

Palestinians Under Israeli Settler Colonialism and “Anglo-Centric” Colonization of Knowledge Production

International Journal of Social
Determinants of Health and Health
Services

1–8

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DOI: 10.1177/27551938231152768

journals.sagepub.com/home/joh



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Abstract

Calls for decolonizing knowledge production are increasing considerably. Yet the domination of knowledge production by English-speaking, neoliberal, Western countries continues, with understandings and assumptions often irrelevant and unimportant to southern countries, and can contain racialized portrayals of the people of the developing world. Palestinians under Israeli military rule have also become governed by neoliberal funding northern institutions that have commoditized research and education and control what should be researched and how. The dual colonization of Palestinians by Israel and the hegemony of neoliberal political-economy among a captive Palestinian population—reinforced by the Zionist lobby’s ferociousness in punishing whoever dares to raise questions about Israel’s wrongdoings—is silencing Palestinians and those supporting justice to Palestinians in ways perhaps not experienced by others who want their voices heard. Yet Palestinians continue to teach and conduct research and to struggle for freedom and justice on one hand and for liberation from donor dictates on what to research and how to research and write on the other. We continue to hope that international funders and publishers would take concrete steps to turn calls for the decolonization of knowledge production from lip service to actions so that all knowledges can contribute to debates and societal advancement worldwide.

Keywords

colonization of knowledge production, Palestinians under Israeli military rule, neo-liberalism, settler colonialism, Anglo-centric domination

During the past 20 years or so, calls for and debates around the decolonization of knowledge production have increased considerably.¹ However, such calls are not new; they go back to the 1960s and 1970s and likely earlier.² For example, Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, emphasized the importance of Africa-centered knowledge in the 1960s.^{1,3} During the 1970s, Michel Foucault also accentuated the problem of the subjugation of knowledge that has been disqualified as inadequate, or insufficiently elaborated—what he called naïve knowledges, or popular knowledge (*le savoir de gens*), that is, local, or regional knowledge.⁴ He emphasized the dominance of conceptualizations and discourses driven by the West, specifically English-language journals, which reduces research to what is prescribed by particular paradigms and traditions prevalent in English-speaking countries.

Despite the more recent surge in attention and criticism, the domination of knowledge production by neoliberal Western countries, notably English-speaking ones, continues and is unyielding. Yet this surge in calls for the decolonization of knowledge production represents not much more than a cooptation—and, in some instances, a misappropriation—of

what many in southern countries have raised for years, and calling for change. Cooptation because, to date, we do not observe serious attempt at the tangible inclusion of southern countries’ excluded voices raised for years in calling for change (and likely other non-English-speaking Western researchers), or the deconstruction and reconstruction of the way in which questions are raised and their underlying assumptions, concepts, frameworks, and methods so that such questions could be more relevant to peoples in different parts of the world. Some even argue that the notion of decolonization has been “metaphorized” so that it allows “settlers” to evade having to confront their guilt and complicity in the process of colonization, moves described as allowing the evasion of responsibility and bringing the settler toward innocence.⁵ We must also not

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forget that research funding is politicized and subject to the pressures of lobby groups, whether research or financial groups or political interests,⁶⁻⁸ dictating what can and what cannot be researched. Consequently, and despite calls for decolonization, international research agendas continue to be dominated by an “Anglo-American center of gravity”,⁹ with English-language frameworks, concepts, and methods, largely derived from the dominance of English-speaking research funding institutions and research production outlets that have embraced neoliberal values, especially the commodification of research, which are aptly called authoritarian neoliberalism.

Paradoxically, and despite decolonization calls, many research funding institutions continue to advertise funding for research after having already decided what research topic is prioritized, what research questions to investigate, and in what ways, never mind whether such questions are relevant and important for many varied contexts, or discriminatory, or even racialized research questions with prejudiced and chauvinistic underlying assumptions. In addition, there is the problem of the manner used to call for research proposals and methods of proposal submission, which reveals a lack of interest, or understanding, or both, of infrastructural problems experienced by people from southern countries which come in the way for them to be, as they call it, “competitive.” To access such research funding, you have to have available un-interrupted and sufficient-speed Internet and electricity and be able to download and upload a variety of documents needed for the submission of funding proposals, not to mention having access to journal articles, books, and other research reports that are often unavailable in local academic and research institutions. As if we people of southern countries have the same or similar access to such technologies to people in northern countries; and as if what is called the digital divide exposed “like never before” as a result of the invasion of COVID-19 into our lives¹⁰ is simply nonexistent. To add insult to injury, you also have to write reports and papers for publication in English in the main, another bottleneck and instrument of control. This once again raises the questions of why you are writing, who you are writing for, and what knowledge is prioritized.¹¹ In effect, when research frameworks, topics, questions, and methods are defined by funders, researchers lose control of the important task of identifying and researching questions that are relevant and important to their context, and in service of their society, and the production of decolonized knowledge that can contribute to global debates.

