke filled the sky. This thick smoke seared the inside of my nose. That evening, I assisted Faisal, an Arab-Palestinian Bedouin citizen[1] in his mid-30s, in burning the remaining Styrofoam pieces of his caravan. We were in a valley considered by Israeli authorities as a nature conservation area, part of the Northern Israeli Negev Desert. A few hours earlier, the Israeli police had demolished the caravan along with a couple of other wood and metal constructions. A range of organisations and activists had claimed the valley as indigenous land to which Feisal's family had a right, framing their struggle increasingly in terms of the global human rights language. In addition, a conundrum of local and international NGOs, academics and politicians had delivered reports, news and speeches evoking frequently reference to human rights, sometimes in very different circumstances (Almi 2003; Amara, Abu-Saad & Yiftachel 2012; Human Rights Watch 2008; Dukium 2008: 8). "Human rights" became an ever-present reference in the requests for peace, equality, access to resources and recognition of rights to land. Over more than one year, this dynamic led to a vicious circle of demolitions and reconstructions of about 20 huts and buildings (Koensler 2012). On one occasion, left-leaning Jewish activists and European foundations managed to persuade a major humanitarian organisation to donate emergency tents in the name of human rights protection.[2] However, nobody needed the emergency tents. Faisal lived with his family elsewhere, on the outskirts of a government-planned "Bedouin town" in Southern Israel, specially designed cities to settle Israeli citizens of Bedouin origin who are currently at the bottom of the socio-economic scale in the ethnically multi-layered Israeli society (Dinero 2010). A few weeks later, a local NGO official confessed to me about the delivery of the unusable emergency tents: "Well, I thought it would be a good idea, no? They could be used as a mobile tool for occupying the land and fold them down before the bulldozers arrive".[3] In other words, the humanitarian aid with its connotations of passive victims had been transformed in this specific situation into a tool of resistance. At first glance, this rather unfamiliar use of humanitarian aid could appear as a case of "corruption" or, at best, persiflage of interventionism. During my fieldwork in the Israeli Negev Desert,[4] I often came across similar situations: circumstances that did break with common sense assumptions

about how human rights should be lobbied for. Social reality turned out often to be much more multi-layered, messy and intricate than other actors in the field, like journalists or activists, would assume.

This article argues that unfamiliar forms of political mobilization, like the use of emergency aid as a tool of resistance, should make us think, should lead us to reconsider some of the implications of how global rights discourses are applied in specific contexts, viewing the global human rights discourse both as opportunity and constraint (cf. Landy 2013). I describe ethnographic encounters with unusual sources of political agency, such as the emergency tents as a tool of mobile land occupation. This is only one of the many different forms of dissent and resistance; some are silent, others are loud and carnivalesque; some are planned, while others are spontaneous. The more abstract aim of this argument is to contribute to the debate on how rights discourses can advance social justice for marginalized groups. A widely diffused, engaged understanding of human rights discourses as moral progress proclaims the value of the global human rights language as emancipating. This body of research opposes a less visible realm of research, derived from an interest in the social life and the unintended consequences of human rights discourses. The intricate issue of Arab-Palestinian Bedouin land rights within the boundaries of the Israeli state is shown here to constitute a particularly significant case in point.

Human Rights: Progressive Hope or Liberal Imperialism?

Over the last decade, “human rights” have developed into a political metanarrative with global ambitions (Wilson 2006: 77; Landy 2013). Originally stemming from the 1948 Genocide Convention, human rights discourses[5] have been enacted by an array of organisations and academics, ranging from liberal individualist approaches to the demand for collective and/or indigenous rights. Anthropologists are often at the forefront of engagement with human rights language, both as engaged activist researchers and as critical observers (Goodale 2009a). The issue of how to engage with human rights seems to have reached impasse. Within the first strand, the literature considers the emergence of a global human rights discourse more or less openly as an emancipating, normative tool. The

