PLACING CRITICAL GEOGRAPHIES

HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY

Edited by Lawrence D. Berg, Ulrich Best, Mary Gilmartin, and Henrik Gutzon Larsen
This book explores the multiple histories of critical geography as it developed in 14 different locations around the globe, whilst bringing together a range of approaches in critical geography.

It is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive account of a wide variety of historical geographies of critical geography from around the world. Accordingly, the chapters provide accounts of the development of critical approaches in geography from beyond the hegemonic Anglo-American metropoles. Bringing together geographers from a wide range of regional and intellectual milieus, this volume provides a critical overview that is international and illustrates the interactions (or lack thereof) between different critical geographers, working across a range of spaces. The chapters provide a more nuanced history of critical geography, suggesting that while there were sometimes strong connections with Anglo-American critical geography, there were also deeply independent developments that were part of the construction of very different kinds of critical geography in different parts of the world.

*Placing Critical Geographies* provides an excellent companion to existing histories of critical geography and will be important reading for researchers as well as undergraduate and graduate students of the history and philosophy of geography.

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Placing Critical Geographies
Historical Geographies of Critical Geography

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1 Introduction

Placing critical geographies

Lawrence D. Berg, Ulrich Best, Mary Gilmartin, and Henrik Gutzon Larsen

The primary objective of this book is to extend our understanding of the development of critical geographies (plural) across a wide range of academic settings. In doing so, we also see this volume as contesting what we term the hegemonic history of critical geography in contemporary geographical scholarship. This hegemonic history is part of a wider Anglo-American hegemony in geography (see, e.g., Berg and Kearns, 1998; Gregson et al., 2003; Paasi, 2005; Timar, 2004). It is thus no surprise that the hegemonic history of critical geography reduces the multiple and complex histories of critical geographies around the world to a singular story that reinforces Anglo-American hegemony, where critical geography is understood to have originated in the United Kingdom and the United States and ‘diffused’ outward to the peripheries of academic knowledge production. These hegemonic stories tend to reproduce liberal epistemologies that construct all differences as the same kind of difference whilst at the same time reducing space to a simple, flat plane free of politics. The ironies of a critical geography that fails to critically interrogate its own stories should not be lost on us (Berg, 2004).

It has been well over three decades since geographers started to think seriously about the way that space is not merely an empty container through which people move and in which things happen (Gregory and Urry, 1985), and that ‘geography matters’ (Massey and Allen, 1984). Thus, it is now, ostensibly, commonplace for critical geographers that space has become a category for analysis that allows us ‘to understand the multiple, and often contradictory ways in which it is recursively constitutive of power relations of domination and subordination, and in turn the ways that such relations (re)constitute human experience of and in place’ (Berg, 2004, 554). The upshot is that there has been a plethora of geographical studies that analyse the way that geography actually matters in the constitution of social (and spatial) relations.

Notwithstanding the more than 30 years in which geographers and others have taken geography seriously and started to analyse the difference that space makes, there still exist topics that seem to escape such critical geographical analysis. Given the power of liberalism as a technology for
understanding the Self in the present neoliberal epoch, it is not surprising that (with few exceptions, see, e.g., feminist geographies, Black Geographies) the socio-spatial politics of academic knowledge production tend to be overlooked or avoided in critical geographic scholarship. There thus exists a tendency to draw on a liberal understanding of the Self as a primary guiding factor in understanding our own role in reproducing the uneven geographies of academic knowledge production. In this regard – and like the flat-earth politics of liberalism elsewhere – our ‘good intentions’ are seen as sufficient to inoculate us against complicity in reproducing the spatial marginalization of colleagues outside the academic ‘centres’ via the hegemonic socio-spatial politics of academic knowledge production. Indeed, it is only recently that we have started to see more self-reflexive scholarship as the basis for the retelling of histories of critical geography. Trevor Barnes and Eric Sheppard (2019), for example, recently edited a volume that seeks to map the variegated spatial histories of radical geography in ‘North America and Beyond’. This is an important step, not least because their book traces some histories ‘beyond’ North America (namely in Mexico, Japan, South Africa and the Francophone countries). At the same time, it is only a start to the necessary task of charting the wider terrains of those historical geographies of knowledge production that exist ‘beyond’ North America (and the United Kingdom, we would add).

With the above in mind, this book is intended to provide a more thoroughgoing engagement with different spaces and histories of what we have tended to call critical geography. Moreover, and given that the names we choose for ourselves matters, it is important to acknowledge that ‘critical geography’ and ‘radical geography’ are not necessarily names for the same objects. The term critical geography originated much later than radical geography: the former coming into wide use in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada during the mid-1990s with the latter coming into use in the late 1970s and early 1980s in these same spaces. We use critical geography specifically to denote a wider coalition of geographers drawing on a significant range of critical social theories. Critical geography is thus more diverse than radical geography and, hopefully, more open to different approaches than the latter, which has tended to draw more narrowly on Marxist and socialist theory. Indeed, it is possible that critical geographers can draw on theoretical perspectives that are often found in opposition to each other in specific use but who can see that it might be politically strategic to work in a larger coalition as a more general political strategy. A good example might be Marxists and Anarchists who would disagree vehemently over the role of the State in emancipatory movements specifically, but who might also find it useful to join together to contest other forms of socio-spatial marginalization arising within capitalism and liberalism. This book is built on the assumption that there are a wide variety of ‘critical geographies’, and we resist the temptation to define them, in part at least, because lists always have the potential for exclusion. We want ‘critical geography’
to be defined, in a contingent fashion then, by the authors included in this volume who write about specific histories of critical geography in particular places.

