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Curricular Change: Outside the Classroom, Under Occupation

Carlos Fraenkel, *Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World*, Princeton University Press, 2015, 240 pp., \$27.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780691151038.

Tom Sperlinger, *Romeo and Juliet in Palestine: Teaching Under Occupation*, Zero Books, 2015, 157 pp., \$16.95 US (pbk), ISBN 978-1782796374.

Both Tom Sperlinger and Carlos Fraenkel remember acutely their interlocutions with Sari Nusseibeh during their teaching visits to Al-Quds University. Al-Quds is a Palestinian university located on the outskirts of East Jerusalem in Abu Dis and Sari Nusseibeh was its president from 1994 to 2014, when he finally was obliged to resign following a Hamas rally on the campus that had provoked controversy and calls for the president's response. As Fraenkel remarked regarding the university president's nearly two decades-long tenure: "Administering Al-Quds under the present circumstances is a permanent exercise in practical reasoning" (10). That Kantian insight would seem to have lapsed with the demonstration. After all, Nusseibeh had, however philosophically if not practically, warned his academic guest, "nothing is predictable" (10). That very unpredictability nonetheless became in turn critically integral to Sperlinger's pedagogy at the same institution in occupied Palestine in the final year of Nusseibeh's administration. For Sperlinger, the "worst kind of class is one in which the teacher knows how the discussion will end" (8). Al-Quds University under Nusseibeh's post-Oslo accords disciplinary oversight, meanwhile, provided the context for the two experiments in early twenty-first century international pedagogy described by McGill philosopher Carlos Fraenkel in *Teaching Plato in Palestine* and Bristol literary critic Tom Sperlinger in *Romeo and Juliet in Palestine*.

A philosopher by training, a Palestinian activist by avocation, and policy spokesperson on occasion, Sari Nusseibeh is perhaps most popularly identified, currently at any rate, as a "moderate" by multiple parties from the several sides to the Palestine-Israel conflict, a representative, that is, for those political positions that would seem to favor negotiated solutions and democratic outcomes. Fraenkel describes his host, furthermore, as "opposed" to the growing international boycott of Israeli academic institutions, whereas Sperlinger notes the philosopher-administrator's support for a "one-state solution" to the question of Palestine. Fraenkel and Sperlinger visit—or rather re-visit—the decades old "question of

Palestine” at a particular conjuncture of circumstances in the early twenty-first century, Fraenkel in 2006 and Sperlinger in 2013. The several years that separate their respective sojourns in one of occupied Palestine’s beleaguered universities are nonetheless telling, punctuated by Israel’s two deadly, and internationally condemned, military incursions into Gaza (Operations Cast Lead in 2008-2009 and Pillar of Defense in 2012—followed most recently by yet a third, even more lethal, Operation Protective Shield in summer 2014). And indeed, it was only after Fraenkel had completed his seminar and returned to Canada that Israel launched its 2006 war on Lebanon; nor had the boycott campaign, launched by Palestinian civil society organizations in 2005, acquired the international influence that it would come to exercise under the popular acronym of BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) by the time that Sperlinger arrived in Abu Dis in 2013. Both academics, the temporal dislocation of their respective teaching stints notwithstanding, share nonetheless a disciplinary unease that animates their accounts of internationally professing—Plato in Fraenkel’s case and Shakespeare in that of Sperlinger—selected epitomes of a Western classical canon. If Fraenkel is keen to experiment with “taking philosophy out of the classroom” (xiv), it is in the Palestinian classroom that Sperlinger speculates in turn on “whether we should be teaching English literature” at all (33). At stake perhaps in the two professorial narratives is a longer historiography of universalizing the contextual that runs from the “civilizing mission” of the nineteenth century imperial project to its contemporary agenda of “humanitarian intervention” under the auspices of the doctrine of R2P, or the “responsibility to protect,” with Palestine still writ large, both front and center.