promotion of human rights is assumed to create if not a utopia than at least a more equal and just society. Increasingly converging with the mission of the anthropologist as a witness (Marcus 2005), this approach is generating a growing body of literature in which political engagement converges with the academic endeavour. Engaged anthropologists, in the first place, are placing a lot of hope and expectation on the advance of political mobilization for human rights in their multicultural version of collective and indigenous rights (Nash 2005, 2008). This approach has developed a substantive body of social critique based on witnessing injustice, inequalities and oppression, framing ethnographic engagement in metanarratives related to Hardt and Negri's (2000) concept of empire and neoliberalism in general. The work of Turner (1997) aims to demonstrate how anthropological engagement in the name of difference offers a potential contribution to emancipatory politics. Farmer's (2005) work also offers a sophisticated critique of structural violence based on implicit assumptions related to the violation of basic human rights. The list of other significant examples could be long.

Interestingly, in many cases, these works do not ignore problems with the application of rights language. For example, Farmer's (2005) work has outlined the deep forms of incorporation of inequality that make the application of emancipatory policies far more complex than many social policies propose. Holston's (2009) detailed analysis of how Brazilian citizens struggle over the unequal distribution of rights remains firmly rooted in the assumption of a global rights discourse, but reveals some of the difficulties and ambiguous effects of those struggles. In her outstanding volume *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia*, Winifred Tate (2011) draws on her first-hand experience as an ethnographer and activist to investigate the complexity of human rights knowledge, including the contradictions and difficulties that emerge in the attempt to define violence and to construct reliable political lobbies. From this perspective, an anthropological approach that focuses on micro-political interactions of activists within their broader social field needs to relate to larger processes of how advocacy programs are enacted and performed in specific contexts.

However, the engaged academic writing on human rights contrasts with less visible critical writing, often developing out of a postcolonial or constructivist perspective. It has often started by investigating the implications of reductivist and simplified constructions of

reality in global human rights discourses. Slavoj Zizek's (2005) provocative article *Against Human Rights* considers the emergence of a global human rights language as functional within the capitalist liberal societies in which this language has emerged, leading to an alibi for military interventions and a sacralisation of the capitalist-driven liberal global market. In addition, Zizek points out how confidence in the emancipatory power of global rights discourses leads to a *de facto* depoliticization of intervention. Other forms of social change, including a broader critique of the liberal-capitalist system, are in this way delegitimized, contends Zizek.

From a postcolonial perspective, the universality of human rights language is frequently considered as problematic with regard to the richness, diversity and multiplicity of specific cultural conditions around the world (Spivak 2004; Baxi 2007). Ratna Kapur (2006: 674), in her evocative essay *Human Rights in the 21st Century: Take a walk on the dark side*, goes one step further and argues that the neutral and dehistorizing implications of human rights language "simply deny the reality of those whom it claims to represent and speak for", concluding that these implications end up reproducing the imposition of the Western hegemonic order.

In addition, in anthropological writing, intense debate over the universality versus the particularity of human rights has occurred over the last decade (Engeleke 1999; Turner 1997). More recently, this interest has been replaced by increasing attention to the ways in which claims are lived up and/or instrumentalized by specific actors and in concrete situations (Merry 2006; Zigon 2013). Richard Wilson (2006: 78) asserts that, compared with other political metanarratives, human rights language does "not provide the basis for a fully worked out moral or political philosophy". Broadening this argumentation, in *Surrendering to Utopia*, Goodale (2009b) shows the vicissitudes of the human rights framework, with its more recent appropriation and transformation into neoliberal rights.

This line of argumentation becomes even more salient in Didier Fassin's (2008) interpretations of humanitarian interventions in the name of human rights. He considers humanitarianism as a recent turn in the change of struggles against oppression. According to him, the hope for revolution has been replaced by the rather vague and fragmented discourses of human rights. He states: "Whereas, not so long ago, that is until the 1960s,

volunteers went off to fight alongside peoples in their liberation struggles, it is now humanitarian workers who take care of victims of conflict" (2008: 532). Those who were struggling for liberation have now to present themselves as victims; a dynamic of "victimization" that also becomes evident in the opening ethnographic vignette of the "abused" emergency tents.

