

Palestine: A Case of Neoliberalization

The Nature and Implications of Palestinian National Development Plans (1994-2023)

RESEARCH ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the emergence of the Palestinian National Development Plans (NDPs) from 1994 to 2023 to understand neoliberalism in the unique context of Palestine. Scholars have broadly approached neoliberalism in Palestine as either a hegemonic project, or a set of ideas imposed by financial institutions that are supported by the local elite with the objective of establishing pro-market institutions. This thesis offers a critical and comprehensive analysis of neoliberalism in Palestine using three lenses: the variegated neoliberalization thesis (VNLT) (Brenner, Peck et al. 2010), Critical Realism (CR) (Bhaskar 1979), and the Morphogenetic Approach (MA) (Archer 1995).

The VNLT provides a theoretical framework that views neoliberalism as a dynamic rather than a monolithic concept. It sees it as gradually unfolding over time and in space and sometimes being interrupted, with the result that each form of neoliberalism is variegated. Neoliberalism, therefore, in this thesis is conceived of as a series of processes, namely the disarticulation, consolidation, and intensification of neoliberalization. However, the VNLT as it stands does not adequately capture such mechanisms. To address this gap, the thesis incorporates Critical Realism, which does not limit its inquiry of social phenomena to the observable but transcends it to other levels or strata. This form of stratified reality allows for an in-depth inquiry of the NDPs and the ways they evolved in order to identify the real structures that conditioned them. With the VNLT embedded in Critical Realism, the thesis unpacks the neoliberalization processes while accounting for stratification within an open system that involves contingent and necessary mechanisms that each shape the nature of the NDPs. These processes involved neoliberal interventions by international actors, mainly the World Bank Group and the European Union, on the one hand, and series of reforms implemented and supported by Palestinian actors, on the other. Moreover, the thesis explores the interplay between structure and agency to understand how the neoliberalization processes are temporally mediated. With the Morphogenetic Approach rooted in Critical Realism, and its methodology of analytical dualism, the thesis explains how people have reflexively navigated these processes as they manifested within the NDPs.

The thesis demonstrates that the NDPs represent the tip of the iceberg of the neoliberalization processes that started with the Oslo Accords and subsequent neoliberal interventions of international and local actors. The intensity and speed of these processes varied over time, resulting in the NDPs reflecting the three phases of neoliberalization processes. The NDPs emerged from the interplay between structure, embedded in the liberal peace and state building paradigm of the Oslo Accords, and the agency of Palestine's political groups, whereby the former conditioned the latter's actions in their mediation of these different phases.

The overall theoretical framework of the thesis contributes to the scientific debate on several levels. It deepens our understanding of neoliberalism in Palestine by conceptualizing it as a series of spatio-temporal processes influenced by the interplay between structure and agency. It upgrades the VNLT by the incorporation of Critical Realism to account for differentiation within neoliberalism, which comes to take shape in an open system where various actors are engaged. By incorporating the Morphogenetic Approach into the VNLT, the thesis offers a nuanced analysis of the neoliberalization processes and how they have mediated, specifically with regards to the intensification of neoliberalization in Palestine post-2007. The thesis also operationalizes the VNLT in the unique context of Palestine, providing a subtle understanding of the existing challenges it faces and enriching the literature on political economy and development in the region.

Keywords:

Palestine, National Development Plans, Neoliberalism, Variegated Neoliberalization Thesis, Critical Realism, Morphogenetic Approach, Neoliberalization Processes