**What kind of space (in what kind of critical geography)?**

We believe strongly in the truism that ‘geography matters’. But just as importantly (and just as names matter), so does the kind of social theory used to both produce and index geographical difference. Here we draw on the works of one of the authors in this volume, Kirsten Simonsen (1996), in order to provide a sense of how different conceptualizations of spatial difference might help us to understand the variegated landscapes of and differences within and between a range of contexts for the production of critical geographies. Simonsen (1996) talks about three different conceptualizations of ‘space’ that have been used by geographers to understand ‘spatial difference’: 1. space as material environment; 2. space as difference; and 3. space as social spatiality. In what follows, we focus on the latter two approaches to think about how spatial difference matters in the production of critical geographies ‘in place’. Conceptualizations of space as material environment, we suggest, can lead to the kind of thinking that ends in notions of such problematic models as spatial diffusion theory, whereby geographical theory is produced in the centres of production (read: United Kingdom and United States) and this knowledge unproblematically diffuses out to the spatial margins. With this in mind, we believe that thinking about space as difference and as social spatiality provide much richer and more nuanced ways of thinking about the ways that critical geography developed differently (and similarly) in various locations around the globe. Accordingly, we feel it will help to discuss space as difference and space as social spatiality in order to help us to both better understand and better contextualize the historical geographies of critical geography presented in this volume. We hope also to outline some of the key strengths of the book as well as some of its key weaknesses along the way. Of course, there is a good deal of overlap between the different spatial conceptualizations presented by Simonsen and we hope that this messiness will also come through in the discussion that follows.

**Space as difference**

Simonsen (1996, 499) argues that ‘stated very simply, the essence of this conception [of space as difference] is that different places, regions or localities are substantially different – in a material as well as an immaterial sense – and that this difference influences social processes and social life’. This accords significantly with our arguments in the book: critical geography developed differently in different places because those places are substantially different from each other, and this kind of difference makes a difference in
the scholarly development of critical geographies in those places. In some ways, we have taken such difference for granted and somewhat uncritically mapped this difference onto nation states or linguistic groupings. The irony here will not escape the critical thinking of critical geographers. Moreover, some of the practical problems of this approach should be obvious with a glance at the table of contents for this book. Yet, even with the limitations of state- and language-centric spatial differentiation, we feel this is at least a good starting point for developing more nuanced historical geographies of critical geography beyond the metropoles. Put another way – we have to start somewhere. But additionally, we should understand the kind of differences that space makes in poststructuralist terms as relational (Simonsen, 1996, 501–502).

**Space as social spatiality**

The problems that arise because of our use of state boundaries and language differences for the starting points for thinking about the geographies of critical geography might be made slightly less problematic if we think about the difference that space makes in terms of social spatiality. In this regard, Simonsen (1996, 502–503) notes that ‘the spatial forms an integrated part of social practices and/or social processes – and that such practices and processes are all situated in space (and time) and all inherently involve a spatial dimension. This is so in all scales of social life’. In this sense, then, spatial difference needs to be understood as a fundamental social category. Space isn’t merely a thing through which people move and objects exist, but instead, space must be seen as generative. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre in *La production de l’espace* (Lefebvre, 1986), Simonsen (1996, 503) thus argues that we should ‘shift our attention from “things in space” to the actual “production of space’’. If space is produced, then it follows that space must also be productive. This highlights the important role of social relations in the production of space, and spatial relations in the production of the social.

So, in our conceptualization of this project, we wanted to capture, through the work of our contributors, the social production of space and the spatial production of the social. Geography matters, in myriad ways. The chapters you are about to read attempt, with varying degrees of success, to capture the difference that space makes and the different social relations that lead to different conceptualizations and understandings of the spatial.

**Strengths and challenges**

In soliciting chapters for this volume, we asked contributors to reflect on the histories of critical geography in specific places. In most cases, the contributors live and work – now or previously – in the places they have written about. We have thus prioritized ‘insider’ accounts, and we discuss the implications of this later. Here, it is important to highlight that we were not
prescriptive, initially, about the focus of each chapter. Instead, we left it to
the contributors to define critical geographies and to recount what those
geographies looked like. We believe strongly that such geographic accounts
need to come from those who are enmeshed in those geographies. As a con-
sequence, this edited volume contains 14 grounded accounts that articu-
late the range of meanings of critical geographies in particular spaces and
across specific geographical networks. The lack of a coherent and overar-
ching definition of critical geographies is a strength of this collection. If we
are to interrogate how critical geography is made, it is imperative to recog-
nize and validate the meaning of critical geography in different places. The
resulting chapters thus vary in substance and style, but provide a detailed
patchwork of the histories of critical geographies. However, the chapters are
also subjective interpretations of what critical geography is, and has been,
in particular places. In drawing attention to these subjectivities, we also
acknowledge one of the difficulties with compiling a collection of this type,
since the acts of compilation and cataloging – even when motivated by a
desire for greater inclusivity – are themselves acts of exclusion.

We encountered many challenges in developing this edited volume,
and how we addressed these challenges has shaped the final form of the
book. The contributors to this collection are drawn from our international
networks – many developed through international conferences such as
the International Conference of Critical Geography (ICCG), the Nordic
Geographers Meeting (NGM) and the Annual Meeting of the American
Association of Geographers. Networks that draw from encounters at inter-
national conferences are limited because of how participation in interna-
tional conferences is restricted to people with the necessary economic,
social and mobility capital. In other words, our networks reflect our own
subjectivities and positionalities; different editors, with different networks
of authors, would have produced a different outcome.