Another aspect of this critique regards the critique of the use of collective identities in human rights language, leading to contemporary upheaval of struggles in the name of cultural difference (Cowan 2006), which has developed in the wake of political mobilization in the name of collective identities (Melucci 1996; Touraine 1988). In an emblematic debate carried out in the field of anthropology between supporters and critics of collective rights advocacy, Adam Kuper pointed out that "…[w]herever special land and hunting rights have been extended to so-called indigenous peoples, local ethnic frictions have been exacerbated" (2003: 395). This line of critique derives from increased attention being paid to the contradictions and complicated consequences that surround political mobilization.

In addition, a growing body of critical NGO studies such as in Israel/Palestine, for example, Hanafi and Taber's (2005) work on the Palestinian globalized NGO elite, has shown some of the pitfalls and problems associated with an uncritical implementation of a global rights discourse. These authors argue, from different angles, that some of the dynamics of human rights and humanitarian discourses and practices are reminiscent of neo-colonial conditions (Fisher 1997; Polman and Bland 2003; Kapur 2006; Zigor 2013). Anthropological research has also argued against one of the assumptions of the global human rights discourse, which forms of civil society in fact exist in Arab culture, if taken as its underlying principles of cooperation, justice regulation and ties of solidarity (Antoun 2000). In summary, in this growing body of work, attention is paid to how right-claims are actually lived up at local levels.

In a broader sense, the two conflicting approaches could be read against a more general evolution of the role of the identity of the anthropologist. According to Marcus (2005), a shift from a reporter towards a witness has been evident over the last decade. At the heart of the controversy is the role of the anthropologist and the way in which his authority is legitimized in relation to regimes of knowledge and the "big picture". The

emergence of the anthropologist as a witness of human rights misconduct "places the anthropologist back into the identity of expert in the service of other regimes of knowledge - an identity that critical anthropologists routinely call into question" (Marcus 2005: 37).

The Struggle over Resettlement and Human Rights

Public discourses and activist representations of the unresolved conflict between some governmental institutions and Arab-Bedouin representatives in the Negev Desert are a case in point to illustrate the double-edged implications of human rights discourses as a political metanarrative. With the foundation of the state of Israel, the population of Arab-Bedouin origin became subject to a programme of settlement and resettlement. In its first years, this program was implemented by persuasion on the grounds of military reasons as well as force (Fahal 1989), but at present is promoted through a combination of economic incentives (Dinero 2010) and politics via the threat of resettlement.[6] The conflict over land between Arab-Bedouin groups and the authorities originated in the Ottoman period (Marx 1967; Yiftachel 2003) and can be seen as part of a longer conflictual relationship between the authorities and nomadic peoples. About half of the estimated 210,000 citizens of Bedouin origin live in unrecognised and informal villages with only limited government services, reminiscent of unstable nomadic settlements. The other half lives in government-planned towns, the number of which has over the past decade increased from seven to twelve, but the planning procedures for some have not yet been completed. In the recent literature, there is a wide consensus that the most disadvantaged citizens of the Negev are those who live in "unrecognised" Arab-Bedouin villages (cf. Yiftachel 2003; Dinero 2010).

However, these numbers overlook both internal fragmentation, such as class dynamics, and external forms of mobility and shifting processes of self-identification, such as the integration of many former Bedouin citizens into broader Israeli or Palestinian dynamics, along with the disintegration of more traditional local social structures. For instance, historically, landowners in Bedouin society have formed only a part of the entirety of Bedouin citizens, often referred to as the "real" Bedouin. Historically, this "aristocratic" social class was supported by associated dependent farmers (*fellahin*) and slaves (*abib*). Former slaves nowadays mostly live in ghetto-style quarters within the larger government-planned Bedouin

towns; their living conditions have been almost completely ignored in advocacy informed by global rights discourses.