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While “Palestine” locates the geographical focus of the title to Carlos Fraenkel’s account of “philosophy in a divided world,” it is also the point of departure for the philosophy professor’s international itinerary that continues through four additional stopovers—Indonesia, New York, Brazil, and “Mohawk land” in Canada—the settings for the “five philosophy workshops that [he] organized between 2006 and 2011” (xiv). This series of seminars, while not necessarily or even always “taking philosophy out of the classroom,” did take Fraenkel around the world, along an almost syllabic cartography that he himself describes as tracing “lines of conflict: Israel and Palestine, Islam and the West, religious orthodoxy and modernity, social and racial divisions in Brazil, and the struggle of Indigenous nations with the legacy of colonialism” (xiv). The five chapters that recount these five scheduled excursions into the “culture of debate” as practiced in multiple foreign, even alien, contexts constitute the body (or Part I) of *Teaching Plato in Palestine*, framed by a preface and a concluding Part II, “Diversity and Debate,” that re-contextualize the workshops within the parameters of the politics of philosophy in Euro-America in that these very guidelines might eventually circumscribe the tensions that inform what Fraenkel endorses unilaterally as a universal “culture of debate” even as it must contend with such competing and resistant, indigenous and localized, forces as religion, ethnocentrism, or multiculturalism.

Fraenkel’s peregrinations begin, however, in occupied Palestine—at Al-Quds University where he has been invited by the institution’s then president, Sari Nusseibeh, himself a Harvard-credentialed philosopher, to co-teach a seminar in the early winter of 2006. Fraenkel, whose own research interests include Jewish and Islamic philosophical thought, describes his preliminary anticipations: “Can philosophy save the Middle East,” he optimistically begins his account of “teaching Plato in Palestine,” but goes on to describe his anticipations more cautiously: “I hope to raise some basic questions about philosophy,” he

disclaims, “and its relationship to politics and religion, and also to open a new perspective on the contemporary Middle East” (3-4). Meanwhile, Fraenkel learns that Nusseibeh is for the moment “traveling in India and Pakistan,” and that the introduction to that “new perspective” will depend on him alone and his syllabus that, in addition to Plato, includes Maimonides and al-Farabi for the first two weeks. It is February, nearly three full years into the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, an object lesson in its own right, Fraenkel eventually determines, in that the “Iraq War seems to make one thing clear: democracy cannot easily be imposed from the outside” (17). The students, however, are taken with Plato’s alleged “contempt for democracy” (18), his intellectual elitism” so fabulously illustrated in *The Republic’s* “myth of the cave” and its “division of humankind into philosophers and nonphilosophers” (22). While he largely eludes the geo-political divides that riddle the precarious institutional situation of Al-Quds, Fraenkel’s chosen residence across the divide, in Jewish West Jerusalem, requires that he recognize for himself the students’ “complaints about Israeli soldiers’ behavior at roadblocks”; Fraenkel too, that is, finds that “getting to the campus of Abu Dis, a suburb of East Jerusalem turns out to be a challenge in itself” (11), no less challenging than the regular strikes that frequently shut down the university altogether. And, so it turned out that, all too predictably perhaps, when Fraenkel left Al-Quds at the semester’s end, “the region [was] once again a war zone—the Second Lebanon War” (28).

If teaching philosophy, imparting *sophrosyne*, for a semester to Palestinian students did not for now “save the Middle East,” the philosopher-professor would continue his academic experimentation in the “culture of debate” in four other national/geopolitical contexts over the next five years: Indonesia, New York City, Brazil, and Canada. On the first of these serial occasions, in one of the most Muslim countries in the world, Fraenkel is accompanied by his wife, a public health physician, and they debate prior to their arrival in May 2007, “whether it is more important to teach public health or philosophy in Indonesia” (30). Whatever his wife’s socially conscious blandishments, for her husband, who will be teaching “Maimonides in Makassar” (Chapter 2), “present-day Indonesia presents itself [...as] a gigantic intellectual and political laboratory, where Islam is trying to come to terms not only with democracy [...] but also with the country’s long-standing commitment to religious pluralism, modernization, and the construction of a national identity” (31). Democracy, in other words, “is a hot topic in Indonesia” (32) and, the teacher concludes, “at least some of them [his students] are up to the challenge” (52). That challenge is posed differently, however, by the dissident Hasidic Jewish students in New York who invite Fraenkel a year or so later to discuss “Spinoza in Shtreimels” (Chapter 3) at an “underground seminar” in the management’s office situated above the Star Bar, a “trendy lounge in Soho” (54). The invitation came in 2009-2010, a year that Fraenkel was spending at nearby Princeton and thus available to engage with this group that the philosopher came to respect as “modern-day Marranos of reason: God-fearing Jews in public, freethinkers in secret” (56). The sectarian difference between the classes notwithstanding, the seminar repertoire remained largely the same as it had been previously, in Palestine and Indonesia: Plato, Maimonides, Spinoza, Nietzsche, al-Ghazali—philosophy for these Hasidic readers was, it seems, a largely “secular” project, the very stuff of dissent and free-thinking, anathema to orthodoxy—but still a long way from Al-Quds in Abu Dis on the outskirts of East Jerusalem.

