Thanato-geographies of Palestine and the possibility of politics

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Abstract
This article critically examines thanato-geographies of Palestine-Israel and Palestinians and the crucial question of the possibility of politics in the context of sovereign exception. The main argument of the article is that bare life as referent for Palestinians’ lives overstates the subject-making capacities of the sovereign and understates the possibilities of political agency. As a response, the discussion turns to two prominent examples of exception – Israeli checkpoints and the Gaza borderlands – with the aim to keep in sharp focus both the thanatopolitical and that which – whether as complement or counter – exceeds it. Two important correctives arise from such an approach: thanatopolitical formations are i) dependent on broader thanato-geographies of capitalism; and ii) countered by the political agency of those figured as bare life.

Keywords
Palestine, homo sacer, thanatopolitics, Agamben, bare life, Israel

Introduction
In this article, I critically examine scholarly work on Palestine-Israel and Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria that foregrounds the power of the state to mobilise violence, suffering and death as a mode of governing. Specifically, the discussion is focussed on the recurrent figuring of Palestinian space as analogous with Giorgio Agamben’s (1995, 2002, 2005) notion of ‘exception’ and Palestinians as ‘bare life’ or homines sacri, and probes the crucial question of the possibility of politics in such thanato-geographies of Palestine. The article tracks the prevalence of exception/bare life, including various re-workings, in geographical works that theorise homo sacer in the actually existing spatial contexts of refugee camps, closure, checkpoints and so forth (prominently: Gordon, 2008; Gregory, 2004; Lentin, 2008; Lloyd, 2012; Ophir et al 2009; Puar, 2017). In doing so, I seek to bring into full view the recurrent but marginal observation that, as Christopher Harker (2020: 6, 158) has recently articulated, ‘Palestine is often comprehended through (geo)political theory and
positioned as exceptional space’ where ‘the possibility or agency is severely constrained’ (see also Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014: 285–287; Leshem, 2015: 36). Taking this as a central problematic, the intention is not, to be clear, a rejection of thanatopolitical analysis but rather something less ambitious: the main argument of the article is that bare life as referent for Palestinians’ lives overstates the subject-making capacities of the sovereign and understates the possibilities of political agency. My aim from here is rather more ambitious: to keep in sharp focus both the thanatopolitical and that which – whether as complement or counter – exceeds it (see also Oesch, 2017; Tuastad, 2017; Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska, 2017). Two important correctives arise from such an approach: thanatopolitical formations are i) dependent on broader thanato-geographies of capitalism; and ii) countered by the political agency that figures as bare life.

The article proceeds in three main sections. The first focuses on a specific trajectory of Agamben’s account of thanatopolitics (1995, 2002, 2005) in geographical writing where parallels are drawn between Palestinian space as ‘exception’ and Palestinians as homines sacri. The second section reviews critical perspectives on the idea of bare life itself, its relation to exception and its application in social science to caution against an overemphasis on the control exerted by the state and/or inattention to the ways people counter that control. The discussion in section three examines two prominent examples of exception – checkpoints in the West Bank and the Gaza border during the 2018–19 Great March of Return – to bring into focus, on the one hand, the broader thanatogeographies of capitalism that maintain exception, and on the other, the political agency that counters and re-makes exception. A concluding section indicates the broader contributions of the article towards a possibility of politics in a slightly different sense by considering the production of knowledge in relation to a less abstract object of critique, an ethics of remaining open to political struggle, and the material promise of decolonisation.

**Palestine, exception and homines sacri**

Giorgio Agamben’s ‘corrective’ (or ‘completion’ (1995: 6–9)) of Michel Foucault’s work on biopolitics has become highly influential as an interpretive frame for understandings of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories. His work is central to a great many research articles, monographs and conference papers (see Ramadan, 2013: 67), and at least two widely read edited volumes, *Thinking Palestine* (2008) and *The Power of Exclusive Inclusion* (2009), that are dedicated to critical analyses of relations between Palestine and exception, and Palestinians as bare life or homo sacer. Given the absoluteness of Israel’s position as sovereign decision maker, the exceptional juridical status of the Palestinian territories it occupies, and the impunity with which Palestinians are incarcerated, exiled and killed, it is no surprise that a thinker such as Agamben should come to the fore; his work offers critical insight into the suspension of law to create spaces of ‘exception’, where life is rendered ‘bare’ and the politics of life (biopolitics) gives way to the politics of death (thanatopolitics). Prominent commentators have accordingly brought critical insight into the thanatopolitics of the occupation in agenda-setting texts. Neve Gordon’s *Israel’s Occupation* (2008: 21) builds on the premise that ‘Israel now operates primarily . . . by reducing members of Palestinian society to what Giorgio Agamben has called homo sacer, people whose lives can be taken with impunity’ and Derek Gregory’s seminal *The Colonial Present* (2004: 135) draws focus on the ‘reduction of the Palestinian people to so many homines sacri. Gregory (2004: 133) elaborates to open the possibility that the Israeli state’s ‘hideous objective . . . is to reduce homo sacer to the abject despair of der Muselmann’. The reference here is to Agamben’s (1995: 185) writing on Auschwitz where *der Muselmann*: ‘no longer belongs to the world of men in any way . . . mute and absolutely alone, he has passed into another world without memory and without grief’. Der Muselmänner were ‘unbearable to human eyes’ (Agamben, 2002: 51) or, as Alexander Weheliye (2014: 119) has put it,
‘limit cases for humanity [and], at least in Agamben’s thinking, incomparable to others because they have journeyed too far beyond the precincts of the human’.