Negotiations between Bedouin representatives and the authorities over the access to resources between organisations and government representatives are increasingly phrased in a language of “community”, “indigenous rights” (Frantzman, Yahel and Kark 2012) and “human rights”. However, this approach fixes unstable and fragmented social categories (such as “community”, the “Bedouins” and “victims”), depicting a static and closed Bedouin community frozen in time and space (Fabian 2003). While it remains crucial to understand socio-economic stratifications, the complex overlap between the state and Arab-Bedouin citizens is often overlooked in these works. In addition, if conceived as a form of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1987) and directed at governmental agencies, this approach risks being transformed into a double-edged sword.

Many organisations and activists who deal with the issue have no problem evoking such dichotomous terms, overlooking the roles of internal stratifications and sub-groups like the *abib*. Thus, the human rights language suggests a static and horizontally equal Bedouin society, which implicitly justifies historically developed forms of exploitation. For instance, many of the former associated farmers (*fellahin*) and former slaves (*abib*) accepted offers from the government for small plots of land in the planned Bedouin towns. The ownership over these plots allowed those citizens with a disadvantaged background to upgrade their social status by actually becoming small landowners in the government-confined spaces.

At the same time, there was another tendency relating to a progressive “Palestinianization” of Arab-Bedouin collective identity. Palestinian Arab-Bedouin citizens in the Negev Desert have officially held full Israeli citizenship since the 1960s, but are subjected to direct or indirect policies of discrimination in many fields, such as access to housing and land rights, comparable to the concerns of Palestinian citizens within the boundaries of the Israeli state (excluding the Occupied Palestinian Territories) (Haklai 2011; Jabareen 2000). Rabinowitz and Abu Baler (2005) speak of the “Stand Tall Generation” when referring to Palestinian citizens in Israel, referring to those who speak out loudly for their collective rights compared with the previous generation who gratefully accepted the entitlement to Israeli citizenship conceived less problematically in terms of individual rights. As the wishful thinking

that Palestinian citizens in Israel would become part of the Israeli citizenry in a relatively smooth way slowly faded away, so practices of resistance articulate collective rights based on the assumption of ethnic, cultural or ethno-national difference anchored in the emergence of the global human rights metanarrative (Koensler 2012).

Blurring the boundaries between activism and academia in many ways, a school of engaged political geography has developed around this theme, most prominently known by Oren Yiftachel's work *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (2006). A recent example in the Negev is the volume *Indigenous (In)justice* prepared by Amara, Abu Saad and Yiftachel (2012) for the Human Rights Clinic of Harvard University Law School.[7] The introduction states: "The Bedouins share many common characteristics with indigenous groups in other countries. At hand, the Bedouins are a case of a tribal society that lived for centuries as a nomadic and semi-nomadic society" (p. 2). Interacting with a conundrum of local NGOs that represent Arab-Palestinian Bedouin issues,[8] the team of the clinic realised several short-term research missions based on a positivistic sounding approach, which were suggestive of the clinic being an institution at the fault lines of regulative power (Foucault 2003). The contributions of this report exemplify a return of objective "expert knowledge" distant from more poststructuralist and self-reflexive approaches now dominant in the social sciences. The revitalization of concepts that decades ago fell into neglect, such as "tribe", is a case in point, as this concept seems to overlook both the internal stratification and the dynamics of "Palestinianization" (Abu El-Haj 2010). Moreover, notions of Bedouin community or indigeneity are reified, despite a globally available literature that problematizes these concepts. Adam Kuper's (2003) provocative attempt to draw parallels between essentialized mobilization of indigenous rights with Europe's right-wing movements and their "blood and soil" ideology has generated much debate, but has demonstrated clearly the implications of essentializing discourses in the name of rights. In addition, some authors argue that this approach rewrites in partly reductivist terms some aspects of the more complex regional history of the Negev (Frantzman 2014). As an example of contested histories, this debate relies on categories of collective identities that often cannot be found empirically in specific settings, at least not in the same way they are conceptualized in either human rights or governmental discourses. The case of the unfamiliar use of emergency tents illustrates this

dynamic clearly. In a more abstract sense, some repercussions of the global human rights discourse are the production of essentializing discourses previously overcome in academic analysis.