The final two stations of Fraenkel’s philosophical journey round the world in seven years are staged in more decidedly secular, albeit no less strife-torn, contexts: an impoverished high school in Salvador, Brazil, and a nation-building workshop in Akwesasne, “one of the largest Mohawk reserves in North America” (100). Fraenkel has a sabbatical in 2010 and has been invited by Almira Ribeiro, a Brazilian high school teacher of philosophy who has also

read her Plato, to try “getting out of the cave and seeing things at they really are” (79). According to Fraenkel, who accepts the invitation, Salvador is not only the “first residence of Portugal’s colonial rulers,” but it is, furthermore, “still Brazil’s blackest city” (79). The classroom discussions of “democracy” take place within a curriculum to which a 2008 national law had made philosophy a mandatory requirement for all students. Philosophy, according to the legislative authorities, was “necessary for the exercise of citizenship” (82). Hence the title to the fourth chapter of *Teaching Plato in Palestine*: “Citizen Philosophers in Brazil.” The recalcitrant, resistant even, citizen philosophers of Salvador, however, where “football is one of the few truly democratic practices, [in which] success depends on merit, not class privilege” (80), give critical way in turn, in the following chapter, to the heroics of the “word warriors” who take on “philosophy in Mohawk land” (Chapter 5). Fraenkel might be back in Canada in fall 2011, returned, so to speak, to his academic home, from his philosophical excursions around the world, but he finds himself nonetheless in an altogether other land, at once a “first nation,” but still a nation-in-the-making, working toward a “self-governance agreement that Akwesasne is currently working out with the Canadian government” (101). Fraenkel’s philosophy workshop in democracy and its critical contributions to the makings and principles for the promotion and practice of “good governance” attracted some fifteen participants, the “word warriors” for whom “reviving Mohawk culture is seen as a key to self-determination” (112), and with whom the philosopher parsed such practical questions as “which cultural traditions to revive, how to govern, how to define membership, and so forth,” concluding finally with the further reiteration: “What philosophers would encourage you to do is to revise these decisions if convincing new arguments emerge” (134-135).

The travelogue told in *Teaching Plato in Palestine* has proceeded, to be sure, chronologically, its sequenced, almost serialized, chapters, following the order of the philosophy workshops offered by Fraenkel, from Palestine, to Indonesia, NYC, Brazil, and ultimately Canada, as journeyed along quasi-Hegelian lines around the world; that it begins and ends in the settler colonial states of Israel and Canada, however, is even more telling than the apparently simple serial, or linear, unfolding of the chapters. Perhaps yet another lesson to be learned from “teaching Plato in Palestine” is the one suggested pessimistically by the critical anthropologist David Scott, regarding the changing currency of the term “self-determination.” According to Scott, the “norm of self-determination as anti-colonial standard” has given way, under political pressures, to the “norm of self-determination as democratic entitlement.”¹ In other words, Scott goes on, linking democracy promotion to a new imperial agenda, “democracy is the contemporary name of an old civilizing project. It is now a regulative principle in the political rationality of international order by which the political prospects of (especially, if not only) the Third World are governed.”² Michael Walzer’s (perhaps unfortunate) foreword to Fraenkel’s philosophical excursus on democracy notwithstanding, to the effect that “*there were once* great Muslim Platonists and Aristotelians” (x, emphasis added), Fraenkel himself is not exclusively focused on democratizing Islam, and indeed the recalcitrant critiques of his students to the doctrines, perhaps read as indoctrination, of classical democracy, can also be read as demonstrations of resistance still active in that “Third World” and its persistently renewed demands for the older, even if obsolete, version of self-determination, as “anti-colonial standard.”

¹ David Scott, “Norms of Self-Determination: Thinking Sovereignty,” *Middle East Law and Governance* 4 (2012), 203.

² *Ibid.*, 219.