The lives of Palestinians are – even if only faintly – brought into parallel thus: with life rendered at its most ‘bare’, even analogous with those at Auschwitz whom Primo Levi (1959: 103) described as the ‘non-men . . . on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen’. Academic work along this theme of life reduced to (or towards) zoe – ‘the simple fact of living’ in contrast to bios, ‘the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group’ (Agamben, 1995, 1) – in Palestine ranges from the site-specific – for instance, at checkpoints (Alijla, 2019; Ball, 2014; Bowman, 2007), the separation wall (Boano and Martén, 2013), refugee camps (Hanafi, 2009) and detention facilities (Khalili, 2008) – to the more quotidien thanato-juridical logics that mark Israel’s governing of the Palestinian population (Ghanim, 2008; Gordon, 2008; Mbembe, 2003, 2019). For example, Glenn Bowman’s (2007: 129–133) writing on ‘encystation’ – or ‘the process of enclosing within a cyst’ – deploys a spatial metaphor of ‘a closed sac in which morbid matter is quarantined’ to elaborate on the inclusive-exclusion of a ‘dehumanised’ Palestinian population trapped within severely restricted mobilities (emphasis added). Focusing on such restrictions, Camillo Boano and Ricardo Martén (2013: 10) have theorised the Separation Wall as a ‘contested border zone’ that creates a ‘genuine space of exception: a sovereign act of land appropriation and delimitation produced via a strategy of inclusive exclusion’. As a result, Boano and Martén (2013: 16) argue, Palestinians are rendered an ‘urban homo sacer . . . the paradigm of an exceptional production of space by decree – a member of a largely waste, invisible, poor marginalised subpopulation whose rights are potentially suspended’. Honaida Ghanim’s (2008: 67) well cited interrogation of the underlying logics of such suspension and dehumanisation draws attention to Israel’s thanatopolitical ‘management of death and destruction’ in which Palestinians ‘are exposed to the continual threat of death that becomes a permanent shadow accompanying them. Death is just on hold again and again, from moment to moment’.

Although these are select examples, they have become prominent, and their metaphorical representation of Palestinian life is worth attention. Through a frame of bare life, Palestinians are figured as a residue (a ‘morbid matter’) or a consequence to Israel’s absolute sovereignty: the ‘largely waste’ substance of a ‘cyst’, either totally ‘invisible’ or at least obscured by the death’s ‘permanent shadow’. By these readings, for Palestinians as akin to homo sacer (or even der Muselmann), the possibility of political agency appears distant. In fact, it is only at the point where ‘death’s shadow’ is at its darkest, in the paradigmatic bare life of the suicide bomber, that politics (somewhat paradoxically) returns. This is the case in Achille Mbembe’s (2003: 39; 2019) work on necropolitics, or the ‘subjugation of life to the power of death’ that ‘profoundly reconfigure(s) the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror’. For Mbembe (2019: 44), Israel’s necropolitical project consists in a ‘dynamic of frenzied destruction whose essence lies in transforming the lives of Palestinians into a heap of ruins or a pile of garbage destined for cleansing’ where the political agency of resistance collapses into self-destruction, or martyrdom. It is only in the final destructive act that ‘the self-sacrificed proceeds to take power over his or her death’ (Mbembe, 2019: 90) and thus (re)claims sovereignty in the act of dying (as opposed to the passive being killed). Honaida Ghanim (2008: 78) similarly writes:

Controlling death becomes a political option available not only to the occupier ... In this deadly trap, the occupier can use the threat of death to oppress and control the Palestinians, but they can turn their own death into a way of gaining political meaning, as a way of compensating for a meaningless life. This is a deadly trap ... it turns the political into a state that can be gained only at the moment of its elimination (emphasis added).
In these and other readings (e.g. Bowman, 2007: 127; Veracini, 2003: 42), politics is only possible among those who live otherwise ‘meaningless lives’ at this final moment. Mbembe (2019: 91–92) writes: ‘death, in this case, can be represented as agency. For death is precisely that from and over which I have power. But it is also that space where freedom and negation operate’. It is an obvious point worth emphasising: that space, and consequently the negations and freedoms within it, is extremely confined and political agency is reduced to its own final annihilation.