Our focus on elucidating the critical geographies extant in particu-
lar places around the globe means that we didn’t specify that authors for
each contribution had to cover specific epistemological or ontological
approaches. Instead, the contributors were free to shape the story of critical
geography in the way they deemed most appropriate, and that reflected their
subjective assessments of historical developments. Accordingly, there are
gaps and tensions within and between the chapters of the book. An episte-
mological or ontological approach would have been more prescriptive, with
instructions to address the presence, or absence, of specific critical engage-
ments, such as radical, feminist, queer, postcolonial or Black geographies;
or of specific approaches to understand the world. Instead, the collection
contains different articulations of critical: some of which align with the
hegemonic understanding of the term; others of which provide alternative
perspectives on how the term is understood. As a whole, then, the collection
both reflects space as difference, and shows how space in turn influences the
social relations of knowledge production.
As we discussed earlier, our focus on covering particular material spaces in the book, and the resultant focus on states or linguistic groups, produced their own exclusions. While the range of states included in the book deliberately extends beyond the Anglosphere, it is still limited. The framing of chapters by linguistic groups or regions serves to enforce the marginalization of those outside the ‘core’: for example, there is no Anglophone chapter, but there is a Francophone chapter; the United Kingdom has a separate chapter, while Brazil is covered in a chapter on Latin America. The emphasis on states masks the significant spatial variations within states, and the implications of these variations for understanding grounded critical geographies. Equally, the bounding of states and regions places limits on the extent to which connections between local areas are identified and understood. As an example, the chapters as a whole pay little attention to the critical geographies of rural space, with the resultant association of the histories of critical geographies with the urban. The chapters thus reinforce a clear spatial hierarchy that has intensified in recent years with the prioritization of the urban through discourses of planetary urbanism. It is also important to acknowledge the issue of the spatio-temporal positioning of the contributors. The histories of critical geographies are written from vantage points that, often inadvertently, privilege the preoccupations of the time. Livingstone, in his broader disciplinary history, described this as a ‘situated geography’, concluding that the ‘geographical tradition … can only be articulated in the midst of the particularities of time and place’ (Livingstone, 1992, 28, 358). This also holds true for the histories of critical geographies, regardless of the broader failure to interrogate these particularities in the search for a shared and liberatory project.

While our guidance to contributors about framing their chapters was minimal, this was not the case when we prepared the chapters for publication. To start, the chapters are written in English, which is not the first, or even second, language for many contributors. This places additional demands on contributors: as Fregonese (2017, 195) points out, writing in a second or third language involves ‘sourcing thoughts and terms from two, or often more, languages’, leading to ‘an in-between linguistic realm in which one can very easily become stranded’. Our preparation and editing of contributions served to shape the linguistic expression into a more standardized form and format, thus somewhat erasing the diversity of modes of storytelling inspired by different places and languages. Müller (2021, 21) warned of this when he wrote that ‘[i]n the pressure to conform to anglocentric expectations of scholarship, we may lose the diversity of concepts, themes, styles and epistemic locations that should be the hallmark of any discipline’. Our editorial interventions, particularly by the editors who have English as a first language, serve to make the patchwork of chapters more monochrome. Just as there are geographies to the production of this volume, so are there histories. Often frustrating contributors as well as editors, the volume has been underway for close to a decade. Some chapters were written at an early
stage while others have been added more recently. This entails that some chapters could appear a little out-of-date – at least when it comes to the academic game of referencing (contributing problematically to the mounting tyranny of metrics in academia). We don’t mind. The aim is not to provide a ‘state of the art’ of critical geography, but to collect geographically situated (and often personal) histories of the making of critical geographies.

Conclusion

This collection is one intervention into telling the stories of critical geographies – how these geographies came into being, how they existed in particular places and times and what they might look like in the future. Alternative approaches to storytelling could focus on particular groups, networks or assemblages, in order to highlight aspects of the making and circulation of critical geographies. Our purpose here was, in some ways, to challenge the spatial hierarchy of knowledge production. In order to do this, we focussed on particular places rather than on specific epistemological or ontological approaches to the development of critical geographies. In doing so, other socio-spatial hierarchies emerge, so this must be understood as a partial telling of the stories of critical geographies, open to situated interpretation and challenge.

Despite its spatial and social limitations, the book also serves a broader political purpose as an act of international solidarity. While critical geography may be prominent in the United Kingdom and the United States, with practitioners of critical geography awarded professional recognition and advancement, this is not the case in many other states and regions. Instead, critical geographers may be isolated or marginalized. Their experiences range from struggles to gain recognition and acceptance for their research and teaching to, in more extreme instances, threats to their livelihoods and physical and mental wellbeing. This collection makes the histories of critical geographies visible, and affords them a place in broader international disciplinary histories. In this way, it uses the hegemony of critical geographies in the Anglosphere to make space for critical geographies elsewhere.

We are heartened by the growing attention to the spatial hierarchies of knowledge production within the discipline of geography, and by the sustained efforts to reflect on the broader socio-spatial implications of how geographic knowledge is produced. This attention is clearly influenced by critical geographic approaches. Our collection provides an insight into how this has emerged, by foregrounding the histories of critical geographies and the grounded struggles of critical geographers who sought to make the discipline of geography, and their lived geographies, more inclusive and just. In this way, we show how a material geographic framing – in this instance, states and regions – offers a route for considering the implications of spatial difference for the socio-spatiality of knowledge production. We hope this
is a starting point for others, in different places, to engage with, apply and further develop the emancipatory potential of critical geography.

References


2 The evolution of Palestinian critical geography in Palestine and beyond

Ghazi-Walid Falah and Nadia Abu-Zahra

Geography – as a discipline, study, interest, practice and profession – has been defined as what geographers choose to do or not to do (Falah, 1994, 9; Kirby, 1992, 236). This definition helps to interpret how a small group of Palestinian scholars have created space within the international community of geographers to plant the seeds of a non- or anti-hegemonic discourse. This chapter begins with anecdotal snapshots illustrating this creation of space and nurturing of ideas amidst what was not always a uniformly hospitable environment.

Snapshot 1: in the years 1987–1990, professional geographers, high school teachers and University students from various parts of Palestine met in annual conferences in the Galilee, Deir al-Asad, Haifa and Nazareth, under the auspices of the Nazareth-based Galilee Center for Social Research. Out of these initiatives, in part, emerged a fourth conference inaugurating the Palestinian Geographical Society. Organized by two leading Palestinian geographers at the time, this last conference was held in Nicosia, Cyprus, in order to facilitate the attendance of Palestinian geographers who could not enter Palestine, such as those based in Arab countries or whose passports did not allow them to visit Palestine under Israeli control.

One of the first steps of the Palestinian Geographical Society was to seek full membership of the International Geographical Union (IGU). The application, at the 27th Annual Meeting in Washington, DC in 1992, was rejected because the main applicant at the time resided in the United States. The applicant, Ghazi Falah, was informed that the application had to come from Palestinian geographers or institutions, residing in Palestinian territory defined as the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where such territory “does not overlap with Israel’s sovereign territory” – that is, the “domain” of the Israeli Geographical Society. The (forced) transnationalism and dispossession of the Palestinian people presented an insurmountable (and unmentionable) problem for IGU regulations.

