

From Hegemony to Partnership

By Ramzi Suleiman¹

I want to begin this short article with a personal account that goes back about eighteen years. At the time, I was giving a talk at a conference organized by the Jewish-Arab Center at the University of Haifa. I do not recall the exact title of the talk, but it dealt with issues relating to the collective identity and collective rights of the Palestinians in Israel.

When I concluded my talk, the then-President of the University, who was in the audience, rose and made his comments. In general, he voiced a clear objection to any "rights discourse." "You, the Israeli Arabs, do not have rights," he said. "We, the Jews, have obligations towards you."

Such a worldview, I argue, is not an idiosyncratic one. Despite the recent "rights-for-duties" rhetoric, this worldview remains characteristic of how most Israeli Jews perceive and articulate their relationship towards the Palestinians in Israel. In fact, this worldview is fundamental to state policies and practices, which derive from the very definition of Israel as a Jewish state.

The "you do not have rights, we have obligations" perspective reflects a "Noblesse Oblige"-mentality. This perspective provides moral and psychological support to a hegemonic ideology and praxis which sustain the objective of the "Jewish state." It is easily argued that despite the immensurable amount of official, academic and other cheap-talk concerning the prospects of democracy and equality in Israel, this type of mentality continues to be deeply-rooted. Obviously, this mentality stands in contradiction to the very basic idea of the principle of equality. This is so because it prescribes that the "ones who have" can act as almighty dictators. They can choose to give when and how much they wish, and the recipients have no choice but to comply. No real partnership or participation exists in such a relationship. In fact, relations of the "Noblesse Oblige"-type reduce the principle of equality to an act of benevolence.

It should be noted that the "noble" who willingly gives derives material and psychological benefits from his benevolent giving. Psychologically, he derives a feeling of righteousness, of acting justly. Conversely, those same feelings of righteousness and of acting justly come to rationalize his punitive acts, if and when the recipient challenges the hegemonic equation.

The reward/punishment (carrot/stick) pendulum is what characterizes the policy of control, which is paradoxically advocated by Jewish left-wing parties to a greater extent than right-wing parties. Within the framework of this policy, not only are measures directed towards the reduction of discrimination and inequality reduced to some form of benevolence, but also those same benevolent acts are utilized as instruments of power and control.

The preservation and enhancement of absolute hegemony on the part of the Jewish majority is contradictory to the principles of procedural justice and power-sharing. At best, when not used manipulatively as instruments of control, measures of the benevolent type aimed at increasing equality or "bridging gaps," might accrue less-than-satisfactory benefits to the minority group members.

From a macro perspective, the goal of preserving the "Jewishness of the State," along with a supportive mentality of superiority, undermines any possibility of integrating the Palestinian minority in Israel. Through numerous policies, laws and official and public actions, the Jewish majority has almost always been proactive in obstructing any organized act by the minority

¹ Professor Suleiman is Chairman of the Department of Psychology, University of Haifa and a researcher at Mada al-Carmel – The Arab Center for Applied Social Research.

aimed at achieving collective rights and equal citizenship for its members.

I have argued elsewhere that the limited, unequal citizenship given to Palestinian citizens, coupled with the hegemonic practices directed towards them, have continually driven the Palestinians in Israel towards a "dual-marginality" status. This status means that they are not only marginal as citizens, but that they are also being alienated from their own culture and identity.

Evidently, the hegemonic, "master-slave" relationship is a double-sided bond. The "master" can exercise his absolute power only if the "slave" acquiesces to his position. Often, it is more utilitarian, and certainly more dignified, to decline a humiliating offer. With regard to the Palestinian minority, in the absence of a clear and consensual collective strategy there are always "legitimate" representatives of this group who are willing to collect the crumbs. No less damaging is the proactive role played by the state, which does not let pass an opportunity to exert its influence in the selection of minority delegates who have internalized the hegemonic, "master-slave" relationship and are ready to speak with their master's voice.

Recently, awareness has been growing among Palestinian intellectuals and social activists in Israel of the need to challenge the status quo. Although phrased in a variety of words and styles, the main argument heard is that the model of hegemony for one group should be replaced by an equality-oriented mode of relationship, which guarantees full and complete citizenship for all. Complete citizenship, it is argued, entails not only equality in individual rights, but also in collective rights, including the right of each group to cultivate its unique identity and culture.

The need to speak with a clear voice on this crucial issue becomes even more pressing in light of recent efforts to stamp a constitutional seal on an immoral and certainly archaic model of hegemony and domination of one people over another.