The Commodification of Knowledge Production and Research

With the increasing expansion and bureaucratization of research funding institutions as one of the outcomes of adopting neoliberal policies,^{12,13} commodification of knowledge

production and research means that money making is becoming a priority for research production outlets and publishers that are swirling in an open market where competition for markets and money are the defining feature. Universities and research centers also seem to have fallen into the trap of market-oriented, competitive bibliometrics by judging scholarship based on indicators that are simply inadequate.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ In effect, publish (regardless of why and how) or perish has replaced the task of conducting research and publishing to produce knowledge of benefit to the world, or to address key issues in society, or to highlight a cause of justice or other worthy purposes, rather than for limited personal gain, be it money, fame, institutional reputation, academic promotion, or otherwise.

To be sure, researchers around the world are subjected to the pressure of performing as dictated. This predicament is, of course, also experienced by English-speaking researchers themselves and researchers from non-English-speaking northern and southern countries. However, it can also be argued that English-speaking researchers have at least a common language with the funders, are “closer to the center” and the power structures within it, and are aided by their contextual and cultural knowhow. Accordingly, they may be able to better understand what needs to be done and how, and know how to better deal with instructions, let alone the potential advantages of networking and linking up with the “powers that be” and obtaining information, privileges, or both. English-speaking researchers also have better access to technology such as the Internet and digital libraries, another key form of access required for research production, whereas people from southern countries may either lack this access completely or have limited access to the international literature. It is also true that researchers from southern countries are also suffering from the domination endured by Palestinians with conceptual and other forms of dictates imposed on them by Anglo-centric research funding institutions and research outlets, and as they too have to be proficient in English, they may have limited access to technology and digital information and likely endure other types of impediments to the process of producing de-colonized knowledge. However, Palestinians suffer from an additional impediment as they continue to linger under Israeli settler colonial rule, which threatens their survival as a nation and restricts research access and production in various other important ways.

The Knowledge Production Burden of Palestinians Under Israeli Apartheid

This brings us to the Question of Palestine, which was brought to international light by the Palestinian public intellectual Edward Said in 1979.¹⁷ During the past two to three decades, Palestinians have been enduring a double colonization burden: that of Israeli military occupation and life under

an Israeli settler colonial regime, recently and finally called “apartheid” by various human rights organizations;^{18,19} and more recently, that of the colonization of neoliberal knowledge production by Anglo-Saxon academia, journals, books, international research groups, and funding agencies, among others.¹¹

It has been over 100 years since the British Government’s Balfour Declaration promised land the British did not own to people coming from elsewhere under the rubric of “a land without people for a people without land.” The tragedy was that we, Palestinians, were living on that land and have been living there for centuries. I myself have a family tree going back to 1636, as is the case with other Palestinian families who own such family trees, in addition to other types of documents demonstrating that Palestine was inhabited by Palestinian Arabs for a long time, and that the land was by no means a desert, but housed an active and thriving agriculture, economy, and society.²⁰ In 1948, the nascent United Nations astonishingly cemented the tragedy by agreeing to the partition of Palestine, which resulted in the creation of the State of Israel on Palestinian land, dismembering Palestinian society and uprooting the Palestinian population in the process with at least two-thirds of the Palestinian population forcibly dispossessed, expelled, and becoming refugees in neighboring Arab countries and elsewhere.

The remaining part of Palestine, the West Bank, was annexed to Jordan, and the Gaza Strip fell under the Egyptian administration.²¹ The fall of the West Bank and Gaza Strip under Israeli military rule as a result of the 1967 Arab–Israeli war led to the emergence of yet another wave of refugees and internally displaced Palestinians. Meanwhile, Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip took a settler colonial character from the beginning, with the annexation of Palestinian East-Jerusalem in violation of international conventions, ever-increasing land confiscated by Israel from Palestinians, and the building of illegal Israeli Jewish settlements on Palestinian land. Furthermore, the Palestinian economy became totally dependent on Israel with “land, water, roads, borders, airspace, movement, access, electricity, free trade relations, and people micromanaged by the Israeli military occupation.”²²