Snapshot 2: in the same time period, a special issue of GeoJournal (vol. 21, 1990) dedicated to the geographies of Palestine met with
opposition. Contributing authors included Palestinians in the Galilee, Jordan, Gaza Strip and the United States, as well as two non-Palestinians residing in the United Kingdom. The special issue was openly opposed by an Israeli member of the journal's editorial board, who requested that the issue not be published. When the journal’s editor-in-chief declined the request, the board member asked for his name to be deleted from that issue only. Thus, a thick black line now covers his name on the inside cover page of that particular issue.

Both events serve to demonstrate the anti-colonial struggles involved in establishing a space for any geographies of Palestine or Palestinians, be they merely for formal recognition or actual critical geographies. An underlying theme throughout these efforts is that the overpowering effects of space and place in Palestine and on Palestinians render much writing by non-geographers necessarily geographical. This is so much the case that non-geographers – when writing on Palestine – publish in journals such as Geopolitics and Political Geography, as their writing by necessity concentrates on movement restrictions, Israeli state efforts to narrow human living space for indigenous Palestinians and how daily life must continue under these conditions (Tawil-Souri, 2011a, 2012a). The best-known Palestinian writer in history, Edward W. Said, late Professor of Literature at Columbia University, popularized the term, “geographical imaginations”, inspiring some of the most prominent publications to date in human geography, and especially critical geography (Gregory, 1994).

The notion that non-geographers contribute to and serve to inspire critical geography in Palestine is addressed most in the first section of this chapter. We argue that by the time Palestinian critical geographers came into their own in the 1980s, they had already been preceded in their thinking and approaches by a range of Palestinian critical thinkers, who themselves wrote on spatial and geographic issues. These early thinkers had concentrated their efforts on raising awareness of the detriments and de-development implied or imposed by colonial practices and discourse surrounding Palestine and Palestinians. Their works, described in brief here, formed a strong basis for subsequent research and critical analysis of inequalities, power struggles, human rights and citizenship and, of course, territory.

The second and third sections explore Palestinian critical geography. The focus of the second section is on how critical geographies have been used to document and challenge narratives and practices of colonization; while the focus of the third section is on how critical geographies have been used to inform and empower the struggles of marginalized groups. In the second section, we spotlight some of the flagship publications that document Palestinian life prior to British and Zionist military occupation, as well as the processes and effects of denationalization and ongoing dispossession. What makes these works “critical” – in both senses of the word – is that they
Evolution of Palestinian critical geography

stand against the strong current of a stream of pronouncements and later academic writing that at best blames Palestinians for their suffering or at worst negates their existence (Said, 1988, 1).

While a strength of Palestinian critical geography has been its capacity to counter such narratives within and beyond academia, a potential weakness in Palestinian critical geography is its ability or inability to engage publicly with Palestinians or others through joint endeavours. “Action” research or involvement that answers Said’s (1994) call for “public intellectuals” admittedly has its own concrete obstacles in Palestine – restrictions on mobility and intensive Israeli surveillance being chief among them – yet the unique examples of such research could perhaps be more in number, even under these severe conditions.

The third section of this chapter looks briefly at how contemporary Palestinian critical geographies – across a wide range of sub-disciplines – offer new insights into the realities of everyday life and proffer radical alternatives for the present and future. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the potential futures of Palestinian critical geography and shows how Palestinian critical geography has developed and changed over time within the broader international context of critical geography.

The foundations of Palestinian critical geography

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.

(Said, 1993, 6)

Beyond our earlier-cited definition of geography, as simply “what geographers do”, is the wider reality that many non-geographers have contributed to the study of geography in Palestine – and this study as critical exercise in particular. In the years after the Ottoman period, Palestinian nationalism had crystallized as both inclusive and cosmopolitan (Khalidi, 1997), accompanied by growing civil societies in Palestine’s urban centres. The strong anti-colonial positioning of Palestinian writers of this period still informs much of today’s critical geographers’ writing and concerns. The near universally felt sense or “awakening” of regional unity across multiple and overlapping identities gave “encouragement and coherence to an otherwise disruptive modern history” (Said et al., 1988, 237).

Much of the work of this period was dedicated to landscape descriptions and traditional regional geo-histories of specific areas of Palestine, for example, works by the Nazareth-born Khalil Baydas (1874–1949), and
journalists, politicians and historians like Muhammad Izzat Darwazeh, Najib Nassar, Khalil al-Sakakini, Fadwa and Ibrahim Tuqan and Abdelrahim Mahmoud. Those Palestinians who witnessed the unfolding of military regulations supporting open colonization of their land were able to widely publish their analyses and even to reach audiences ordinarily excluded from such discussions, such as the Palestinian landowners and peasantry. These publications, together with diaries, speeches and other written and oral forms of communication among those less politically active and visible at the time constitute the road map for a burgeoning critical geography *in situ*.

**Documenting and challenging colonization**

The dispossession and denationalization of 1.4 million Palestinians in 1948 (also called the “Nakba” in Arabic, meaning “catastrophe”) and the continuing practices of systematic oppression, exclusion and discrimination form pivotal elements in Palestinian critical geography and anti-colonial writings in general. Critical legal studies, critical legal geography and critical political sociology have all incorporated study of the regulatory framework that propped – and continues to prop – up colonialism in Palestine (Abu-Zahra and Kay, 2012, 162).