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The question, then, of what the proverbially star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet, might have to say about self-determination riddles Sperlinger’s “teaching under occupation” just as determinedly as democracy underwrites Fraenkel’s professing “philosophy in a divided world.” Sperlinger’s story of the semester he spent as visiting faculty in the Department of English at Al-Quds University in Abu Dis in spring 2013 begins dramatically enough with the evacuation of the university premises. It was not, as might have been expected, a demonstration in support of Palestinian political prisoners on hunger strike but rather the just as predictable teenagers, “shouting and brandishing bats, sticks and strips of wood torn from fences” (1), although no one seemed to be able to explain why. Perhaps something to do with the Capulets and the Montagues...? Having finished teaching for the day anyway, the visiting professor proceeds to board a *servees*, the inevitably over-crowded minibuses cum shared taxis that ply the partitioned roads of the occupied Palestinian territories, back to Ramallah, post-Oslo home to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and countless international NGOs, where he too has found lodgings. Describing the morning’s class, however, provides Sperlinger the narrative opportunity to recapitulate a critical sketch of recent Palestinian history and the pretextual context too for setting “Romeo and Juliet in Palestine.” The students, that is, were discussing just “how the play might be adapted as a film in Palestine” (2). One female student, for example, would locate Shakespeare’s tragedy in the present, which she describes as the very “peak of their troubles, economically and politically.” Another classmate, however, returns to the late 40s or 50s, famously described by Palestinians as the *nakba* (or catastrophe), with the establishment of the state of Israel. Still other students argued that the drama could just as easily be set “at any time in Palestine because of the violent context” (2). Verona could be re-presented as Jerusalem and Romeo banished to Ramallah, or Jordan, or even Gaza. Referencing the system of IDs imposed by Israel on Palestinians, especially since the 1994 Oslo Accords, a practice not all that unlike South Africa’s pass laws during the years of apartheid, Juliet could be from Jerusalem and Romeo unable to meet her given that his papers brand him as coming from the West Bank. Such classic, even canonical, difficulties, notes Sperlinger, frustrate the students themselves and not only when it comes to romantic trysts, but when just getting to class is the more mundane stake. More simply, at least obviously, would be to cast one of the lovers as Israeli and the other as Palestinian. After all, “‘That happens a lot,’ one young woman said” (3).

A hallmark of Sperlinger’s pedagogy, as he had described it to his class at one point, is that “the worst kind of class is one in which the teacher knows how the discussion will end” (8). Sperlinger, who is Reader in English Literature and Community Engagement at Bristol University in the UK, draws on the same pedagogical axiom in constructing his account of a semester of “teaching under occupation.” Circumscribed temporally (one semester) and spatially (in “Palestine”) as the story might appear to be, however, the parameters are only too flexible, fluid, unstable—in a word, circumstantial—and subject to contextual conditions and political pressures, which, in still other words, are over-determined by military occupation. Even as the academic requirements of a semester—its terms, schedules, syllabi—are interrupted by strikes, evacuations, demonstrations, military orders, etc., the very perimeters of the occupation are themselves constantly revised and reinforced by Israel’s expansionist agenda, from the proliferating illegal settlements to the Israeli-issued IDs for Palestinians and the limited visas granted to international visitors to the settler colonial state. Indeed, as Sperlinger discovers for himself when he travels to Tel Aviv to renew his “tourist

visa”: “Whereas in the West Bank, the occupation permeates everything, in Israel what was striking was the denial about what was happening just a few miles away” (85-86). The relatively insouciant border crossings, that is, that went largely unremarked in Fraenkel’s travelogue of serial workshops in the philosophy of democracy are writ large across the narrative of “teaching under occupation.” Its author further cautions, in what superficially appears to be a form of the standard disclaimer, that his narrative will be a “story about the particular students and colleagues I encountered and is not intended as a general account of life in Palestine or at the university” (8). Rather than the pro forma disclaimer, however, of the sort that absolves others—readers and writers, students and teachers—of accountability or responsibility for what is to follow, Sperlinger’s caveat, in its relentless insistence on specificity and context, eschews spurious claims to a putative universality that threatens to conceal instead a will to domination. As sociologist of “epistemologies of the south,” Boaventura de Sousa Santos, has argued, “universalism” more often than not serves as a “Western particularity whose supremacy as an idea does not reside in itself, but rather in the supremacy of the interests that support it.”³ What, after all, is the interest of *Romeo and Juliet* in Palestine?