A diminished possibility of political agency remains also in reworkings of Agamben’s theory where Israel’s ‘thanato’ is recognised as intentionally incomplete (e.g. Puar, 2017; Wells, 2019). In Right to Maim (2017: 139), for instance, Jasbir Puar adds ‘a critical axis’ to the biopolitical quadrant – make live, make die, let live, let die – to propose that suffering, injury and debilitation constitute a midpoint between life and death: ‘will not let die’. Maiming thus serves as part of a framework to analyse Israel’s use of ‘non-lethal’ or ‘ethical’ munitions (tear gas and rubber bullets) and practices (shooting of limbs not torsos). This is central to an objective of critiquing the purported ethics of the Israeli Defense Forces – ‘the most moral in the world’ (see Eastwood, 2017; Joronen, 2016) – and its ‘violations and violence [committed] in the name of the principle of the ‘lesser evil’’ (Weizman, 2011: 66). In terms of political agency, however, in even the not-quite-ness of thanatopolitics, Puar (2017: 150) is clear on the limits of Palestinian for individual and collective action: ‘through debilitating practices of maiming and stunting, Palestinians are further literalised and lateralised as surface, as bodies without souls, as sheer biology (and are) thus rendered nonhuman’. As ‘not even human enough for death’ (Puar, 2017: 141), Palestinian people by Puar’s account are analogous to Agamben’s reading of the ‘anonymous mass’ of der Muselmänner (Levi, 1959: 103). The reduction to a ‘sheer biology’, as Charles Wells (2019: 12) has noted in commentary on maiming, fulfils a precise Israeli military ‘ethical’ objective of ‘keeping the human body alive while eliminating the possibility of resistance’ (emphasis added).

**Bare life, exception and social science**

There is, then, a prominent trajectory of Agamben’s account of thanatopolitics in geographical writing in which equivalence is drawn between Palestinian space as ‘exception’ and Palestinians as homines sacri and, as corollary, where the power of the sovereign eradicates political agency. In an important sense, we can attribute such a conclusion to the application of the notion of bare life in its constitutive difference from the collective life of politics. In Agamben’s (2000: 40) words, collective or communicable life (bios) is diminished – and even erased – within exception: ‘a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation’. Although it is beyond an article of this length to collate and order a full critique, in this section of the article I want to caution against similar such convictions in research on Palestine (and beyond) by discussing further the idea of bare life itself, its relation to exception and its application in social science.

On the idea of bare life, that there is little equivocation across Agamben’s principal works on homo sacer (1995, 2002, 2005) on the possibility of politics within exception invites critique on how bare life can be related to ontic contexts in scholarly research. Thomas Lemke (2005: 5), for instance, questions a tendency to reduce life to ‘mere physical existence’ as ‘some kind of living dead’ (cf. Mbembe, 2003: 40) and the apparent return to absolute sovereign power that thus neglects ‘the self-regulating capacities of subjects as autonomous actors’ (2005: 9–10). Jef Huysmans (2008: 165) has similarly written of ‘the jargon of exception’ and the ‘suppression of political renditions of the societal’ in which he argues that ‘Agamben’s biopolitical reading of the exception-being-the-rule ontologically erases the problematique of the political capacity and significance of ‘the people’ as a multidimensional differentiated sociality’ (2008: 176, original emphasis). ‘Sociality’ in this sense refers to the ‘mediations that structure human life into a socio-political order’ through the ‘various processes that mediate between life and collective ends’ (Huysmans, 2008: 176).
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points out in discussion of contemporary migration: ‘for all the brutality . . . we are not rounding up

welfare mothers and exterminating them en masse; in an absolutely minimal sense, they remain

legal persons. They retain a sliver of the right to due process’. In this sense, the totality of exception

can never be complete because the law is not simply suspended by the sovereign but advocated and

contested based on the rights of a gendered and reproductive body. A corrective for thanatopolitical

analysis here is to recognise that (‘pure biological’) life within spaces of exception can be ana-
tomically distinct and generative of differentiated (political) life. This point is put directly by Ewa

Plonowska Ziarek (2008: 93):

‘exception and bare life originate in the decree and

time of Agamben neglects a full theorisation of race as a primary mechanism that ‘discipline(s) humanity

into full humans, not-quite humans, and nonhumans’. It is the historical singularity of Nazism at

the centre of these orderings and thus the neglect of colonial genocide and plantation slavery – on whose

racial logics the concentration camp was built – that still grounds global economies of living and
dying (Isin and Rygiel, 2007). At least in part, therefore, Weheliye’s point is that Agamben (1995:
84), by figuring bare life as that which ‘no longer belongs to the world of men in any way’, remains

within and reproduces the very same ontological bounds that makes certain humans ‘nonhumans’. 

Weheliye (2014: 123) urges us towards a different project: taking Agamben’s ‘limit cases for

humanity’ to show how they belong to the ‘world of men’ as ‘subjects (who) lived and dreamed

other ways of being human’.

Further caution is required around an assumed contiguity between exception and bare life. Laura

Zanotti (2013: 291) argues that understandings of bare life as product of state-induced exception

‘substantialise power along the blueprint of a mighty ‘Leviathan’ that can be understood based upon

its capacity to impose on others’. The necessary and only conclusion ‘in this narrative’ is that

subjecthood is ‘excluded from the juridical order’ (Zanotti, 2013: 291) to produce an account of too

near a distinction between an ‘all-powerful sovereign’ and its ‘the powerless victim’ (see Abujidi,

2009: 290). The problematic opened up here is not only the ascription of an absolute power to the 

Leviathan-like sovereign but also the determining function ascribed to that power: that bare life

follows exception. It is a base tenet – though sometimes overlooked – of Agamben’s formulations

that, while closely tied and even co-dependent, exception is a spatio-legal designation given to

prising bios from zœ and homo sacer is the complement juridical subject. Although for Agamben –

whose project is, after all, a state-centred one – exception and bare life originate in the decree and

thus can (co-)exist on the ontological terms of the state, the view from scales ‘below’ is necessarily

contrary: bare life is distinct from exception in terms of its manipulability for the simple fact that the

sovereign can more readily decide the law than it can delimit the contours of subjectivity. Locating

bare life in actually existing contexts, then, risks writing out ‘[the] multifarious and contingent
struggles that are constituted within scripts of governmental rationalities and at the same time exceed and transform them’ (Zanotti, 2013: 300).

