Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror

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It is one thing to assert that Israel has advanced its hegemony, both in Israel proper since independence and in the West Bank since 1967, through a process of enclosure—with all the historical resonance of that term. It is quite another thing to show it. Gary Fields shows it. The task he sets himself, based initially on little more than a hunch spurred by a striking comment from the Mayor of Qalqilya who was touring Fields around the Palestinian landscapes of his home (“They have enclosed us,” p. 3), is to show how, in practice, not just in form, what is happening in Israel is essentially the same as in two other great moments of enclosure: the original capitalist enclosures of the British landscape and the settler colonial takeover of North America. In short, Fields argues that careful attention to the history of first the English (and larger British) enclosures beginning around 1450 and advancing in waves in subsequent decades and centuries, and then the long, even still ongoing dispossession of Native Americans beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and reaching an apogee at the end of the nineteenth century, will yield significant insights into what is happening in the Palestine–Israel landscape today. More than that, though, he shows how contemporary Israel–Palestine struggles deserve sharp scrutiny as processes of enclosure. For, he argues, quite convincingly, it is precisely by enclosure that Israel is advancing its claims to the land and its conquest of it, and thus sequentially dispossessing Palestinians of their own claims to the land.

To make his arguments (and to make them historical rather than polemical), Fields has had to dig deeply into both the ideologies that drove—and in Israel–Palestine now drive—enclosure movements and the actual practices (of law, cartography, agriculture, and engineering) that accomplished, and accomplish, them. He has had to become expert in literatures on the ideology of improvement; the history of cartography; landscape theory; colonial settlement; the commons; property; the history of Ottoman and Mandate Palestine and of Israel; Islamic and Ottoman land tenure systems; contemporary Israeli land law; and a lot more. He has done so impressively: This is a book of incredible historical sweep and compelling depth of analysis.

Fields’s strategy in Enclosure is as simple as it is fruitful. As he puts it, in each of the three cases—the British enclosures of common lands, the U.S. dispossession of indigenous peoples and enclosure of their lands, and the ongoing Israeli enclosures in Israel–Palestine—focusing on “the interplay of two primary variables, the independent variable of power and the dependent variable of landscape” allows for the telling of a unified story about how, through enclosure, landscape is “power materialized” (pp. 5–6). Over the course of six chapters divided in two parts (sandwiched by introductory and concluding chapters and with each part prefaced by a short scene-setting introduction), Fields lays out a rich story of this interplay stretching over a more than 500-year history. The continuities between the three cases become starkly apparent as the book unfolds, which is not to say Fields glosses over the important differences and dis-
tinctions among them. He does not, for one of the great strengths of the book is precisely Fields’s attention to historical detail and contextual nuance. Still, with little more than a change of place name, his introduction to the Palestinian case could easily serve as a summation of all three: “When we probe beyond direct observation, this landscape reveals a story of how a geometrically patterned order has come to dominate the land, constantly expanding its footprint on the land while forcing those from communities like Nahalal into ever smaller, more restricted and enclosed territorial spaces” (p. 173).

The analyses that result are of how, in each case, discourses of improvement, based on ideological assumptions of empty, unused, or poorly used land, serve to justify the violence of displacement and dispossession. In early modern England, the meaning of improvement shifted “from a legal process for alienating land to an economic process of profiting from the land” (p. 48). By definition land was “improved” when it was “enclosed and brought under individual ownership; it was cultivated more efficiently; and it enhanced value for the owner in terms of rent” (p. 49). Similarly, in the New World, an “improved landscape was not only one under crop, but verifiable through the visible markers of fences, walls, and hedges. These two notions enabled promoters of colonization to deride what they regarded as savage landscapes—landscapes underutilized and unenclosed, without fencing” (p. 128). In Palestine, the improvement discourse, rife in Zionist plans for developing Israel, is perhaps best summarized in a 1984 Supreme Court decision as written out by Fields:

“It is important to know how the law perceives the concept of working and reviving the land,” the Court announced. “This concept means: seeding, planting, ploughing, constructing, fencing and other improvements performed on a dead land,” all of which should result in “a total, permanent, and persisting change in the quality of the worked land.” (p. 268)

The key word here is dead (a particular category in Israeli discourse and law), which like similar words before it (uncivilized, empty) allows colonizers to ignore the myriad ways in which the land is used and is not empty or dead. When land is understood to be empty or dead, then the (often violent) dispossession of those already using it becomes not only easier, but just. Throughout the book, Fields goes to great pains to show how colonizers and improvers justified to themselves, and then made concrete in law, the justness of their enclosures.

As I have said, in Enclosure, none of the arguments or analyses Fields undertakes operates at the level of mere assertion. Rather, through all three cases, we get rich, impressively well-documented accounts (to which I can do no justice at all in this short review) of developing and shifting discourses, legal wrangling, and sometimes bloody battles as those being dispossessed of their land fight hard to retain it. The tale can at times be as depressing as it is enlightening. Overall, though, the “historical mirror” Fields holds up to the Israel–Palestine case reveals in sharp detail, at just what cost “improvement” in the landscape comes. “In all three cases,” Fields summarizes, “dominant groups with modernizing aspirations engaged in systematic efforts at ‘clearing’ the landscape of people in order to implement their visions of a modern order” (p. 313). In every case these efforts were strenuously resisted, but in “the course of these confrontations, the groups with power successfully uprooted and removed the people tied to the land, then preceded to substitute themselves as the landscape’s new owners, stewards, and sovereigns” (p. 313). Enclosure is particularly worth reading not only because it shows just how this has been the case, but especially because it now allows us to see the seemingly endless conflict in Israel–Palestine in a whole new—or rather a sharply historical—way, one that shows just how deeply Israeli claims to the land are rooted in deep European philosophies of improvement and practices of displacement. After reading Enclosure it is impossible to see the Palestine–Israel struggle as somehow unique or exceptional.

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