Thus, this body of work usually fails to engage critically in anthropological insights into more intricate dynamics between what is presented as grassroots activism and the global human rights discourse. This dynamic is reminiscent of Isin's (2002; 2008; 2009) anticipation of how subjects "constitute themselves as those with 'the right to claim rights'" (2009: 371), rather than awaiting the allocation of rights from state actors. According to Isin (2009), these political acts in the context of a weakening nation state produce new claims and claimants: a dynamic that creates new sites of contestation, belonging, identification and struggle. Framing land claims of former Bedouin landowners in terms of human rights can be considered as one of these new sites of contestation.

Waiting for Demolitions

I now wish to relate some ethnographic episodes that can offer a more detailed look into these dynamics. The main episode narrates how Arab-Palestinian Bedouin citizens were waiting for demolitions of a series of provocatively erected buildings that did not happen. In different periods between 2004 and 2011, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork related to networks around campaigns against house demolitions in unrecognised villages.[9] For the purposes of this article, I selected a particular moment of contradictions related to the consequences of activism in the name of human rights discourses. The way in which the events evolved around this case may not be taken as representative of the Bedouin-state conflict in Southern Israel, but may shed light on some emblematic dynamics of how the global human rights discourse, as part of a broader NGO and activist conundrum, is enacted in specific multi-layered local settings. As part of this fieldwork, I hung around with Faisal a lot. He was a friend of an extended Arab-Bedouin family who had been at the centre of a campaign against house demolitions.

One afternoon, he called on me unexpectedly.[10] He silently took a coffee and sat down for about an hour without talking. Then he said: "Probably tomorrow they come with bulldozers". He was referring to events in a place known by organisations and activists as a

“village”, but which in fact was not regularly inhabited.[11] Possibly as part of a strategy to create “facts on the ground” that vaguely evoked Jewish settlers’ practices in the West Bank, buildings and other constructions in this place had already been demolished by the police and reconstructed several times. Faisal was one of the people who had contributed to establishing buildings, caravans and tents in the village; besides that, he resided in a more conventional home in another town. I was astonished at his precise prediction. He explained to me that a friend of his had informal contacts with the Israeli police and that his cousin had searched for and discovered a couple of Jewish National Fund bulldozers[12] parked in a field near another Bedouin town. Later, we went to the village by car, but nobody was there. Despite not being a “normal” village in the common sense of this term, the place had become a hotspot of activism and had been the scene of both demolition and reconstruction activism. In the afternoon, Faisal’s friends and extended family prepared things for the expected demolition. Nobody wanted to disappoint the visiting journalists and activists, especially since stories of Arab-Palestinian Bedouin life are not usually heard in the Israeli mainstream media. Faisal, along with other activists, regarded this event as an opportunity to incise public discourses.

Two boys were asked to wake up very early in the morning and to position themselves on hilltops as guardians. I joined them and, the next morning, at about six o'clock, we had breakfast with pita bread, cream cheese and humus. The brand of the humus we ate was at that time running commercials with young, attractive male and female soldiers training in a desert camp and eating humus. Were we unconsciously imitating them, fulfilling the promises of modern advertising? We moved up onto the hilltops in order to observe the landscape with binoculars. We had also brought equipment to prepare coffee, expecting a wait of several hours. However, there was no sign of any bulldozers. Only three pick-up cars arrived from the direction of the nearby Bedouin town. A group of women and three men headed towards the shacks. The men unloaded pillows, carpets and various objects. We waited for hours. Nothing happened. We prepared more coffee and tea, chatted about football and engines, and watched the horizon. Still nothing. In the end, on that day, no bulldozers arrived. The women exited the shacks and some left. They probably had other things to do. I stayed with Faisal and two of his cousins. While one of them was going to buy

a pack of Arabic bread, humus and Coke for breakfast, we remained in the shade of one shack and fell asleep. I was tired and had little desire to talk more.