This brings us to a final cautionary point to do not with the idea of bare life itself but its application in social science. Within much of the work cited so far in this section, there is tendency towards a conflation of Agamben’s writing itself with the application of Agamben’s writing to understand real-world conditions. Cleaving the two apart renders critique of bare life itself somewhat moot for the important fact that Giorgio Agamben is not a social scientist but a philosopher in the continental tradition whose writing on thanatopolitics refers not to sociological conditions but to an ontological rationality of governing. As philosophers such as Mathew Abbott (2012: 26) have argued, Agamben’s bare life is ‘a metaphysical figure’ and ‘not a category of ontic politics’. This is key to situating Agamben’s metaphysics as metaphysics in relation to concrete cases; it is not so much that Agamben’s explorations of (ontic) contexts – from Auschwitz to Guantanamo – serve to present cases of exception/bare life, it is more that those sites are secondary to a main objective of abstracting a metaphysical logic of governing in those spaces. Understanding Agamben in this way is to recognise that, as Abbott (2012: 26) emphasises, ‘no life is bare . . . no human form-of-life has ever been reduced to bare life. Bare life, like pure being, can never exist (has never existed)’ (original emphasis). In this sense, even if we recognise in the substance of governing a sovereign desire to reduce life to ‘abject despair’ (e.g. Gregory, 2004: 133), it does not follow that ‘the governed’ such as Palestinians in the Occupied Territories can be considered to live sociologically correspondent lives to the banished (metaphysical) figure of homo sacer.

Drawing such analogies overstretches the notion of bare life from an ontological to a social condition and from the state to its subjected people. I would argue that the works reviewed above (in Section Palestine, exception and homines sacri) tend towards this conclusion, as does the large body of literature that derives from those of the works that have become influential. Such a conclusion misleads for one or more of three reasons: i) Agamben neglects the gendered and racial politics of the body; ii) the sovereign exception cannot fully determine subject-making; and/or iii) Agamben’s metaphysics make no claims on sociologically extant forms of life. Whichever of these discrete arguments convinces, the corrective is the same: the use of bare life as referent for Palestinians’ lives oversates the subject-making capacities of the sovereign and understates the possibilities of political agency.

The possibility of politics

The issue to hand therefore is not to deny the politics of death that are prevalent for Palestinians living in highly securitised environments (e.g. East Jerusalem, the West Bank), zones of exclusion and indistinction (e.g. refugee camps) and relative abandonment (e.g. Gaza) but to recognise the limits to thanatopolitical analysis and address that which is excessive of it. As analytical tools, the notions of exclusion and bare life provide a crucial critical grammar of the state (figured as the sovereign) but can narrow our view of the multiple (extra-state) forces that bear on the subject and divert attention away from the persistence of political agency in even the most oppressive conditions. My aim here therefore is to keep in sharp focus both the thanatopolitical and that which – whether as complement or counter – exceeds it. I build the dual argument that thanatopolitical formations are a) dependent on broader thanato-geographies of capitalism and b) countered by the political agency of those figured as bare life. The substance of these arguments consists in two empirical examples, one drawn from long-term fieldwork on checkpoints in the West Bank, the other from the recent Great March of Return on the Gaza border.

Israel’s checkpoints in Palestine have been widely studied from a range of perspectives that provide detailed analyses of the colonial state’s control over colonised people and the ways that border crossings have become sites of elevated threat to Palestinian life (Alijla, 2019; Ball, 2013;
One prominent such checkpoint – Checkpoint 300 between Bethlehem and Jerusalem – is known (along with Qalandia and Hawwara) for its hour-long queues, unpredictable security staff and a constant threat of violence (see e.g. Griffiths and Repo, 2018, 2020, 2021; Rijke and Minca, 2018, 2019). Redesignated a ‘terminal’ in 2005 (see Mansbach, 2009), Checkpoint 300 is now a vast complex of corridors, turnstiles and surveillance technologies – including cameras and airport-style X-ray and body scanners – and is staffed by an amalgam of state actors (e.g. IDF soldiers, Israeli Crossing Points Authority Staff, Shin Bet agents) and employees of private security companies such as T&M Protection Resources Holdings Israel (Farah and Abdallah, 2019: 16; Whoprofits, 2016: 19–20). As Palestinians enter the complex they are funnelled through a caged walkway that doubles back on itself under the watch of staff in a remote control room inside the main building. Once in that building, Rapiscan and L3Harris Safeview body scanners render bodies and belongings legible while Hewlett Packard’s Basel Biometric Identification System records fingerprint and facial recognition technology to attach those bodies to state-maintained profiles (Spektor, 2019; Whoprofits, 2016: 22).

