

# STRUGGLES OF THE DISENFRANCHISED: COMMONALITIES AMONG NATIVE AMERICANS, BLACK AMERICANS, AND PALESTINIANS

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*Dr. Dance was the guest speaker at Al-Hewar Center, a discussion forum in metropolitan Washington D.C., on September 30, 2009. Her comparison of these different disenfranchised groups generated an interesting discussion and raised a lot of issues and ideas. The following article summarizes her presentation.*

## **Introduction: Disenfranchisement & Dimensions of Power**

***Definitions, Questions, and Comparisons*** To “disenfranchise,” typically defined in any basic dictionary, is to deprive of civil privileges, rights of citizenship or constitutional rights, especially the right to vote. Within a colonial administrative or nation-state context, disenfranchisement is an active process by which the colonizing power, state or state-sanctioned institutions deny colonial subjects or citizens basic rights (Scham 2001). To borrow the title from John Gaventa’s book (1982), disenfranchisement includes dynamics of “*Power and Powerlessness*.” American ethnic minorities can tell a variety of stories about disenfranchisement and struggles against disenfranchisement for civil rights. This is especially true for Native Americans and Black Americans. This working paper explores the following questions: (1) To what degree do the more recent experiences of Palestinians resemble the historical experiences of Native and Black Americans? (2) To what extent do such experiences illuminate the mobilization of bias and symbolic violence that has occurred against Palestinians since the 1917 Balfour Declaration in British occupied Palestine (Schulze 2008, Pappé 2006)? (3) To what extent do such experiences portend a Palestinian future? This working paper is an early draft of what will become a larger manuscript. This early draft may raise more questions than it answers.

Of course, as with any comparison, there are many differences among the experiences of Native Americans and Black Americans in the U.S. These differences increase when we add to the comparison the experiences of Palestinians who live within and beyond Palestine and Israel. Furthermore, prior to the processes of disenfranchisement discussed in this working paper, the histories of these groups are noticeably distinct. In other words, the histories of these groups do not begin with colonization by Western European governments. Prior to European colonial rule, Native Americans, West Africans, and Palestinians may be more characterized by differences than similarities. This essay focuses not upon these broader historical differences but upon the disenfranchisement processes that have occurred after the impact of British colonization, and the formulation of the United States of America. British colonization dates back to the early 1600s for Native and Black Americans and to the early 1900s for Palestinians (Pappé 2006, Takaki 1994).

## **Mobilization of Bias and Symbolic Violence**

***Gaventa & Power and Powerlessness*** In order for disenfranchisement to occur and then be maintained or sustained, the colonizer, enslaver, invader, or the usurping power has to create and disseminate a story or ideological justification. Renowned scholars like Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, and Edward Said have contributed to and inspired a vast literature on ideological hegemonic dynamics (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, Gramsci 1971, Said 1994). This working paper borrows briefly from the work of Bourdieu but focuses more upon the claims of John Gaventa. Political Sociologist, John Gaventa, reveals how ideological justification is forged through a “mobilization of bias” during which the usurping power asserts, imposes, and legitimizes cultural hegemony (Gaventa 1982). Another way of looking at this may be through the concept of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence, as defined by Bourdieu, refers to the ability of a dominant group to impose its symbols upon others not through physical violence but through cultural domination, the control of ideas, images, standards, icons, and so on (Bourdieu 1977, Wacquant 1993). This ideological control becomes so

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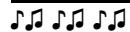
pervasive and taken-for-granted that both dominant and disenfranchised group members internalize or accept these symbols as legitimate. Organizations, corporations, colonial administrations, governments, government-based institutions (including school systems), are just a short list of the entities that often engage in symbolic violence. Over time, the control of ideas, images, and symbols may become so taken-for-granted that, as argued by Gaventa, inequities become non-issues. Allow me to repeat, grave inequities such as land dispossession, dehumanization, enslavement, and apartheid eventually become non-issues. *Inequities become non-issues!*