While hardly a generic picaresque, the narrative of *Romeo and Juliet in Palestine* is construed episodically, with each of its thirteen chapters recounting a particular, singular, engagement between a traditional educational mission under duress and the contextual details that both inform and mitigate the fault lines of that historical force field. In Chapter 4, for example, entitled “I was part of the story,” Sperlinger—since become at once teacher and learner—reflects self-consciously, indeed self-critically, on the “parallels between what I was doing [teaching Shakespeare in occupied Palestine] and the subject’s history as part of the curriculum in colonial settings...” (33). Just four chapters later, in “When I was out” (Chapter 8), Al-Quds is once again on strike, this time, as is also often the case, over unpaid wages, especially given Israel’s repeatedly punishing failures to reimburse the taxes that it has collected from the Palestinians. Such closures, however, provide the serendipitous opportunities to explore alternative syllabi, in the political geography and cultural history of the occupied Palestinian territories: to join the regularly held protests against the apartheid wall in the village of Ni’lin, for example, or, on still another occasion, in Chapter 11 (“Split the Air”), to compare the Freedom Bus Theatre in Nabi Saleh with its namesake from the civil rights protests from the 1960s in the US south, or to look askance at the infamous experiment in neoliberal modernization represented in a “planned Palestinian city,” Rawabi, just outside of Ramallah (114). The excursion to Hebron in the penultimate Chapter 12 (“My country’s friend”) includes even a discussion of the Arabic word for literature—*adab*—a lexical item that really doesn’t mean literature at all, but something like “politeness” or maybe “arts,” some other such thing at any rate. “It was,” Sperlinger belatedly realizes, “the worst kind of question you can ask as a teacher. I was fishing for a particular answer, hoping someone would say ‘literate’” (125).

At what level of literacy though does a student satisfy the prerequisites for reading *Romeo and Juliet* in Palestine? Having asked his class “why they did not read,” Sperlinger speculates on the “distinction between being able to *read* and choosing to read *literature*” (47, emphasis in original). To counter the students’ resistance to reading per se or, Malcolm X’s example notwithstanding, to reading literature, the teacher introduces Daniel Pennac’s “Bill of Rights” for readers. The Moroccan-born French novelist’s “rights” range provocatively from

³ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Public Sphere and Epistemologies of the South,” *Africa Development* Vol. 37, No. 3 (2012), 60.

the “right to not read” to the “right not to defend to your tastes” (49). Haytham, often one of the more belligerent students, exercises now his own “right to read,” overcomes his reluctance, and rereads Pennac’s “bill” in yet another context—that of “teaching under occupation.” According to Haytham, “In Palestine, the first thing you need is the right not to be arrested for what you read, or for what you do with what you read.” His fellow students take Haytham’s emendation further still, however, according to Sperlinger’s report: “In the discussion that followed, the students said that this would once have applied to the way in which the Israelis behaved, but they were now also afraid of the Palestinian Authority” (49). With this discussion, then, of the otherwise somewhat whimsical document, “The Rights of the Reader,” what might be termed “rights-talk” is invoked, translating Pennac’s inventory back into the heavily fraught question—and questioning—of human rights and their disputed use and abuse in the political history of Israel/Palestine and, perhaps more ultimately still, the implications of that disputation for the very “universality” of human rights, which, like “democracy,” may prove to be yet another “regulative principle in the political rationality of international order by which the political prospects of (especially, if not only) the Third World are governed.” Citing Israel itself as a consummate example of the “reparation of a human rights violation through settler colonialism,” Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon have deplored the ambivalence inherent in “rights-talk” that allows, too, for the “human right to dominate,” sanctioning a “violence [that] protects human rights from the violence that violates human rights.”⁴

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Much as Fraenkel, still in the air en route to Makassar, had wondered “whether it is more important to teach public health or philosophy in Indonesia,” Sperlinger, towards the end of *Romeo and Juliet in Palestine*, recalls: “I sometimes had doubts about how useful I could be to the students of Al-Quds, and I felt sure that an expert in Palestinian (or postcolonial or comparative) literature would have more to offer. I doubted my subject too, wishing I had more practical skills to offer” (136). Perhaps not “postcolonial” or “comparative” though, but at least “Palestinian.” And not even in either case, albeit for radically different reasons. There are geopolitical lessons, after all, to be learned from “teaching under occupation,” as well as “outside the classroom,” whether Shakespeare critically recontextualized in Sperlinger’s account or Plato promotionally universalized in that of Fraenkel, about the propagation of pedagogical priorities and the dubious universalisms of “democracy promotion” or the “human right to dominate.”

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⁴ Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon, *The Human Right to Dominate* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33 and 3.

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