DECOLONIZING OURSELVES

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, conversations about decolonizing management and organization studies have grown tremendously in scale and scope. In this brief reflective essay, I explore the idea of decolonizing ourselves as an important way we can foster further dialogue and understanding, and hopefully lay the groundwork for more profound and progressive institutional change. I tell a personal story, as a son of a Palestinian refugee, that sketches the suffering journey of my mother, Violet Barakat, and how that has shaped me and my struggle to figure out what decolonization might mean for me. I hope my story further broadens our dialogue on decolonization to enable more voices, accounts, and stories to be heard, and contributes to our effort as a scholarly community to decolonize management and organization studies.

Keywords: Decolonization; dialogue; management; organization studies; Palestine

Emamdeen Fohim invited me, in my capacity as the series editor of Research in the Sociology of Organizations, to consider writing a short reflection piece on the challenges of decolonizing management and organization studies. While I was initially reluctant to do so, I have agreed mainly because of the encouragement of

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many colleagues and friends, and my firm belief that the theme and the volume is critically important. I am certainly no expert on decolonization and decolonizing studies, and I am fully cognizant that I am somewhat naively wading into potentially hazardous terrain, and that there is no way for me to string together words that will not be objectionable, perhaps fiercely objectionable, to some people.

I understand decolonizing as going beyond achieving independence of colonized peoples, comprising variegated efforts to address profound problems related to colonial institutions and broader economic, cultural, and psychological maladies created by various forms of colonialism – past and present (e.g., Tuck & Yang, 2012). This includes the structural inequalities that have been created and exacerbated by capitalism and modern corporations that have been made possible by various forms of ongoing violence and appropriation, including slavery. This has resulted in growing poverty, especially in the Global South with many people left with limited access to basic amenities such as water, sanitation, health care, and education. Many have argued that universities have also perpetuated colonization intellectually via the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, as well as non-Western worldviews, knowledge, and pedagogies (e.g., Banerjee & Prasad, 2008). To address this, Smith (2012) and others have emphasized that decolonizing research, scholarship, and education requires efforts to valorize concerns and world views of non-Western individuals and collectives, and respectfully knowing and understanding theory and research from previously "Other(ed)" perspectives.

I believe that to make progress as a community of educators and scholars, we should be inviting a broader and honest dialogue on this topic – to educate each other and enroll sympathetic others as allies across the academy. While many of us may be willing to support decolonization as an abstract institutional project that aims to uplift marginalized or oppressed peoples around the globe (but see Simpson, 2016), it remains unclear to me how this project should, and could, go forward in a concrete way, and what the implications are for extant institutions and people. Even more profoundly, decolonization implies to me the need for deep subjective reflection about how colonially-inflected epistemologies, languages, institutions, and processes have co-constituted all of us, sometimes in violent ways (e.g., Thiong'o, 1986). Given that these subjective understandings and ways of being also undergird the very institutions that we study, and within which we are embedded, and acknowledging the need for this to be changed, I would like to briefly explore the notion of decolonizing ourselves – which might perhaps be understood as a form of personal emancipation, but that I also believe is a precondition for the kinds of emancipatory institutional changes we seek to promulgate (see, e.g., Fanon, 1967). I will tell a personal story – my story – as a vehicle for exploration.

I am a Palestinian American who has also become a Canadian citizen. While I now enjoy the privileges associated with the bourgeois life of a senior academic in North America, and am probably mostly perceived as a middle-aged "white guy," the Palestinian in me has recently been awakened. My mother, Violet Barakat, was a Palestinian refugee, whose family was forcibly removed from their house in Jerusalem by British soldiers in 1948 when she was 6. In the early 1950s, my

mother and her family were able to escape to upstate New York thanks to a local church who sponsored them and helped set them up with a place to live. They were poor refugees who were stigmatized and struggled to survive. Palestine was in the process of erasure and was not recognized by the American government – the official papers for Violet and her family actually indicated that they came from Jordan.

As a teenager in a new country, Violet sought to break away from at least two forms of oppression: the stigma of being Palestinian as well as that of being a young woman in a patriarchal Arabic family. Against parental wishes, Violet both went to college and married an American man – these were major cultural transgressions. Before I was born, Violet taught Latin and art at a high school. When I came along, we lived in a trailer. We were poor, my father worked two jobs, and we had governmental aid in the form of food stamps to be able to eat. As I grew up, Violet told me stories of trauma from her childhood in the "old" country, and the struggles she endured in the "new" country. I heard from her stories that everyone is out to get me, and in retrospect, it seems that every effort was made to ensure my brother and I were more assimilated into North American culture for the hope for a better life. I did experience communal gatherings with our extended Arabic family, only limitedly learning the language, but very much enjoying the food. Nonetheless, much effort was made to keep distance from that family, and, in a sense, break away. To "purify" (Douglas, 1966).

In my teens, Violet became afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis, slowly and painfully declining, and tragically died at age 52 during a failed liver transplant operation. A lifetime of suffering. She lives on inside of me, and inculcated in me a great deal of resilience. But, as I grew up, my Palestinian identity remained largely hidden. In retrospect, I think Violet believed it was a liability.

