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**Reviewed by Basma Fahoum**

Nearly 25 years have passed since Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) signed the Oslo Accords. These agreements were initially meant to be temporary, to be followed up by further negotiations in the next five years. Oslo II, adopted in 1995, divided the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) into three areas, with varying levels of civil and security control assigned to Israel and/or the then-established Palestinian Authority (PA). The several agreements, however, are in effect to this day, as the “peace process” between the two parties has not made substantial progress since the 1990s. This means that the civilian Palestinian population in the OPT, consisting of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, have been stuck in a non-sovereign position and governed by a multiplicity of legal regimes but ultimately controlled by Israel. This political stagnation is the context that paved the way for unilateral peace plans like Trump’s so-called “Deal of the Century.”

Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins’ *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine* brings this sense of impediment to light. Concerned with waste in the West Bank, the author is interested in the materiality, spatiality, and temporality of waste infrastructures. Contrary to Mary Douglas’ anthropological conceptualization of waste as *matter out of place*, the author argues that waste in Palestine is *matter with no place to go*. She thus marries classical anthropological theory with the interdisciplinary field of discard studies and a critical Latourian materialist sensibility, to ask: how do ordinary people and bureaucrats in Palestine live and work in the state of being inundated, even besieged, by waste? What is infrastructure? What is value? And how does environmental and infrastructural time converge with the aspirations of statehood in the West Bank? *Waste Siege* explores some answers to these complex questions, which have come to the fore under the prevailing circumstances of climate change, water scarcity, and food insecurity, issues that Palestinian communities experience more so than other sovereign populations.

The Palestinian West Bank in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords and the Second Intifada proves to be an excellent context to ask these questions. Stamatopoulou-Robbins consistently refers to the West Bank as “Palestine,” despite the fact that

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most Palestinians would argue that the OPT are a far cry from what they politically or symbolically perceive as “Palestine.” Over the last two decades modernization, consumerism, and capitalism have intersected with the professional and academic interest in environmentalism, governmentality, and colonialism to produce what the author has called “waste siege.” The current state of waste siege in the OPT is a product of Israeli occupation, the proliferation of discard as a daily practice, and the layered and multifaceted governing bodies, legal systems, and foreign aid organizations.

The book is divided into five chapters. Two chapters are concerned with material infrastructures in the traditional sense—landfills and sewage treatment facilities—and the professionals in charge of them. The three other chapters focus on infrastructures and practices ordinary Palestinians have devised around waste. These infrastructures include second-hand markets, bread discards, and hazardous dumping practices, the latter in West Bank areas controlled by Israel (Area C according to Oslo II).

The occupation renders itself invisible in Stamatopoulou-Robbins’ account, as it besieges Palestinians, their natural resources, labor, and purchasing power for its settler-colonial state. The occupation renders responsible waste management harder for Palestinians, for Israel controls Palestinian imports, and sometimes outright dumps waste into landfills on Palestinian land. Since waste, like the State of Israel, knows no borders, the smoke of Palestinian trash fires pollutes Israeli air; and due to the topography of the West Bank, Palestinian sewage flows out of the West Bank to pollute Israeli water sources. This and so-called “security considerations” are major concerns for Israel, along with managing Palestinian solid and liquid waste. However, as Stamatopoulou-Robbins argues, waste siege is in fact a very pressing concern for Palestinian bureaucrats and environmental professionals, as well as the besieged Palestinians writ large.

She argues that waste is ecology in itself. Palestinians are besieged by waste as much as they are occupied by the Israeli military, economy, and modernization discourse. They have to think of ways to mitigate and organize the waste around them. But they cannot get rid of the waste altogether. Palestinians have to keep it, bury and compress it in landfills, use or reuse it, and assign meaning to these mitigation methods and to the waste itself. Therefore, creativity, matter-of-factness, and material gestures all stem from the inability to govern oneself, in what Stamatopoulou-Robbins calls the “phantom state” of the PA. Therefore, in order to manifest their will, ethics, and aspirations, Palestinians compromise, invent, and make do. Waste Siege is committed to bringing these facts to light.

For example, in a perceptive chapter, which harkens back to Stamatopoulou-Robbins’ article about Palestinian adaptation plans for climate change, she describes how landfills are a product of the prevalent legal, political, and economic
circumstances. But these same landfills also embody ideas about present frustrations and future aspirations of Palestinians. For the people managing them, “landfill time” is a finite period of grace, when solutions seem to be working now, but will clearly fail in the future. These professionals are materially stuck in the present, but ideally look forward to a modern, clean future of waste management in the future Palestinian state. Stamatopoulou-Robbins emphasizes how a higher level of education among Palestinian environmental professionals doesn’t make their jobs easier, but rather introduces them to ideas of sustainability, which are inapplicable to the West Bank in its current state. Palestinians are caught between the practical and the ideal, the locally possible and the internationally required.