The argument that Checkpoint 300 (and other Israeli border crossings in Palestine) constitutes a space of exception is a convincing one for the ways that legal rights are not conferred to Palestinians inside the checkpoint (and in the West Bank more generally) yet the de facto suspension of law necessarily remains within the juridical domain of the state. However, much is lost if this analysis is expanded solely on a strain of thanatopolitics that interrogates the state-as-juridical executive. Palestinians’ exposure to harm consists not merely in a locally produced legal ‘threshold’ between ‘inclusion and exclusion’ (Agamben, 2005, 2) but depends on broader thanato-geographies of capitalism represented by the myriad technologies that surveil, categorise and dehumanise subjects in checkpoint space.

Inside the checkpoint, the waiting, subjection to decision and always-looming potential of banishment – and the myriad repercussions to do with degradation of livelihood and physical/mental health – are effected by Palestinians’ encounter with advanced technologies that exceed the colonial state. The provenance of hardware, for instance, directs us to an account of thanatopolitical space produced through global networks of production where R&D travels from sites in Melbourne, FL (L3Harris), Palo Alto, CA (Hewlett Packard) and Torrance, CA (Rapiscan) to manufacturing plants in Hyderabad, Johor Bahru and Singapore before reaching the market at international security fairs (Stockmarr, 2015) and purchase by security contractors to the Israeli state (e.g. in this case G4S Israel, part of London-based G4S, a subsidiary of the Californian company, Allied Universal). This coming together of global networks is significant for the fact that such hardware constitutes the ‘brutal materialities’ of Checkpoint 300 (see Rijke and Minca, 2019, 984). For instance, the deployment of body scanners – in a way that is analogous to the stripping of bios from zoe – reduces ‘real’ people to ‘data-based risk scores . . . algorithmic models’, displacing a previously person-to-person ethics of the decision (Amoore and Hall, 2009, 461). Writing specifically on Rapiscan and similar scanners (i.e. those in use in Checkpoint 300) Louise Amoore and Alexandra Hall (2009, 457) have noted that ‘[t]he stripping, exposure, and ‘writing’ of a body involves . . . a reduction of the person [through which] previously unimaginable political interventions become possible with the reduction of people to ‘bare life’ . . . naked in real or metaphorical terms’. The figuring of Palestinians as homines sacri thus rests on the thanatopolitical innovations not merely of the colonial state but of a globalised security industry that enables subjects to be categorised in terms of admissibility, and even dispensability.

This broader geography also underpins the recent outsourcing of the checkpoint’s day-to-day operations to T&M Protection Resources Holdings Israel, a subsidiary of US-based T&M LLC. The contract for operating Checkpoint 300 came into place in 2019 and follows global patterns of privatising national security infrastructures in ways that subtly re-shape the relations of the state to the violence distributed in its name (see Gordon, 2002). The significance for Palestinians attempting
safe passage through checkpoints is that private contractors are (even) less accountable than the state and their employment practices are known to lack strict supervisory mechanisms, leaving personnel free(r) to use ‘unnecessary and excessive force’ (Farah and Abdallah, 2019: 17). It is important to state that the relations of ‘excessive force’ at Checkpoint 300 and the current contractor are yet to be investigated; it is of equal importance to emphasise that privatised security staff can match state counterparts in terms of brutality without being directly answerable to either a public or to stringent regulation. The prominence of private contractors at Checkpoint 300 directs inquiry to the international flows of capital and employment practices that tie Israel’s thanatopolitical formations as much to neoliberalism as to religion, race and ethnicity (see Clarno, 2017; Haddad, 2016; Hever, 2018: 134–169).

In the business (literally) of producing bare life, technology providers such as L3Harris, Hewlett Packard and Rapiscan and globalised models of outsourcing and employment conditions are integral to the making of thanatopolitical space in Checkpoint 300. My argument here is that remaining close to Agamben’s account of bare life leads us to the sovereign, the Israeli state and its control over Palestinian space, but at the same time gestures towards different vectors of power dispersed through globalised networks of security practices and technologies on which sovereignty depends – and is thus constituted by. The ‘possibility of politics’ in this sense is broadened significantly to include the thanatopolitical state alongside that which exceeds it yet enables control over life/death. There are recent and compelling moves in this direction: Toufic Haddad’s (2016) account of Western-led state-building projects since the 1993 Oslo Accords demonstrates the ways that neoliberal globalisation has contributed to and exacerbated the failure of Palestinian statehood, and thus buttressed Israel’s occupation; and Craig Jones’s (2020) study of war lawyers and targeted killing operations tracks a flow of ideas between advanced militaries (the US and Israel) that dislocates ‘the’ state as the distributor of life/death. Although diverse sites of study, both Haddad and Jones take seriously the workings of power that are simultaneously exogenous and integral to the state. Kareem Rabie’s (2021, 201) recent book takes a similar approach with a cogent rationale that ‘too often Palestine is understood through the separation between it, Israel, and the outside’, in a way that seeks ‘resistance to a cohesive colonial power (thereby) orient(ating) politics narrowly against occupation’, and thus discounting the wider geographies that sustain it (emphasis added).