The most important spatial thinker of the immediate post-Nakba period was the historian Walid Khalidi. He chronicled the history of Palestinians in *Before Their Diaspora*, describing the diversity and “continuous intermingling” dating back to Roman and Byzantium times (Khalidi, 1984, 7). Khalidi further asserted in his research that the Zionist leadership had plans for expelling Palestinians from their homeland prior to the 1948 War. His article “Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine” (Khalidi, 1961) became the cornerstone for subsequent work revealing that Zionist forces at the time were engaged in ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Palestine, a process best summarized in 1988, when a group of intellectuals – including Edward W. Said, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, Janet L. Abu-Lughod, Muhammad Hallaj and Elia Zureik – co-authored a chapter that brought home the demographic and ethnic cleansing aspects of the war (Said et al., 1988). A second important book of the time that also backed up Khalidi’s original research was Benny Morris’s (1987) *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. While Morris attributed expulsion to low-ranking officers’ decisions – rather than on prior intent among the Zionist leadership – later evidence pointed to the latter, further confirming Khalidi’s original work (Pappé, 2006). Palestinian geographers took note of this assault – and ones to follow after 1948 – on the Palestinian domestic and cultural landscape and its later use as the material basis for the denial of rights (Falah, 1996a).

Today, the consequences of dispossession and denationalization are still keenly felt, as shown in critical geographical literature among and about Palestinians.
In Palestine now, identity documentation not only signifies what a person is, but more importantly what a person is not, that is, a member of a privileged minority with state-protected human rights.

(Abu-Zahra and Kay, 2012, 163)

Geographers and legal scholars documented ongoing expulsions and developed a critical legal geography that was informed by their direct analysis of land expropriation (Abu Hussein and McKay, 2003; Falah, 1991, 2003; Jiryis, 1973). Historical geography blended into legal geography as researchers documented some 34 separate laws, ordinances and regulations designed to dispossess Palestinians within the Armistice lines (Abu Kishk, 1984, 31).

As Palestinian geographers worked to detail the long-time Palestinian presence and experience, they faced continuous efforts of erasure. The persistence of denial by the Israeli political class – of the very existence of Palestinian people in Palestine – has led to much analysis (Masalha, 2003), including by geographers. As Said et al. (1988, 241) stated, “By denying the existence of the Palestinian people, and by dehumanizing them, Zionists meant to hide from the world the intended victims of their colonization”. Beyond simply refraining from criticism, some Israeli geographers have a crucial function in building an exclusionary discourse and reality:

As in many other cases of nation-building, Israeli geographers have played an important role in manipulating of landscape and places to form a modern Jewish Israeli national identity [emphasis added]. (Golan, 2002, 554).

Two of Israeli geography’s “founding fathers” (Waterman, 1985, 195), Yehoshua Ben-Arieh and Yehuda Karmon, refrain from referring to the indigenous population as Palestinian, choosing instead to use labels derived from religion (see Ben-Arieh, 1975, 1976). This terminological elision is described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Ben-Arieh's historical work relies on itinerant foreigners’ accounts, and depicts the indigenous Palestinian population as prone to “exaggeration and fancy” (Ben-Arieh, 1972a, 99), with a penchant for “backsheesh” or bribes (Ben-Arieh, 1973, 18). Palestinians, who remain unnamed as such, are described as “bandits”, filled with “hatred” and “anger” at “infidels” (Ben-Arieh, 1972b, 82–83), who render such fear as to keep “the people of Jerusalem locked inside the walls of the Old City” (Ben-Arieh, 1975, 262). Who exactly these “people of Jerusalem” are is not a subject of research; while centuries and millennia of Palestinian history are ignored, Ben-Arieh focusses on the “increasing activity of the Jews and Christians in the city” as the cause, “undoubtedly”, of Jerusalem’s “rising importance” to Ottoman and “European Powers” (Ben-Arieh, 1976, 59).

Yehuda Karmon, meanwhile, describes Palestinians as “marauding” enemies (Karmen, 1960, 156–157, 249), ignorant of the “secret of organized
irrigation”, who unnecessarily flood their crops and thereby delay their harvest (Karmon, 1953, 19, 22). Palestinian wariness of the interventions of occupying British forces is put down to backwardness, and their agricultural practices – uniquely developed to preserve the wetlands and wildlife of northern Palestine, where water buffalo were once a key feature of communal life and landscape (Abu-Zahra, 2007a, 369; Hütteroth and Abdulfattah, 1977, 48) – are characterized as lacking “the knowledge and the means to subdue nature” (Karmon, 1953, 24). If representation is a “site for domination and resistance” (Blomley, 2006, 91), then the work of Ben-Arieh and Karmon constitutes a clear challenge to those wishing to engage in critical geography and the deconstruction of “dominance” by class and race, as described in Sparke (2004, 778) and Hall (1980). This challenge is well met in geographical writing on Palestinian Bedouin, which squarely addresses the inferior status assigned to Palestinians after colonization of their country (Falah, 1983, 1985). Yet, Palestinian geographers found themselves personally targeted the moment they dared weigh in on Israeli policy (see Editorial Note, 1985, 421, in Geoforum).

For some Israeli geographers, their contact with Palestinian critical geography is truly a dialogue in search of a common truth. Newman and Portugali (1987) undertake the exigent task of examining Israeli geography and conclude:

> Israeli writers …employing notions of ‘exploration’, ‘colonialism’, and ‘industrial reserve army’ are nevertheless careful to ensure that their criticism of the activities of Israeli authorities will not imply the delegitimization of Israeli society or the existence of the Israeli state.

(NEWMAN AND PORTUGALI, 1987, 325)

Criticism outside the guild, government and state is ill met, in a context that rewards “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci, 1971). This is not unique, and examples can be found across the world of how “dominant forms of social science have sought to legitimate and naturalise [prevailing cultures of prejudice], and related forms of oppression and injustice” (Blomley, 2006, 91; see also Blackwell, Smith and Sorenson, 2003). Indeed, this dynamic is what often gives rise and reason to critical geography as a modest academic contribution to global counterhegemonic efforts.

The practice of critical geography: countering erasure and advocating for alternatives

Although Palestinian geographers have not led the way in becoming “public intellectuals” as Said (1994) urged, they continue to engage with public efforts to counter erasure and advocate for alternatives. One of the most impressive fields in which Palestinian geographers have succeeded in engaging the wider public is cartography. Beginning with a mapping of
Evolution of Palestinian critical geography

the Palestinian people, culture and economy of the 1500s (Hütteroth and Abdul fattah, 1977), and culminating in the maps used by the Negotiations Support Unit of the Palestinian Liberation Organization Negotiations Affairs Department, Palestinian cartography has accomplished what narrative could not: it laid bare the dispossession and denationalization of the Palestinian people.