Additionally, as part of their jobs, Palestinians in charge of PA waste management projects must verbally or physically perform a willingness to cooperate with the Israeli military and civil administration, as well as international NGOs. They are expected to prove that it is worth investing in Palestinian infrastructural and environmental projects and in Palestinians as a people. The PA has even resorted to the use of force against protestors opposing its developmental waste management schemes, in cooperation and coordination with the Israeli authorities. This is also a discursive necessity, as Israeli authorities and settlers utilize environmental discourse to argue that Palestinian waste spilling into Israeli lands and the mountain aquifer (the main source of potable water in the West Bank) is a bellicose act of negligence, when in fact Israel controls and often impedes the construction of better waste management facilities by the PA. Stamatopoulou-Robbins’ discussion makes it easier to understand the Palestinian professionals’ ambivalence toward more challenging, sustainable projects, which fall in line with international standards required by donors. Such cutting-edge projects are clearly difficult to implement in the foreseeable future.

I was especially intrigued by chapter 2, the subject of which is the rabish, from the English rubbish. Used goods smuggled from Israeli flea markets, the rabish ends up being sold in the municipal market of the Palestinian town of Jenin. Stamatopoulou-Robbins argues that, while rabish is a class and status signifier, it is also an indicator of a rather unique system of value-making. This value-making, she suggests, does not follow the logic of the ethical choice of being fashionably or conscientiously thrifty, as is the case in developed countries. Neither is it a consequence of poverty. Rather, within the available choices of commodities available to the Palestinian public since Oslo, used Israeli goods are better than the flimsy, hazardous goods imported into the West Bank. The main strength of this chapter is the author’s intimate and nuanced portrayal of practices around consumption and market dynamics, which can only be achieved after spending a long time doing fieldwork among families and shop owners in Jenin.
The same is evident in the chapter concerning bread. However, this chapter is imbued with too many overlapping conceptualizations of what bread is to Palestinians under waste siege.

Stamatopoulou-Robbins argues that to Palestinians bread is sacred: an infrastructure, a possible gift, reclamation of space, and a signifier of a collective will to share. But in fact, the practice of not discarding bread with other household trash is not entirely unique to Palestine; rather it is a pervasive practice widely seen in Muslim and Arab countries. Bread is considered sacred in all Abrahamic religions, and can be found hanging next to dumpsters wherever religious and observing Jews live in Israel. Of course the situation in Palestine is exacerbated by the other structural limitations of waste and public space management. But it is worth noting that this multifaceted nature of bread and the conflictual considerations about discarding it are not unique to Palestinian society. The fact remains that in this respect Palestine is not exceptional but has more in common with other areas of the world.

A better editing of the Arabic transliterations and translations would have benefitted this valuable book. Al-Am’ari Camp is consistently spelled as al-‘Amari; I’tiraf is consistently spelled as ‘Itiraf; and many other inaccuracies mar the manuscript. Perhaps most unfortunate is the mistaken linguistic link drawn between the unrelated shibh (meaning semi or quasi in Arabic) and shabah (meaning phantom, ghost, or apparition). Nonetheless, this unfortunate mistake does not detract from the author’s argument about the performance of the PA as a “quasi-” or “phantom state” (135).

More important is Stamatopoulou-Robbins’ deep and intimate understanding of Palestinian life in the West Bank. It is hard to talk about pollution without being judgmental against the culture in which it is created and maintained. As one settler environmental activist the author interviews says: “You see all the garbage? You see the enormous difference between Israel and the Palestinian Authority?” “It’s a Third World country!” He concludes (53). However, Stamatopoulou-Robbins’ is careful not to blame Palestinians for their siege. Instead, she highlights the day-to-day reality of Palestinians, which is not only determined by the occupation and its hindrance of infrastructural projects. Their reality is also controlled by the aesthetic, professional, and moral codes, as well as the social, political, and economic constraints. These codes and constraints produce actions and performances which have the potential to be harmful, bizarre, or ineffective.

Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine is a welcome addition to the sparse literature about the environment, waste, and infrastructure in Palestine and the Middle East more broadly. It is an important work concerned with the daily lives of Palestinians in the post-Oslo and post-Second-Intifada eras of
exacerbated spatial and temporal separation between Palestinians in the OPT and
the citizens of Israel (not to mention the surrounding countries). Despite the com-
plexity of the subject matter and its disciplinary location in anthropology, it would
be apt and accessible reading befitting many syllabi concerning Palestine, the
Middle East, or environmental and global studies. To face the challenges ahead,
we need to understand not only global processes, but also local politics and practices,
as is done in *Waste Siege*.

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**Notes**

4. Halachic questions about the sanctity of bread and the best ways to discard it are many and easy to find online. For example, see Jakob J. Petuchowski, “Not by Bread Alone,” *Judaism; New York*, 7:3 (Summer 1958), 229–234.