The Advent of Neoliberalism to the Occupied Palestinian Land

The Oslo Accords of 1993 between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization led to the continued complete control of Israel of at least 60 percent of the West Bank, with land, water, airspace, roads, borders, etc., of all of the West Bank under Israeli control as well. Thus, although the Oslo Accords were supposed to achieve the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) of the West Bank and Gaza

Strip, these accords represented “an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles.”²³ Not only was liberation from Israeli military rule not achieved as a result of the Oslo Accords, as the oPt has since remained under Israeli apartheid, the Accords also signaled the advent of yet another form of colonization grounded in neoliberalism and United States–led international finance,²² leading to important social and economic transformations. In fact, the Palestinian quasi state structures that were being built following the Accords were now being subjected to the meddling/control of international financial institutions and international development agencies forming multinational interventions.²⁴ Various economic development schemes, governance technologies, and methods of social control were implemented by funders, whether Arab or Western, supposedly to promote economic prosperity.

Accordingly, the national agenda of the pre-Oslo years was shifted toward the adoption of an imported, globalized, market-oriented agenda. Of course, this necessarily led to the gradual exclusion of indigenous voices calling for the prioritization of local needs and interests, with research and development, education, health, the economy, and society becoming subsumed under a donor-led neoliberal agenda dictated from above and then redefined and commoditized to suit market conditions and interests. Meanwhile, a new modernist and aspiring urban middle class emerged,²⁵ signaling the crumbling of the national project, which was replaced by consumerism,²⁶ thanks to bank loans that allowed for buying consumer goods such as cars, furniture, and homes and to declining solidarity, with individual interests becoming paramount, in compatibility with the neoliberal agenda that the Palestinian Authority adopted. These events also signaled the demise of the notions of common good and citizens’ rights, which we were so hopeful about in the 1980s during the Palestinian social action period that supported the population with basic services as it was building the infrastructure of resistance to Israeli military rule.²⁷

The Burdens of International Research Funding

During the past 10 or 15 years or so, we too at Birzeit University, as elsewhere in the oPt, began to experience pressure to abide by topics, inquiries, and research questions that suit funders, or are attractive to or needed by free market conditions that are supposedly good for us, as if our markets were free and not controlled by Israeli apartheid. Funding institutions themselves had begun to metamorphose and bureaucratize to make rules, making them powerful and controlling,^{28,29} with the imposition of neoliberal governance structures on non-profit and other types of institutions, including Birzeit University itself, to suit agendas pushing toward market-based regulations and what is called the “business model.” We also began to suffer the consequences of the

vagaries of funding, with priorities defined globally, as if one hats fit all, and with research priorities suddenly changing from, for example, women's health, to an abrupt youth violence, to a sudden environmental health, to a unexpected turn toward child mental health and so on, without our understanding—or maybe anyone else's, for that matter—of the rhyme or reason for such sudden changes. The vagaries of funding for research priorities made it difficult for us to follow our research trajectory, which was derived from our understanding and keen observation of our context and qualitative research from the ground up, to bring in the views and comprehensions of the people we wanted to serve into research. Of course, this contributed to the dishevelment of research to completing bits here and pieces there as we carefully tried to maintain some sort of cohesion of our research trajectory. Unfortunately, we even began to witness the production of research locally that is neither relevant nor important for our community, just because funding was available to study particular topics—never mind their utility. Thus, research institutions, including Palestinian ministries, would complete research pieces on, for example, HIV/AIDS when we do not have a problem with this disease, perhaps because our borders are sealed by Israel and the increasing conservatism of society since the Oslo Accords were signed; or researching tuberculosis, which is also not prevalent here. In truth, this problem should be included in the unethical research conduct category, relevant to funders more than researchers who can be lured to abide by such calls for proposals because of starvation for funds.

At the same time, we began to experience pressure from funders to abide by ethical considerations in research that are relevant to northern countries, even though clearly, ethical research principles are universal but their application has to be context-specific.¹¹ For example, we experienced pressure to abide by defining the age of adulthood to be 18 years, as in the West, when many here begin to work, get married, and have children at younger ages. But if they are able to take responsibility for work, marriage, and childrearing, should they not also be able to take responsibility for independently agreeing or not agreeing to be research participants? Such persons also generally begin to live in homes separate from their parents' homes, so whom do you obtain ethical approval from if we are to abide by the Anglo-centric imposition? Or do we just drop such men and women from research even though perhaps they need to be included more than ever in health, education, and other research?