Chronologizing Palestinian life and land in cartographic form was achieved through conscious effort, for among Palestinians the sense of unity preceded the image of the map.

The multifaceted vision is essential to any representation of us. Stateless, dispossessed, de-centered, we are frequently unable either to speak the ‘truth’ of our experience or to make it heard. We do not usually control the images that represent us; we have been confined to spaces designed to reduce or stunt us; and we have often been distorted by pressures and powers that have been too much for us [emphasis added].

(Said, 1986, 6)

Carefully outlining Palestinian reality in Cartesian terms required constant fieldwork in archives, across the terrain and among the people of Palestine. Thus, mapping in Palestine was born of an awareness of the importance of an image to communicate with the international community; it operated in reverse of the pattern described by Benedict Anderson, in which the map-as-logo precedes a sense of collectivity (Anderson, 2006, 179). While a number of atlases stand out for their meticulousness and inclusive vision (Abu Sitta, 2010; PASSIA, 2002), the landmark study continues to be All That Remains, a collective project involving key Palestinian geographers and led by historian Walid Khalidi (1992). Beyond this seminal work is a ten-volume historical atlas (Dabbagh, 1991 [1965–1976]), as well as a catalogue of more than three decades of Palestinian struggle against colonialism, written by political geographer Basheer Nijim – one of the founders of the Palestinian Geographical Society – and Bishara Muammar (Nijim and Muammar, 1984).

As Palestinian geographers became progressively more confined in their movements by Israeli restrictions, and as colonization intensified in Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a segment of Palestinian cartography came to concentrate on these areas. Some theorists posited that shifting control over resources embodied colonialism:

Israeli colonization of the West Bank for over forty years has gradually evolved to differentiate it from other familiar forms of classical colonialism… colonization of the West Bank is less a matter of managing the population through a Foucauldian framework of biopolitics, and more a matter of controlling the resources (land, water, and airspace).

(Zureik, 2011, 4–5)
Cartographically exposing colonial control over resources and the indigenous population

The imperative, therefore, was to document this shifting control over resources – land and water confiscation – in order to better understand economic domination, proletarianization, population expulsion and induced transfer, political suppression and denial of Palestinian rights.

This theoretical approach was paralleled by its own contradiction – that population control was key to resource control. Yet, for decades, and continuing into the present, translating resource control and dispossession into cartographic terms was a principal aim for Palestinian geographers. Khalil Tufakji engaged in a daunting project to document historical land tenure in Jerusalem and worked ceaselessly as the key cartographer to live and work in the city (Fischbach, 2003, 337). Michael Younan directed his efforts to the most recent changes in Jerusalem and across Palestine, even predicting what was yet to come (Halper and Younan, 2005). Walid Mustafa looked at Jerusalem from the 1800s to the present (Mustafa, 2000). The Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem and Land Research Center launched and sustained a project to monitor colonization, mapping expropriation as it happened with satellite imagery, geographic information systems, on-the-ground fieldwork and intimate knowledge of what was taking place on the ground (ARIJ and LRC, 2012).

Individual geographers used cartography to uncover the colonialism and siege that lay behind the façade of a “peace process” and the “two-state solution” (Falah, 2005). Yet, all the while, Israel had military power, communication technology, access to international media and “institutional mediation” (Newman and Falah, 1997, 114). From the 1970s and before, in works such as the Atlas of Israel (Amiran, 1970), and The Land That Became Israel (Kark, 1990), Zionist geographers continued to produce their own brand of “knowledge” about which land belonged to whom, while maintaining a conspicuous silence on indigenous rights.

The contest through cartography over resources is striking (Tawil-Souri, 2011a) but not unique to Israeli and Palestinian cartography (Murphy, 1990, 534). For Palestinians, however, the power differential and challenges for criticizing the hegemonic discourse are nearly prohibitive. Nevertheless, critical historical geographers and critical cartographers inside and outside Palestine have painstakingly chronicled the omissions in the Israeli discourse, for Palestine as a whole, and Jerusalem in particular (Mustafa and Abdul Jawad, 1987). They did so in the face of formidable obstacles, with restricted access to archives and archaically draconian regulations over mobility. In common with Palestinian researchers in law and human rights, geographers at times suffered imprisonment and interrogation – with torture methods such as prolonged positions and sleep deprivation – as research was criminalized (Falah, 2007). Despite and even because of this, Palestinian geographers’ interventions countered Israeli cartographic
hegemony on Palestine, bringing together stark parallels with colonial and anti-colonial experiences and cartography elsewhere in the world.

**Advancing alternatives for justice, equity and inclusion**

In addition to critical cartography, the applied research of urban planners, such as those at An-Najah University’s Urban and Regional Planning Unit (in the Nablus region of the West Bank), is also significant. Urban and rural geographers’ applied research breaks new ground in multiple directions: researching and advocating equal access to public services; exploring avenues for participatory planning using geographic information systems; developing strategies for affordable housing; integrating refugees and overcoming their physical separation in rural and urban areas; and considering ways to enhance daily life through rural and urban services and aesthetics (Abdelhamid, 2009, 2010).

These activities are all the more remarkable given that they take place in a context of ongoing military occupation and attack – a context which elsewhere would elicit a top-down, emergency management approach to planning, recovery and reconstruction. These few examples from the broad array of critical and participatory research taking place in An-Najah University demonstrate a unique emphasis on capacities (rather than solely inequalities), and on intra-Palestinian debates and strategies. The criticisms levelled at the Palestinian Authority are indirect and highly constructive – suggesting ways forward rather than merely taking aim with the academic’s pen. In terms of Palestinian critical geography, the Unit’s work is but one example, and is mirrored elsewhere – such as al-Khalil (Hebron), Nazareth, Gaza, Jerusalem or Jenin – but without additional fieldwork in these areas and in the absence of accessible publications, such wider work has yet to gain international prominence.