Waiting for demolitions that did not happen was an inverse version of Allen Ginsburg's (1972: 137) line from the poem *Graffiti*: "Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Came". However, in the context of a critical reflection on human rights language, it demonstrates how complex entanglements lead to the constitution of "victims" as a political acts. In other words, the global rights discourses allow mobilization only in terms of "victims", silencing a realm of agency usually associated with political activism. One needs to become a victim in order to attract attention to the cause, which certainly does not facilitate dynamics that are genuinely emancipating. Waiting in the ruins of previously demolished and partly reconstructed buildings was a melancholic endeavour; it is reminiscent of how Ann Maria Stoler (2008) describes the political function of various engagements with debris.

Real Demolitions

However, this event was accompanied by a series of demolitions of shacks and tents that actually did take place. The "real" demolitions of the uninhabited buildings, at the beginning, successfully attracted the interest of a broad range of local, regional and national advocacy and coexistence organisations, journalists and Israeli left-wing parliamentarians. A puppet play for children took place and emergency aid was even delivered. However, the area was not inhabited by what could be imagined as a "community". Despite that, a range of NGOs directed and founded by middle-class Arab-Palestinian Bedouin citizens from the Negev, Faisal and his companions apparently did not find a meaningful role in their activism.

The history of Arab-Bedouin involvement in this specific area is a rather complex story of social mobility and attachment to ancestral land, but very distinct from a linear history of a stable local community. It is also a story that remains connected to the broader socio-economic developments of the Israeli state and the Middle East. Some members of Faisal's family moved into the so-called *Syag* area in the early 1950s, a "closed area" designated in the early years for Bedouin citizens uprooted from other areas in the course of Israel's war of independence.[13] Not even a decade later, in the early 1970s, the family moved to Central Israel, where they worked at various sites in the construction business. Towards the end of

the construction boom, most members of this family decided to return to the Negev. In 1976, the head of the extended family requested from the Israeli administration a plot of land in a government-planned town for Israel's Arab-Bedouin citizens, as did many of his fellow citizens. However, various difficulties and bureaucratic restraints emerged. In short, the requested plots of land in the designated area were not ready for building. In the following years, the responsible authority, the so-called "Authority for the Advancement of the Bedouin" (***המנהלה לקידום הבדואים בנגב***), promised to find alternative plots of land, an offer that did not convince the local leader.[14] According to a representative of the administration, the family rejected the offer because of 'internal' problems. However, family members insisted that the reason for rejecting the offer had been related to the conditions of the offered alternative plots. These plots, they claimed, did not meet their basic living requirements.

Some members of the family continued to live in Central Israel, however. For example, one of my key informants, Faisal, lived in a rented apartment in a Jewish kibbutz, working as a truck driver driving back and forth between Gaza and Central Israel. In the meantime, other family members who came back to the Negev settled on the outskirts of the town on the land of another extended family. As time passed, however, tensions arose between the two family leaders. Finally, the host family requested that the entire family leave as soon as possible from what they described as their land. This development was the "straw that broke the camel's back" to seek help at advocacy NGOs. I documented how NGO activists advised the family members to "return to their ancestral land", setting up buildings on what they considered to be such land. However, this land had in the meantime been declared a nature protected area by other parts of the Israeli administration, which did not communicate this to the Authority for the Advancement of the Bedouin.

These dynamics demonstrate a rather complex but not uncommon family history of Arab-Bedouin citizens as part of various modernization processes of the Israeli state and the Middle East in general. However, the human rights discourse has reframed these stories into a more clear-cut picture of victims of human rights violations *versus* the state. Three years later, when I met some of the citizens involved in this case, nobody demonstrated any more interest in the area where the demolitions had taken place. A strange silence was associated

with the story. The attention of advocacy organisations had moved to other, more dramatic hotspots.