The possibility of politics opened up by such an approach was very recently in evidence in the UK where pro-Palestine activists disrupted and closed down facilities in Leicestershire and Staffordshire operated by UAV Tactical Systems and Elite KL, respectively (BBC, 2021). Both companies are subsidiaries of Elbit Systems, one of Israel’s largest arms manufacturers, and were targeted for their roles in the supply chains that produce 85% of the drones used by the Israeli army for reconnaissance and bombardment. As the sovereign is rendered more Leviathan-like, the possibility of politics narrows; as its dependence on more accessible actors are known, however, the possibility of politics is greatly expanded into the broader thanato-geographies of capitalism that simultaneously enable violence within exception and signal points of potential disruption.

A second way that thanatopolitics can be opened more fully to the possibility of politics is by attending closely to sites of Palestinian protest that – whether intended as violent or not – are routinely provoked and supressed with strong military force. A prominent recent example is that of the Great March of Return in which Palestinians gathered along the eastern edge of Gaza to call for the return of homes to refugees and for an end to the ongoing blockade. Each week over a period of 20 months between 2018 and 2019, tens of thousands took part in the rallies, carrying their demands to the edge of the buffer zone that stretches 300–1000 m into Gaza from the border with Israel (Abusalim, 2018; Barakat, 2019; Erakat, 2019). The response from the Israeli military was shocking, even to a mainstream media that is largely desensitised to the brutal treatment of Palestinians under occupation (Guardian, 2018; New York Times, 2018). The United Nations Human Rights Council (2019: 18) reported that protesters were met with a ‘disproportionate use of force’
comprising ‘high-velocity weaponry at close range (that) result(ed) in killings and long-term, life-changing injuries, including paralysis and amputations’. In the first ten months of the protests, 260 Palestinians were killed and 27,094 were wounded by Israeli military fire (OCHA, 2019).

During this time the Gaza borderlands became a paradigmatic example of spatial exception. Israel’s 2005 ‘disengagement’ from Gaza serves as grounds for denying its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of civilians in occupied territory. This is contradicted by its claim on authority to declare a no-go zone within Gaza, and to consider that zone one of combat where lethal force can be justified. For entering the buffer zone during the period of the Great March of Return, IDF soldiers (snipers included) were reportedly authorised to use deadly force against ‘primary instigators’ or ‘primary rioters’ (Yesh Din, 2020, 4). When human rights organisations submitted a petition (HCJ 3003/18) to the High Court of Justice to counter this spatial designation, the Court ruled unanimously with the state: “the soldiers are acting in accordance with the binding provisions of both international law and domestic Israeli law, and are performing the humanitarian duties they bear under the laws of war …” (Yesh Din, 2018). This ruling set a different legal pathway for dealings with complaints about deaths and injuries that would no longer be reviewed by the usual Military Advocate General’s Corps (MAGC) but by the General Staff Mechanism for Fact-Finding Assessments (the FFA Mechanism), a bureaucratic formation noted for its slowness and anti-transparency. The change in bureaucratic procedure, the human rights group Yesh Din reports, meant that injury to Palestinians cannot be subject to complaint and of 231 inquiries into deaths, only 17 reached investigation stage with only one indictment – that of a soldier for the killing 14-year-old Othman Rami Jawad Hillis for which a derisory punishment (demotion and 30 days military labour) was issued (see Noy, 2020).

Given these legal and spatial designations, the Gaza borderlands during the Great March of Return became a model topological structure of exception. The militarised state – in its belligerence, impunity and claims on territorial control while denying humanitarian responsibility – effected, in Agamben’s words, the ‘capture of a space that is neither outside nor inside’ (2005: 35) in which ‘power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation’ (1995: 171). It would follow, in a reading that remains close to the conceptual relations of exception and bare life, and especially given the high numbers of casualties and deaths, that one interpretive move is to bring to the fore the ways that protesters were rendered bare life (see e.g. Erakat, 2019: 796–801). Although this is crucial for critique of the practices of the state, as I have argued above (Section Bare life, exception and social science), where analysis begins and ends at a Palestinian-homo sacer analogy,⁴ there is a risk of reducing the gendered and racial politics of the body to the sovereign’s capacity to determine subjection.

Accounts from protesters themselves invite a qualified understanding of the thanatopolitics of the March. Amid the killing and maiming persisted powerful political voices and actions that countered the positioning of Palestinians as bare life. One important example is that of the Gazan poet, Ahmed Abu Artema,⁵ whose words catalysed the protests:

The March of Return is a scream of life. It’s a knock on the door. When there is a person inside a prison without food, without medicine, then he hasn’t any choice but to knock the door, to try to escape towards the life. This is exactly what the Palestinians made in Gaza. They said to Israel, our will of life is stronger than despair. So we continue. We want to struggle. And we struggle for life. We struggle for humanity. We struggle for justice. (quoted in Democracy Now, 2019, emphasis added)

Much less ‘incommunicable and mute’ (Agamben, 1995: 188), such vital conviction signals a political agency that is angled precisely against the threat posed by exception: ‘we struggle for humanity’. A second example is drawn from the account of an organiser – Wael, a 33-year-old freelance journalist – of a protest site on the southern portion of the strip:
There are set and contingency plans in the camps; there are logistics plans for the camps which include mapping for the places in the 5 camps and prepare them in all aspects to accommodate women and children, youth and elder’s participation and provide water and sanitation services and setting up tents for women and families that had the names of the villages they were forced to flee, these are individual and family tents, in addition to setting up medical points in the camps and equipping them with what is needed for emergency interventions to preserve the lives of youth and families. The contingency plans, for example, we discovered in the first week that tents were set from a far distance that the occupation could not hear the voices of protesters, so in the second week the tents were set up closer. There are activities that are receiving great interaction which enhances the steadiness and staying in the camps. (quoted in Palestinian Return Centre, 2018: 20)

This account not only asserts an obvious political will of the protesters but also details the political life (bios) that is preserved in the preparedness to tend to the body – ‘pure biological life’ – in its injured form via the provision of communal medical points, and in a way that is orientated to the differentiated sanitary needs of women, children and older people. If we are to read this with any fidelity to those targeted by thanatopolitical formations, a key conclusion must be that the protest camps re-make the space of exception by countering the stripping of bios from zoe via that which is antithetical to bare life: communal life.