Another example is the imposed mandatory signature of participants of the disclosure/informed consent sheet, with people here in general not feeling comfortable about having to sign such disclosures. This is why we usually opt for oral consent and the signature of the field worker, with the exception of written signatures required for bodily invasive procedures. But we often fall into arguments and delays with funders in order to get our culturally appropriate method

of obtaining informed consent accepted by the funder, or the university in the West we have partnered with to complete a piece of research. Moreover, the division of research priorities into sectors also became especially problematic, as those of us who research the health of the public, broadly defined, and in search of the causes of disease, and not only consequences, know all too well that people do not live in sectors; they live in community. Consequently, when we investigate health, we also investigate the factors associated with good or bad health and delve into societal, economic, and political research questions—as, for example, our current research on human rights violations, which examines the causes and also the health and other consequences of human rights violations among Palestinians under apartheid. That is, exploring the broader determinants of health and expanding understanding beyond a narrow examination of health from a biomedical perspective is difficult, if not impossible to achieve with sectoral research calls.

In effect, we have become governed by directives about what should be researched, and a focus on policy and practices rather than knowledge production so essential for undermining racialized and inappropriate frameworks and conceptions about Palestinians, which in turn can lead to inappropriate policies and practices. In so many ways, we were and are still told that we are ignorant and that they (Western donors and Western collaborators, also called “partners”) are the source of “scientific” understandings of health, morality, and ethical considerations in research, and that they must tell us how to do things, and how with the diffusion of modern technology, increasing investments and consumption, and exposure to Western society, our society will become more “developed”.³⁰ Amazingly, this is back to square one thinking of the 1950s, which is known to not work for “development” and is defunct, yet is excellent for the expansion of profits and markets instead. Such dramatic changes necessarily ousted our calls for citizens' rights or public good.

The Articulation of Israeli Settler Colonialism with Western Anglo-Saxon Controls of Research Funding Institutions

This is how Palestinian universities, local research institutions, service providers, and especially the Palestinian Authority ministries all became captive to international aid's dictates in their various forms, in the face of serious infrastructure problems related to being occupied by Israel, including Internet and electrical outages, inadequate libraries for research and teaching purposes, and chronically interrupted educational and research processes and activities as a result of Israeli violence against Palestinian institutions, communities, and persons. We became colonized by the need for funds, which meant being colonized by the imposed knowledge, theories, interpretations, and

methodologies discussed above. And while this predicament is also relevant especially to southern countries, in the Palestinian case, this articulated with the pre-existing Israeli military rule and controls and created the situation for the further stunting of already struggling Palestinian research and academic institutions. This is because, other than Israeli measures affecting society at large, there are the chronic, specific Israeli attacks on universities that are fighting for their survival,³¹ Israeli control of Palestinian borders becoming the arbitrator of who can teach and who cannot teach (and conduct research) at Palestinian universities, as a result of Israeli travel bans and controls on entry;³² numerous university and school closure orders; arrests of faculty and students;^{33,34} and road closures³⁵ disrupting teaching and research activities, among a range of other controls.

The most recent Israeli restrictions on the ability of foreigners, even Palestinians in origin, to enter the West Bank for business, education, humanitarian work, and family visit³⁶ is only an example of how Israeli policies can severely restrict academic and research work, as for example stated in the newly published procedures entitled “Procedure for Entry and Residence of Foreigners in the Judea and Samaria Area,” meaning the occupied Palestinian West Bank.³⁷ These procedures were implemented in October 2022 despite condemnation by rights groups and legal measures taken to stop the restriction from being enforced. Such restrictions severely limit the entry of faculty, students, and researchers who would have wanted to work with local universities and research institutions or study there. This new Israeli measure contributes to further limitations imposed on Palestinian academic and research institutions, let alone other consequences of its implementation, which negatively affect all walks of life, including the economy, which is already de-developed and controlled by Israel, and the separation of families by banning entry to people married to Palestinians who do not have an Identity Card issued by Israel.³⁷

Of course, in the Palestinian case, there is also the Zionist lobby watching every move and ruthlessly exercising pressure and waging wars on those who dare to criticize Israel’s wrongdoings in the occupied Palestinian territory or call for justice to Palestinians and support for Palestinian rights. In fact, censorship on Palestine and the Palestinians in academic journals and in the academic world in general is pervasive, where pressure campaigns from the Zionist lobby can have significant damaging effects on writers and editors.³⁸ For example, a letter on the Gaza Strip’s vulnerability to the COVID-19 pandemic was withdrawn by the prestigious academic journal *The Lancet* after extreme pressure and serious harassment was waged by the Zionist lobby, which forced the removal of the letter to stop the onslaught. Such extreme Zionist lobby pressures and systematic and relentless silencing campaigns to censure the Palestinian narrative³⁹ choke those who speak truth to power and severely