When I searched for Faisal, I discovered that he had moved. After month of searching, an activist of an advocacy organisation told me that Faisal and his family had accepted a government offer of subsidized plots in a neighbourhood of an existing Bedouin town.[15] At first glance, this seems surprising. The constructions and demolitions had been accompanied by fierce rhetoric and clear anti-institutional activism. His decision to move into a government-planned town demonstrates what has been labelled as "complicity" (Pitzalis and Zerilli 2013), recalling Bourdieu's (2012) assertion of integration into the state apparatus through "participation in the field" and investment in its "stakes" (*illusio*).[16] Moreover, this result shows some of the limits regarding the traditional activism of advocacy organisations. In addition, the events can be interpreted in different ways, with the case showing that there is no clear polarity between the people's resistance and the government, as earlier literature on resistance has suggested (Scott 2008; Scott and Kerkvliet 1987). In terms of their broader repercussions, the cases of unconventional agency that emerge beyond the designated role of 'victims' of human rights violations have in fact created new sites of contestation that still need to be understood comprehensively.

Conclusion

This article has followed the implications of mobilization in the name of human rights activism, focusing on specific events related to a campaign against house demolitions in informal, unrecognised Bedouin settlements. Here, I have focused on ethnographic episodes that demonstrate possible creative uses of humanitarian aid delivered in the name of human rights. Moreover, in the cases provided, the way in which people mobilize and protest far exceeds the possibilities imagined by other actors. People wait for the demolitions of what would appear to be their houses. They prepare well for the event, but nothing happens. The limited range of options for activism offered in the name of the global rights discourse seems to be constantly exceeded by what is in people's best interests, and by the way their lives intersect in complex ways with the Israeli state. The way in which this case evolved is certainly unique in many aspects and cannot be generalized, but in these unique dynamics,

some emblematic patterns of human rights activism can also be seen. Most notably, this case shows how human rights discourses tend to silence the agency of political subjects, victimizing and patronizing those who seek emancipation. The ethnographic insights emphasize the role of a range of carnivalesque and spontaneous acts of resistance, which subvert the patronizing implications of the human rights language. Activism and practices to improve living conditions include not only more traditional forms of political activism, but also go far beyond what is usually considered as political activism.

I have interpreted these selected episodes against the polarized debate of whether human rights discourses have emancipatory potential or actually reaffirm divisions. In the mainstream literature, the complex functions of these "acts" are often overseen or reframed into more binary pictures of indigenous, victimised people against the state. However, the events I have described show how those practices for social change often create new sites of contestation, reminding us of the way in which ruins can become a tool of agency for those whose lives are ruined by imperial formations (Stoler 2008). These forms of mobilization cannot be understood using an approach that does not problematize the specific repercussions of the global human rights discourse.

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[1] In this paper, I use the term 'Arab-Palestinian Bedouin citizen' to refer to Israeli citizens of Bedouin origin, as part of the minority of Palestinian citizens who live within the boundaries of the Israeli state, as opposed to those who live in the Palestinian Occupied Territories and do not hold Israeli citizenship. The term resonates with the expression 'Palestinian citizens of Israel', now a prevalent categorization for those citizens who, after the creation of Israel, remained on Israeli territory, comprising a variegated set of group definitions including Druzes, Bedouin and Arab-Palestinians, among others. These citizens have long been categorized unproblematically as 'Arab-Israelis' in public discourses. However, with an increase in Palestinian national articulation, this term is now often considered to be problematic (Rabinowitz 1997; Payes 2005).

[2] Activism in the area in question involved a set of different organisations. As a precursor to the more widely known case of demolished and reconstructed buildings in El-Aragib, this case has involved coexistence,

peace, religious and rights activists with different ideological motivations. In contrast to the case of El-Aragib, which involved a broad set of different organisations including the group of cultural guerrillas, Tarabut, and alternative planners of Bimkom, activists in the case described here were more directly linked to human rights activists and involved in the publication of reports for international human rights organisations (cf. Human Rights Watch 2008). Therefore, in this paper, I focus in particular on the implications of mobilization that has taken place in the name of human rights (Fieldnotes, 7 January, 2007).