The possibility of politics in this sense is immanent to the lives and activities of those who are subjected to the logics of exception without ever being completely subsumed by it. There is an important precedent to such an approach where scholars have recently sought to move ‘beyond’ or ‘post’ Agamben in an area his work has been most influential, refugee camp studies (see e.g. Carter-White and Minca, 2020). On specifically Palestinian refugees, for instance, Dag Tuastad (2017, 2160) has traced ‘high level(s) of political autonomy’ among residents of camps in Lebanon that are ‘not compatible with the state-of-exception paradigm claiming that subjects are victims of a total deprivation of political agency’ (emphasis added); Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska (2017, 164) writes of al-Am’ari camp close to Ramallah as ‘always a lived space’ and the ways that refugees’ collective demands for self-determination and social recognition assert a Lefebvrian ‘right to the camp’; and Lucas Oesch’s (2017, 118) study of Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan re-conceptualises Agamben’s notion of indistinction to show how ambiguity relates to refugees not only as ‘assisted subjects and beneficiaries, but also as autonomous and productive subjects, as well as entrepreneurs and consumers’. For each of these works, there is a clear delineation between state practices of maintaining exception and the lived lives of those who re-make and counter, holding onto political life.

Such an approach concentrates on the ways that ‘lived space’ emerges in tension with ‘bare space’ (Tawil-Souri, 2011: 23) via collective politics within exception that, as Rema Hammami (2015: 12) has succinctly put it, ‘make liveable lives against and in resistance to its necropolitical logics’ (emphasis added). Ahmed Abu Artema’s and Wael’s accounts of the Great March of Return provide two illustrative examples of precisely this: they resist bare life to instead ‘make liveable lives’ within and against exception. Crucial for the wider discussion here is that a thanatopolitical frame enables an understanding of the power of the state to mobilise death and allows us to see – yet struggles to address – that which emerges alongside and exceeds it, such as a ‘struggle for humanity’ or a mass mobilisation of communal networks of medical assistance. It is difficult to imagine these counter dynamics without that which they counter; they are thus, in crucial ways, a part of thanatopolitics. The imperative from here, I would argue, is to think dually: of simultaneously threatened yet durable political agencies; of both an awesome state power and an element of life that remains ungovernable; and, ultimately, of a never-fixed tension between governing and governed (see also Griffiths, 2017; Hammami, 2015, 2019; Joronen, 2017; Joronen and Griffiths, 2019; Richter-Devroe, 2018). Thanato-geographies of Palestine (and beyond) are then well equipped to
account for the thanato-logics of state power and complementing actors (e.g. global security industries) while also attending to the political agency that emerges through, counters and re-makes exception.

Conclusions

The intention here has not been to criticise thanato-geographies of Palestine but to probe the limits of thanatopolitical analysis to enable a view and critique of that which exceeds it. The notions of exception and bare life, as I have maintained, provide a crucial critical grammar of the state but can obscure a view of the manifold (extra-state) forces that bear on the subject and foreclose the political agency that persists in even the most oppressive conditions. There is a tendency, I have argued here, to overstate the subject-making capacities of the sovereign and understate the possibilities of political agency within exception. Bringing into view the complements and counters to thanato-geographical formations opens the possibility of politics in two key directions: i) to the wider thanato-geographies of capitalism that sustain exception in a specific space; and ii) to the counter of political agency of those figured as – but not rendered – bare life. To conclude here I want continue the theme of the possibility of politics in a slightly different sense by considering the production of knowledge in relation to a less abstract object of critique, an ethics of remaining open to political struggle, and the material promise of decolonisation.

On the object of critique, an overstating of Palestine-as-exception and Palestinians-as-hominess sacri analogies risks normalising Israel’s colonial project as one more expression of liberal democracy everywhere (see Agamben, 1995: 168–169). For this unfettered geography, Ilan Pappé (2008: 149) points out, some on the Israeli academic right have embraced thanatopolitical analogy: ‘if Israel can be judged with Agamben’s terms of reference, then it must be regarded a variant of democracy – flawed or otherwise’ and therefore ‘this membership [of a democratic community] places Israel together with the US . . . or in a lesser category such as Agamben’s own Italy, or France’ (2008: 150). Oren Yiftachel (2008: 1) makes a similar point in critique of Derek Gregory’s The Colonial Present (2004) for a ‘flattening of difference between American and Israeli colonialism(s)’ and for failing to account for the stark fact that Israel’s colonialism more closely ‘resemble(s) the notorious Bantustans (that) propel Israel/Palestine further into the process of ‘creeping apartheid’ (2008, 4). The wider point to this is that theorising the production exception/bare life in Palestinian spaces is largely welcomed by the New Right in Israel (see e.g. Sagiv, 2007) because it includes Israel in a geography of Western democracy and replicates a refusal to recognise the human-ness of the people it violently oppresses (see also Pappé, 2015). In the less abstract approach here, one that locates Israel within broader thanato-geographies and that recognises the re-making and countering of exception, the specific object of critique – the function of power in Palestinian spaces – is brought into sharp(er) relief.