So, according to Gaventa (as well as Bourdieu), what are the procedural dimensions of power and powerlessness by which a dominant ideology is imposed and, then, grave inequities become non-issues? Well, disenfranchisement and other forms of disempowerment may involve the following three levels or dimensions of power (Gaventa 1982):

1. The ability of a powerful entity (e.g., organization, corporation, government, colonial administration, executive or congressional or parliamentary power) to ***force someone or some group to act against their will***. This level of power often involves physical force and observable conflict.
2. The ability of a powerful entity to ***set the agenda or “rules of the game”*** and thereby mobilize bias in its favor in some political arena. At this level of power, a powerful entity constructs barriers that prevent a disempowered group from participating in a political process.
3. The ability of a powerful entity to shape individual and group consciousness through the ***control of ideals, information, ideologies, myths***, and so on. It is at this level of symbolic power (also known as symbolic violence) that a powerful entity has legitimized its ideals, symbols, and ideologies and de-legitimized or destroyed those of disempowered groups.

The concepts of “mobilization of bias” and “symbolic violence” illuminate the stages through which inequities become non-issues. Also, during processes of disenfranchisement, the powerful are able to successfully characterize and treat the disempowered as a “thing” or as an “it”, in other words, as a less than human object instead of a complex human subject.

### From a Subjective “Me” to an Objectified “It”



“Doe,” deer, a female deer...  
 “Ray,” a drop of golden sun...  
 “Me,” a name I call myself...  
 “ME,” A NAME I CALL MYSELF!



**“Me” to “It”** Disenfranchisement has many consequences. In addition to issues becoming non-issues, another consequence is that an individual or group is de-evolved from a subject to an object, from a *“Me’ a name I call myself”* to an *“It’ a thing I am called by others.”* As mentioned above, disenfranchised groups become known not by what they call themselves but by what they are called by the colonizer, conqueror, or some other powerful entity.

Back to the ideological justification or the story created by powerful entities to justify disenfranchisement. For Native Americans, the story has changed over time as British colonizers, then U.S. state and federal governments have justified disenfranchisement. During pre- and early colonial times and prior to disenfranchisement, Native Americans appeared in romanticized Enlightenment stories as noble savages. This was also an image held by Thomas Jefferson in the late 1700s (Jefferson 1998/1785). Also, prior to European contact, many Native Americans did not describe themselves as “Indians” who belonged to mere “tribes” but as “The People” who belonged to Nations, Bands & Clans, Pueblo City States, Confederacies, and so on (Nabokov 1999; Deloria and Salisbury 2004). This story would give way to stories about “Indians” as non-Christian “heathens” to stories about them as “wild animals,” “savage redmen” or “blood thirsty savages” to modern day stories of American Indians as “wards of the State” and “drunken Injuns/Indians” (Aguirre and Turner 2009, Deloria and Salisbury 2004, Deloria 1988).

For Black Americans the story has also changed overtime. Prior to enslavement, those West Africans who would become victims of the slave trade included Arabic scholars, merchants,

craftsmen, peasant farmers and cattle-tenders (Rawick 1996). The reality that enslaved Africans were diverse and complex, would change to colonial American stories of Blacks as “uncivilized heathens” to early American stories about them as “childlike” beings that were more like chattel or property than human beings to stories about them as “pack animals,” “niggers,” and rapists of white women to more modern day stories of Blacks as “criminals,” “thugs,” and “welfare queens” (Aguirre and Turner 2009, Asim 2007, Deloria 1988). In other words, the enslaver or colonizer creates dehumanizing stories to justify the inhumane treatment of disenfranchised peoples. Gaventa argues that ultimate power exists when the powerless are made to appear quiescent or apathetic despite their history of resistance and/or when the usurping power can manipulate policies, symbols, and ideologies to the extent that inequities experienced by the disenfranchised appear to be non-issues.