Of course, I grew up learning about and watching the ongoing struggles of Palestinian people. But it seemed so very far away. Depersonalized. Even though there has been such a massive diaspora over the years, with Palestinians now living all over the world, I never felt a strong sense of Palestinian community. However, in recent years, something has changed. A few years ago now, my good friend, Tammar Zilber, invited me to a conference at Hebrew University where she works. It was my first time in Jerusalem. It was a profound experience in many ways – walking the streets where my family once lived. Seeing Palestinian ghettos and marginality. Thinking about all the pain and suffering that has occurred in that land. And then, in 2023, I became transfixed by the shock and horror of the initial Hamas attack on Israelis, and then the resultant Israeli invasion of Gaza which some have labeled a genocidal effort (Short, 2016), with more than 64,000 people (more than half of which were women, children and those over the age of 65) killed between October 7, 2023 and June 30, 2024 according to a recent study by Jamaluddine et al. (2025). As I write this in January 2025, there is a nascent truce that I pray enables a more lasting peace, many more people are feared dead, and much of the infrastructure has been annihilated including most of the educational and healthcare infrastructure.

Last summer at EGOS 2024 in Milan, I had the pleasure of meeting and listening to Zahira Jaser, a Professor at the University of Sussex Business School, give a

talk that elaborated on the provocative essay she published in the *Financial Times* entitled, "Coming out as Palestinian." Her words resonated with me. She writes:

> I am Palestinian and Italian, with fair skin, blue eyes and a slight Italian accent. I am not "obviously" Palestinian – many people think I am European when they meet me – so it did feel like a coming out. Do not misunderstand me, being Palestinian is one of the greatest honours of my life. But it can feel like a highly stigmatised identity, reinforced by racist assumptions. This is a reality lived by many Palestinians. (Jaser, 2024, p. 14)

She detailed aspects of Palestinian discrimination, and how she felt the need to proclaim and express her Palestinian identity more pointedly.

I found Zahira to be brave and inspiring; at the same time, my teenage daughter was also amidst a more profound search for her own identity, prompting me with questions and concerns about all the killing and destruction, as well as the silencing of Palestinian voices and protests. Coterminously, many colleges and universities including mine forcibly shut down and removed Palestinian encampment protests (e.g., Kent, 2024). It is amidst all of this that I also began reading about and thinking about decolonization, and began to contemplate how my biographical journey has been imprinted by colonialism. This has left me tied up in knots – at different times, I have felt confused, depressed, fearful, filled with guilt, empowered, paralyzed…

I despise all forms of racism and discrimination – those against the Jewish people (i.e., antisemitism in all its forms) and those against Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. But I remain deeply troubled by the globally supported efforts to erase Palestine and silence Palestinian voices. While some have referred to this as part of an ongoing settler-colonial process (see, e.g., Cavanaugh & Veracini, 2020), I am sympathetic to the argument that such labeling may do more harm than good if we aim to create a more progressive and peaceful world (Kirsch, 2024). Perhaps less inflammatory is to acknowledge that this is a complicated historical process that was enabled by colonial powers, and marked by the Balfour Declaration in 1917, the "Nakba" at the conclusion of World War II, and ongoing conflict every since – unfolding over generations including my entire life. What could decolonization mean in this context? History cannot be undone. But could a decolonizing process enable Palestinians to exist with more perceived dignity? Could it enable Palestinian voices to be heard? For Palestinian advocacy to be legitimated in our universities, in Western society, and around the world? And if so, how?

What are the implications for decolonizing ourselves? I am not sure. For me, I have increasingly become more aware and embracing of my Palestinian heritage, and am trying to find a way to effectively use my voice as a Palestinian American/Canadian. I am more mindful of how Western institutions, including our academic environment, has a stifling effect. I think about what it might feel like for scholars of organization and management who belong more explicitly and openly to colonized communities. Of course, the Palestinian situation, as well as my story, is not completely unique, and only scratches the surface of problems stemming from colonialism. Colonial regimes across time and space have embraced slavery, the forced exodus of people, the murder, rape and torture of dissidents, the destruction of the environment, genocide, and the extermination

of Indigenous populations, as well as the destruction of various cultures and forms of knowledge (e.g., Saeed, 2024). Many of us have stories of dispossession and exploitation – some more proximate than others.

Given that the volume I am writing this for is focused on decolonizing management and organization studies, it seems that a key implication is the need for reflecting on how what we do as educators and scholars in management and organization research has been shaped by and interpenetrated with the broader colonial project and political economy. Certainly, I would like to see more studies of decolonization efforts as well as a deeper unpacking of the colonial nature of our institutions, including the role of universities, corporations, and other organizations in perpetuating the physical and symbolic violence of colonialism. Such research should also work its way into our classrooms; for instance, where are the Harvard Business School cases on Palestinian entrepreneurs? However, such efforts should go hand in hand with mindful efforts to decolonize ourselves. In doing so, I believe we need to be open to a wider variety of epistemologies and ontologies. We need to be more sensitive to intersectionality, systemic power, cultural marginality, and oppression (Sasaki & Baba, 2024). We need to hear more voices, accounts, and stories. We need to listen to, stand up for, and help each other. As a scholarly community, we should work together on this – not against each other. And ultimately, I would like to see management and organization studies evolve in a way that can reflect these concerns, and even have an impact in addressing some of the profound problems associated with the legacy of colonialism. I would like to be hopeful. I am enthusiastic about this volume as a conversation starter and amplifier. My hope is that it enables further, and broader, dialogue.

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