What have, by contrast, generated substantial publications beyond Palestinian institutions are projects that draw attention to ongoing colonialism in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; and that emphasize water rights, water exploitation and unequal distribution (Abu-Ayyash, 1976; Abu-Zahra, 1999; Alatout, 2008; Asadi, 1990; Dahlan, 1990; Elmusa, 1998; Falah, 1984, 1990; Hassan et al., 2010a, 2010b; Mustafa, 1986; Nijim, 1984, 1990; Saleh, 1990). In exposing inequalities and exploring the colonial and other roots of these inequalities, geographers have used the terrain of academia to encompass and augment the shrinking terrain of public, personal and private life among Palestinians living in Palestine.

Feminist, antiracist and transformative insights have also unfolded within Palestinian critical geography, and serve to “contest the hegemony of dominant representations” (Blomley, 2006, 91–92). A noteworthy element of Palestinian transformative geography is the gradual shift from identifying exclusionary thought and imaginaries within colonialism, toward promoting inclusionary thought and imaginaries for the present and future. This shift paralleled a shift in focus from land to population and was led
by sociologists, poets and politicians – followed by critical geographers. Philosophy professor and former Palestinian politician in the Israeli government, Azmi Bishara, launched a campaign for inclusion irrespective of faith, ethnicity, colour or creed, under the banner, “a state of all its citizens”. Alongside poet-politicians like Tawfik Zayyad, Emile Habiby and Samih al-Qassem, Bishara elucidated collective Palestinian sentiments of inclusion and social justice while remaining active in quotidian politics.

In sociology, Zureik’s classification of the situation as “internal colonialism” matched his detailed study of peasant marginalization, intense land confiscation, political manipulation, residential and occupational segregation and a duality of economic and social relations (Zureik, 1979). Other sociologists also drew light toward inequalities and discrimination against the indigenous Palestinians (Ghanem, 2008). Geographers then followed with studies of how the practice and profession of planning in particular played a role in these dynamics (Khamaisi, 1997, 2011). Studies on urban destruction or “urbicide” in the West Bank and Gaza Strip bridged the subjects of land and population, bringing an emphasis on human suffering and daily life in refugee camps and neighbourhoods attacked and besieged by the Israeli military (Abujidi, 2013; Dahlan, 1990).

These and other studies eased out of the previous concentration of attention on land and into the realm of population and its control. Studies of resource expropriation and extraction became studies of colonialism, apartheid and ethnic cleansing, for example, with a focus on segregation and housing discrimination, as well as population control and land confiscation – internal colonialism against the indigenous Palestinians – in the Galilee (see, for example, Falah, 1993, 1996b). These works constitute some of the earliest and most influential pieces of writing on Israeli efforts to spatially isolate Palestinians remaining within the Armistice lines after 1948, pointing to parallels with South African racial policies of the same period (1948-1991, following on three centuries of colonization).

The physical obstacles to movement imposed by the Israeli military across Palestine ostensibly demanded scholarship (see Tawil-Souri, 2011c, 2012b); from 2002 onward, the Wall in the West Bank became an urgent focus for attention (Abu-Zahra, 2006, 2007b; Falah, 2003). Yet, in keeping with the trend toward examining population control rather than solely land control, new works emerged on identity documents and population registration. Geographers, like sociologists (Abu-Laban and Bakan, 2019), highlighted the administrative tools used to uphold and entrench inequality, while consistently demonstrating how equality and inclusion could have widely felt benefits (Abu-Zahra, 2008; Tawil-Souri, 2011b, 2012a).

Perhaps the key shift in the recent literature, however, is toward seeking insights into how these administrative tools and their consequent inequality render daily life asunder. Such insights have been labelled as a “double deconstruction”, simultaneously addressing geopolitical and micropolitical
forms of oppression and injustice (Sparke, 2004, 784). The work of Lina Jamoul (2004) garnered widespread praise for its ability to traverse the interior of the home and the expanse of the militarized landscape in a single breath. This approach is typical of Palestinian writing, and particularly of diarized transcriptions of the intimate effects of weaponized assaults on denationalized Palestinian citizenry (Hamzeh, 2000, 2001). Palestinians chronicle more than this, however, and detail the absurdities that arise in response to a constant Israeli – and at times international – denial of their identity, rights, and of course, geography (Abdel-Fattah, 2009; Peled-Elhanan 2008).

The remarkable work on coping mechanisms and altered geographies of daily life is perhaps one of the most valuable contributions that Palestinian researchers have made to current and future analysis of oppressive contexts; it constitutes a rare examination of how geopolitical and discursive hegemony – and the resistance to that hegemony – translates within everyday experiences (Taraki, 2008). Describing, for instance, her effort to move from place to place within the straight-jacket-like constraints across her native land, Birzeit University professor Lisa Taraki reflects on the hierarchies created through selective dispensation of Israeli military “permits” or apartheid-style passes (Taraki, 2003).

Yet another example of this “double deconstruction” is found in Abu-Nahleh’s (2006) graphic fieldwork with a family who, 17 days after the death of the husband and father, is shelled by tank missiles in their home. After feeling the second missile strike their home as they huddled in one of the dark rooms, the mother “started feeling the mouths of my children to see if they were breathing” (Abu Nahleh, 2006, 113). The interplay between geographies is crucial in Palestinian writing, which touches on children’s geographies, geographies of affect, urban geography (Taraki and Giacaman, 2006) and sociocultural geography, while displaying a constant awareness of geopolitical circumstances and interventions. The personal, the (geo)political and the everyday are merged into a lived reality that jumps from the page and grips the reader in an urgent call to intercede, to cease complacency and to speak, act or stand to challenge dominance and abuse.