***Grave Inequities Become Non-Issues*** It is important to understand that Native and Black Americans are not dehumanized into “objectified it-things” overnight but through processes of disenfranchisement and domination carried out from the first to the third levels of disempowerment listed above. At the first level of disempowerment Native and Black Americans were ***forced to act against their will*** through such events as colonization and/or enslavement, war, land dispossession, forced migration, apartheid, and ghettoization. Then, at the second level of disempowerment, colonial powers and then the U.S. government were able to mobilize bias against Native and Black Americans. It is during this second level that the powerful entities excluded Natives and Blacks from the political process and ***set the rules of the game*** through various types of discrimination institutionalized in Congressional Legislation, Supreme Court decisions, presidential practices, codes, and military actions. Then, by the third level of disempowerment ***the control of ideals and information is so pervasive*** that Native and Black Americans are known more by the labels given them by dehumanizing entities than by the names they once called themselves. Even worse, some Native and Black Americans internalize dehumanizing labels (Takaki 1993). This is the level where symbolic violence is most pervasive and insidious.

During my university lectures, I sometimes use political satire to convey this point about inequities becoming non-issues. I “joke” with my students about John Punch and other African indentured servants in the Virginia colony. In the mid-1600s, unlike European indentured servants, African indentured servants were told that they would become slaves for life. I imagine that the conversation went something like this:

*British Colonizer: Excuse me, but we here at the Virginia House of Burgess have henceforth and forever decided that Africans in the colony will become slaves for life.*

*John Punch and other African Indentured Servants: Wait a minute! That’s a big-Ass inequity! Excuse me if I use expletives but you can’t f\*\*\*ing do that!*

And we know from historical sources that Metacom or King Philip of the Wampanoag Confederacy vehemently protested the theft of Native American lands to the point of retaliating with warfare (Takaki 1993). At this point, the theft of Native American lands is a grave inequity. Though later generations may have submitted, adjusted or acquiesced to these atrocities, those initially dehumanized and disenfranchised screamed “INEQUITY!” It is through the three levels of power that the screams of many were silenced. Later, it would be through making these three levels of power transparent that later generations Native and Black Americans would re-scream “INEQUITIES!” and begin to reclaim their complex humanity.

### **The Recent Disenfranchisement of Palestinians**

***Atrocities against Palestinians Relegated to Non-Issues*** Around one hundred and sixty years ago, during the 1850s, characterizations of the enslavement of Black Americans as a grave inequity were up for debate. Likewise, in the 1800s it was difficult to sustain the claim that ethnic cleansing, forced removal, and theft of Native American lands were grave inequities. As recent as sixty years ago, leaders and participants in the American Civil Rights Movements had to argue, march, protest, and die to prove that American Apartheid and other forms of Black dehumanization were grave inequities. And as recent as forty years ago, leaders and participants in the American Indian Movement had to argue, march, protest, and die to prove that the theft of Indians lands and other forms of Native

American dehumanization were atrocities. Decades ago, mobilizations of bias and symbolic violence against Native and Black Americans were extreme.

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the situation has improved or, at least, become less extreme. Though important inequities remain (e.g., housing and job discrimination, schooling inequities, income and health disparities, and so on), the U.S. has had a few Native Americans and Black Americans in Congress, and most recently a Black American president. Today, many mainstream Americans either already argue or are beginning to argue that the atrocities of ethnic cleansing and land dispossession against Native Americans and enslavement and apartheid against Black Americans were/are huge inequities instead of non-issues. Powerful interest groups working on the behalf of Native and Black Americans have been able to ideologically challenge the mobilization of bias and symbolic violence imposed by powerful entities. In contrast, mainstream Americans and many powerful Americans (including mayors, governors, congresspersons, journalists, and presidents) do not claim that ethnic cleansing, land dispossession and apartheid against Palestinians are atrocities (Chomsky 1999, Jhally 2003, Pappé 2007, Skuratowicz 2010). For Palestinians grave inequities remain relegated to non-issues.