[3] Fieldnotes, 3 March, 2010.

[4] The case study derives from ethnographic fieldwork in 2004, 2006–07 and 2010–11. Ethnographic fieldwork has been embedded in different yet interconnected research projects: in 2004, with an M.A. thesis (University of Perugia, Italy), between 2006 and 2007, with a Ph.D. Fellowship at the Universities of Siena, Perugia and Cagliari, and in 2010–2011, with a Postdoctoral Fellowship (University of Perugia, Italy, and Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research, Ben-Gurion University, Israel). The names of ordinary people who make an appearance in this article are pseudonyms, as are the names of minor localities. I thank Yaakov Garb, Salim Al-Turi Pnina Motzafi-Haller, Cristina Papa and Massimiliano Minelli for their critique and collaboration in various stages of the research. However, I am solely responsible for the contents of this article.

[5] Following Mark Goodale (2006a: 490), the human rights discourse can be defined as the "constellation of philosophical, practical and phenomenological dimensions through which universal rights, rights believed to be entailed by a common human nature, are enacted, debated, practiced, violated, envisioned and experienced". From this perspective, more detailed attention to the interaction between human rights discourses and other discourses reflects hierarchical differences and conflictual potential between universal and local discourses.

[6] One example of these threats is the so-called Praver Plan, a governmental outline of a plan of regional development that had envisioned resettlement and partial recognition of some of the previously unrecognised and informal settlements. The plan produced a national and international outcry and was suspended in 2013.

[7] In addition, other works could be mentioned. For instance, the complex challenges of Arab-Palestinian society in Israel have been dealt with by Sarab Abu Rabia Quader's (2009) writing on the self-organisation of women as one particular example of how human rights discourses have advanced. An additional example is Marteau's (2009) work based on the underlying assumption that political activism in the name of human rights constitutes moral progress in the context of the ethnocratic and colonial elements of contemporary Israeli society.

[8] In the Negev, there are a range of advocacy organisations that represent Arab-Palestinian Bedouin issues, including democratic self-governing bodies like the "Regional Council of Unrecognized Bedouin Villages in the Negev" (RCUV), founded by a younger generation of middle-class Palestinian citizens. These organisations sometimes have difficulty closing the gap between international rights discourses and specific aspirations on the ground (Koensler 2012).

[9] More specifically, I have been interested in micro-political interactions across lines of division and practice rather than discourses of community self-representations. This methodological shift has also allowed me to go beyond the classical approach of "community studies" and to follow partial connections of flows of people, discourses and material goods within the conundrum of NGOs, global human rights discourses and international foundations alike.

[10] Fieldnotes, 20 April, 2007.

[11] In the case in question, potential inhabitants lived on the outskirts of a government-planned Bedouin town, waiting to receive land plots. However, the majority of unrecognised Bedouin villages are regularly inhabited.

[12] In the place in question, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) operated bulldozers to establish the nature conservation area in question. The JNF is legally a private international foundation with strong ties to the Israeli state. It was originally established to promote the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

[13] The *Syag* area is certainly reminiscent of a reservation-like space. The implications of its establishment have been analysed, among others, by Abu-Rabia (2000) and Dinero (2010). However, not all Bedouin citizens actually moved into the designated area and nowadays the area is also subject to general Israeli development efforts.

[14] Interview with two officials of the Authority for the Advancement of the Bedouin, Be'er Sheva, 16 June, 2007.

[15] Fieldnotes, 12 December, 2010.

[16] In Bourdieu's practice-based theory, *illusio*, the "investment in the game" made by individuals to participate in the field of social forces, connects his concepts of field and habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98). In their recent analysis of a case study of mobilization in Sardinia, Pitzalis and Zerilli (2013: 382) employ the concept of *illusio* to investigate the ambiguous role that movements play in relation to state power and

sovereignty. For an outline of similar intricate dynamics in the role of checkpoints in the Israeli-Palestinian region, see the concept of "void sovereignty" proposed by Amir (2013).