limit free speech, including silencing debate on Palestine/Israel in higher education in general.⁴⁰ Especially, but not only, on North American campuses, silencing campaigns are used to shut down Palestinian solidarity work and suppress Palestinian voices and the voices of academics, artists, and students who publicly support Palestinian rights,^{41,42} inhibiting academic freedom and freedom of expression in universities and colleges. Purposefully distorted definitions of words are used⁴³ to cover up the truth, conflate issues to obfuscate reality, and bring support to Israel no matter what violations it commits—for example, using anti-Zionism to mean anti-Jewish in order to silence advocacy for Palestinian rights and political debate, and accusing all support for Palestinian rights as anti-Jewish!

The concoction resulting from this dual colonization with Israeli structural racism against Palestinians and apartheid conditions, coupled with the hegemony of neoliberal political economy among an already captive Palestinian population—and reinforced and intensified by the Zionist lobby—makes for a nasty mixture that has been silencing Palestinians and those supporting justice to Palestinians in ways perhaps not experienced by others who seek to have their voices heard. To be sure, we continue to be denied the “permission to narrate” our story⁴⁴ or point the finger at Israel and its wrongdoings, especially because of the articulation of a particular Anglo-American understanding of the Palestine Question with the Zionist lobby’s forceful attack on and punishment of those who dare to point to Israel’s numerous violations of basic human rights and to provide space for the Palestinian narrative—indeed, an “academic censorship on Palestine in the medical world,”³⁸ which I have myself experienced several times.

How we Handle This Double Burden of Colonization

We deal with this double burden sometimes successfully, and not successfully at other times. But we should not be described as resilient, because this is a problematic concept. Resilience comes from engineering and means going back to where you were. Instead, I use the notions of enduring and resisting, much better terms for understanding our daily lives.⁴⁵ In contrast to only enduring, we also resist every day of our lives. We resist by sticking to the land, *Sumud* (in Arabic), no matter how hard life can be. We resist by having the resolve to get up in the morning and take the children to school, or go to work, or complete the chores of the day, or do whatever we need to do no matter how difficult the general and road situations are; and without quite normalizing the very abnormal context we live in, we maintain a delicate balance between adapting to a hard life yet realizing that we live in this abnormal and unjust context as we hold onto our struggle for justice. We resist violation and injustice by teaching and mentoring

young people and the future generation of Palestinians who struggle to be free. We resist violation by conducting research. And as we conduct research and search the literature, we always deconstruct and search for problematic assumptions about ourselves or others who are disenfranchised, subjugated, or disqualified. We then reconstruct by commencing with the voices of our community with qualitative research first, before we move further, so that what we research and write is relevant to our community's ways of knowing, and being, and doing, and with an eye on the relevance of our research to others enduring conflicts and wars in this world. As a colleague noted recently: "we do not reject knowledge from the West and replace it with local knowledge. Instead, we need to include other types of knowledges into global knowledge to make it truly global"¹. But we especially seek to de-racialize knowledge as well. And we resist by being part of community, sustained by communal solidarity, which is one of the main features that has allowed Palestinians to survive all these years despite all odds. Of course, we resist by knowing that the moral imperative is ours, we are the occupied, and they are the aggressors, occupiers, and colonizers. This symbolic capital gives us strength and a particular capacity to endure all sorts of political violence and injustice, and also to resist such violence by surviving against all odds and trying to live as much of a normal life as possible.

It has been more than 100 years of injustice that the Palestinian people have suffered, withstood, and resisted. Nevertheless, and as different generations of Palestinians have noted, we Palestinians "will not go away"; "we are here to stay." We will continue to struggle for freedom, justice, sovereignty, and self-determination on one hand and liberation from donor dictates on what to research and how to research and write on the other. We will continue to narrate our story and the story of the Palestinian cause for justice and to hope that international funders and groups, publishers, journals, and other research outlets would take concrete steps to turn the calls for the decolonization of knowledge production from metaphor and lip service to actions so that all knowledge can contribute to debates and advancement of societies around the world.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. Communications with Professor Maher Hashweh from the Education Department at Birzeit University.

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Rita Giacaman is a professor of public health at the Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, in occupied Palestinian territory and was the founder of the Institute in 1978. Her research focuses on the impact of chronic war-like, colonial, and apartheid conditions and exposure to political violence on the health and well-being of Palestinians. She has published extensively on women's health and mental health in wars and conflicts from a

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