In a sense therefore, a possibility of politics extends to critique via our own ethics of representation. I am thinking here of important geographical debates on politicised and ethical ontologies in the processes of knowledge production. For instance, towards ‘politicising ontology’, Mikko Joronen and Jouni Häkli (2017: 572) advocate for interrogating the potential ‘ontological lock-ins’ of (pre-)given theoretical frames ‘that narrow down what the political can mean’. In this approach, the ontological takes place in ‘events and situations as always emerging and constituting in multiple ways’ (Joronen and Häkli, 2017: 562) and is in this way not politically bound to analytical frameworks that emphasise, for instance, the state. The question of what is opens widely so that even the most thoroughgoing critique of the contemporary liberal/colonial state can be brought into contact with different scales of complementing or countering arrangements of power, giving cause to qualify understandings of the state’s centrality to the making of space and subjects. Alternatively, and in a slightly different mode of ontological thinking, J.K. Gibson Graham’s (2008: 620) notion of
a ‘performative ontology’ connects to a possibility of politics via their analytical principle of ‘difference not dominance’ whereby scholarly interpretation seeks to ‘(give) what is nascent and not fully formed some room to move and grow’. To adopt such a position is to recognise that interpretive practices are never innocent (e.g. Law and Urry, 2004) and encourages reflexive thinking on, for instance, how state-centric models might erase oppressed people’s testimonies (see e.g. Zanotti, 2013). The imperative here is for critique to, in an important sense, write into being the possibility of political struggle.

Finally, on the production of knowledge and the promise of decolonising, the contribution of this article is twofold. On an epistemic level, it must be recalled that the theoretical logics of exception and bare life are firmly situated within a European history of sovereignty – Agamben (1995: 45–67) himself does the genealogical work beginning with the originary Roman figure of homo sacer – and may not apply so readily across space (see Lentin, 2018: 21–48). Most obviously, the Aristotelian distinction between bios and zoē underpins a large amount of scholarly writing on postcolonial/non-Euro-American contexts, especially in the fields of development (e.g. Sylvester, 2006) and refugee (e.g. Ramadan, 2013) studies, but analysis can struggle to account for political agency and the gendered and racial politics of the body (see Isin and Rygiel, 2007; Repo, 2016; Smith, 2010; Weheliye, 2014; Ziarek, 2008). An engagement with thanatopolitics that does not exclude the possibilities of political agency can become more open to mutable power relations as they form and are negotiated by gendered and raced bodies who are not only subjected to thanatopolitical exception (see e.g. Hammami, 2019; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015: 116–142) but whose very resistance is constituted by and constitutive of such colonial spatiality. As Sarah Radcliffe (2017: 330) neatly surmises: ‘re-orientating intellectual work in this way generates sharp analytical insights into power – including the abandonments and durabilities of imperial power – and remains alert to alternative articulations of/within power’. It is to this end that a large part of the current discussion is orientated: towards other ways of understanding political oppression, exception and bare life that do not foreclose alternative movements within formations of (thanato-)power.

More pragmatically, the power of decolonising as an idea consists not so much in its gift to critique but in its radical re-making of the world in a material sense – a ‘programme of complete disorder’ as Franz Fanon (1963, 36) famously put it. Where order is colonially produced, disorder is the only proper response. Exception is an ordering of the world according to the territorial designs of the sovereign; counter is a disorder driven by a decolonising call for ‘the repatriation of Indigenous land and life’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012, 21). On the one hand, investigating and exposing the broader thanato-geographies of capitalism provides substance for the disordering of global networks of production that pass through diverse sites (e.g. Leicestershire and Staffordshire in the UK), on the other, understanding and platforming political agency within exception builds the awareness and solidarities that are undoubtedly necessary for the fracturing of colonial power and Israel’s apartheid regime that segregates or exiles all Palestinians. The possibility of politics is made urgent here; where from one perspective power issues from the colonial state as an impenetrable and consummate subject maker, from that explicated here it functions through an accessible state-client network countered by a population desperately and steadfastly holding onto political agency. That which exceeds the colonial state yet enables control over colonised life/death could then be crucial for its undoing.

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Notes

1. https://www.whoprofits.org/company/tm-protection-resources-holdings-israel/.
2. The information provided here is drawn from long-term fieldwork and study of Checkpoint 300 (see Griffiths and Brooks, 2022; Griffiths and Repo, 2018, 2020, 2021)
3. https://www.whoprofits.org/company/elbit-systems/.
4. To be clear, this is not a charge I level at Noura Erakat’s legal analysis that is carefully delimited to state attempts at subject-making rather than a notion of ‘actually existing’ bare life.
5. Also transliterated as ‘Abu Ratima’.

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