The collective Palestinian experience of vulnerability provides a commonality in attitudinal response – a shared culture of resistance (Said, 1980). While regional differences can be found, household surveys confirm a prevalence of similarities in approach and outlook (Johnson, 2006, 59). This has given rise to a gentle sense of humour in certain Palestinian writing, as a means of transcending and transforming a conflictual and oppressively narrowing space. The popular works of Amiry (2005) and Abdel-Fattah (2009), as well as major strides forward in the media of film – an important format for participatory research (Pain, 2003, 654) – and websites, exemplify this humour, transcendence and transformative element of social/cultural geography.
Conclusion

While Palestinian geographers have indeed “chosen” what to do and what not to do, as suggested in our introduction to this chapter, much of this “choice” has been – and continues to be – a response to their circumstances, in particular, of dispossession, denationalization and denial of their history, presence and rights. Drawing upon the early works of non-geographers, which celebrated pre-expulsion diversity while taking a firm anti-colonial stance, subsequent geographers recreated the life and times of the over 500 villages and localities destroyed and depopulated in 1947–1949 (Al-Aref, 1956–1960; Khalidi, 1992). Unconsciously echoing the writings of critical cartographers of places like Turtle Island and Abya Yala (the Americas), Aotearoa (New Zealand) and other spaces of colonialism and decolonialism, Palestinian geographers countered the ongoing erasure of their place-names, and more crucially of their places themselves: erasure through mass bulldozing and demolition of homes, shops, markets, streets, orchards, villages and refugee camps. The scale from and for which this counter-narrative was projected stretched from the home to the supra-state region, with visions for regional unity and a non-ethnically-defined inclusivity.

Considering the critical geographies discussed in this chapter, we raise questions that are of relevance to critical geography anywhere. How has the discipline changed over time, and what implications does this carry? Does critique and criticism extend to Palestinian governance, society or scholarship? And to what extent have critical geographers succeeded in becoming public intellectuals?

To answer the first question, we began with a broad overview of how Palestinian critical writing documented historical events and village life, from perhaps a very public point of view. This public style of writing has since moved into the more private and personal, sometimes as a result of conscious feminist theoretical approaches (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004, 3. See also Abu-Zahra 2006, 2008; Jamoul 2004), sometimes as a result of circumstances particular to Palestine (Falah, 2007). Edward Said, for instance, encouraged “people’s narratives […] interviews, autobiographical reflections, oral testimonies, all of them by actors, some important some modest, in the various dramas of Palestine” (1988, 17). He explained how important these narratives were, not only to challenge stereotypes against Palestinians, but also to dispute “the prevailing research norms that require Western witnesses as the only dependable or credible evidence” (Said, 1988, 17).

Yet, in following these particularities of the Palestinian context, as well as critical research approaches that advocate “giving voice”, the past, present and future of Palestine has become a personal story, with research entering the private spaces of people’s lives. Such exposure is in part worrisome, given the degree to which ordinary Palestinians are already under surveillance in their homes, communications and
personal spaces. Might the highly personal interview, once published, be used against individuals, who describe, for instance, their dependence on medical services, mobility or income – all of which are in the power of the Israeli military to cut off (Abu-Zahra, 2007b)? Palestinian critical geography has shifted from reserving its eye for issues of land and public symbols, to magnifying its lens onto individuals’ personal and private lives. While this has its strengths, academically speaking, it may yet bear difficult consequences.

A second shift has been to examine more critically Palestinian governance and society. This has been part and parcel of the trend to inclusive thinking within Palestinian writing and activism. When Palestinian geographers publish inward-looking criticism, they tend to concentrate on issues of inclusivity, stressing the need for pluralism and healthy tolerance of opposition (e.g. Mustafa, 1998, 1999). Couching criticism in technical language – related, for example, to urban or rural planning – has been a key strategy in conveying critical messages to policy- and decision-makers (see, for example, Abdelhamid, 2009). Palestinian geographers, who urge that public governance emphasize participation and equality (e.g. Abdelhamid, 2010), are important contributors to Palestinian society, despite not often having or taking the opportunity to publish about their experiences in the English-language and international academic press.

The final irony of Palestinian critical geography is that it has likely faced wider success in making human rights issues an internationally public affair than in reaching out to the Palestinian public, even if broadly defined to encompass the 13 million Palestinians denationalized until today. International geographers’ attitudes toward human rights in Palestine are a contemporary litmus test of right/left-wing standing, just as attitudes toward the Vietnam War or South African apartheid once were in past generations. The academic boycott of Israeli institutions – alongside but more so than the cultural, military or commercial boycotts – has stood as a lightning rod for debate in academic journals, such as Borderlands (Gordon, 2003; Reinhart, 2003), Political Geography (O’Loughlin, 2004; Slater, 2004) and Settler Colonial Studies (Salamanca et al., 2012, reproduced on the Antipode website). Despite the barrage of “anger” against them, Palestinians who had called for the boycott saw that they had denaturalized systematic inequality and oppression; they had shown that, “Israel is boycottable, like South Africa was boycottable” (Omar Barghouthi, quoted in Khouri, 2005). That particular quote was distributed to the Critical Geographers email list in 2005, amid close to 100 emails, between February and August 2005, debating the boycott.

In sum, Palestinian critical geography has grown in large part from multi-disciplinary, anti-colonial roots, to branch into international critical discussions of academic activism at a time when those discussions are intensifying. While any such venture requires constant self-examination and critique,
Palestinian writers have become accustomed to being questioned and conducting some soul-searching to find answers:

[N]othing – literally nothing – about Palestine can go without proof, contention, dispute and controversy…

(Said, 1988, 11)

Perhaps the turn toward the personal and highly concrete or tangible, within Palestinian academic and popular writing, is one form of response to this constant questioning. Inside and beyond Palestine, it could be a negative symptom, of desperation, of individuals forced into more and more vulnerable positions, compelled to be more revealing, having to prove endlessly – and with more divulging of personal information – that Palestinians indeed are indigenous survivors of ongoing colonialism. Yet, alternatively, pulling together all the threads in this chapter, the increasing notion of international attitudes toward Palestine as a barometer of integrity, and the concomitant turn in Palestinian writing toward the personal, could also be interpreted as signs of more voices joining, and more confidence in speaking out on the intimate effects and dynamics of political violence, systematic oppression and discrimination. In the sense that new work in personal geographies (geographies of affect) can be more inclusive – emphasizing a common humanity rather than a geopolitical identity – these recent trends bode well not only for Palestinians, but also for all in the region, all who relate to these dynamics, and all who engage with this work.

Note

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Bibliography


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