The three levels of disempowerment that operated to disenfranchise Native and Black Americans have also operated to disenfranchise Palestinians. At the first level of disempowerment Palestinians were *forced to act against their wills* through such events as British and UN, then U.S. and Israeli government supported mandates and events, including colonization, warfare & conquest, removal from original lands (forced migration), Israeli-government sanctioned blockades & impoverishment, ghettoization & marginalization, and incarceration in an Israeli Prison-Industrial-Complex. Then, at the second level of disempowerment, the British and Zionist colonial entities and then the U.N. and U.S. were able to mobilize bias against Palestinians. It is during this second level that powerful entities began excluding Palestinians from political participation and *set the rules of the game* through various types of discrimination institutionalized in policies including the 1917 Balfour Declaration (supporting establishment of “national home” for Jewish People), the 1922 British Mandate over Palestine (pre-empting Palestinian solidarity, facilitating Jewish immigration, transferring Palestinian lands to Jewish settlers), the 1947 UN Resolution 181 Partitioning Palestine, Israeli policies after the 1967 Six-Day War resulting in the military occupation of Palestinian lands, and so on (Pappé 2006, 2007). Then, by the third level of disempowerment *the control of ideals and information is so pervasive* that Palestinians are known not by the names they call themselves but by the “it-thing”-labels of the Israeli and U.S. power structures. Given that relative to Native and Black Americans, the disenfranchisement experiences of Palestinians are recent, Palestinians are still actively resisting disenfranchisement.

### **Disenfranchisement Commonalities of Native & Black Americans and Palestinians:**

In looking briefly at these histories we see some unifying threads:

1. Inhumane treatment of one group by another (dispossession of Native American and Palestinian Lands, Apartheid imposed upon African Americans and Palestinians).
2. This treatment is not mere one-on-one individual discrimination; it is justified in ideologies that become institutionalized through congressional/legislative acts, presidential/parliamentary orders, Supreme Court decisions.
3. The ability of the colonizing/usurping power to develop a national and international discourse to convince the world that State or government-based actions are justifiable.
4. In addition to acts of physical violence, disenfranchisement occurs through “symbolic violence” imposed from the top down.
5. Horrendous, horrible inequities can become broadcasted and misrepresented as non-issues, when in fact they are extremely important issues.

6. An important part of countering disenfranchisement, in addition to halting and preventing physical violence against the disenfranchised, is re-establishing non-issues as issues by undoing or countering forms of symbolic violence and mobilized violence.

Those supportive of Black American civil and human rights have been able to re-establish the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and American Apartheid as atrocities. Those supportive of Native American civil and human rights are re-establishing attempted genocide, ethnic cleansing, and land theft as atrocities. In both the cases of Native and Black Americans dehumanization through processes such as colonization, enslavement, forced migration, and land theft date back to the 1400 and 1600s when Western colonial powers engaged in colonization and dehumanization on a regular basis. The colonization and dehumanization of Palestinians is relatively recent, yet occurs in a time when so-called “Western Civilization” supposedly no longer engages in such atrocities.

Allow me to return to the questions posed at the beginning of this working paper: (1) Do the more recent experiences of Palestinians resemble the historical experiences of Native and Black Americans? (2) Do such experiences illuminate the mobilization of bias and symbolic violence that has occurred against Palestinians since the 1917 Balfour Declaration in British occupied Palestine (Schulze 2008, Pappé 2006)? (3) Do such experiences portend a Palestinian future yet to come? So far my answers to these questions are “Yes,” “Yes,” and “Yes”; but I hope the world will not take hundreds of years to understand that, through the three dimensions of power and powerlessness, grave inequities against Palestinians have been relegated to non-issues.

Unless we believe Palestinians to be less than human—this is something once believed about Native and Black Americans—we may use the disenfranchisement histories of Native and Black Americans to speed up the process by which the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian communities, theft of Palestinian lands, occupation of Palestinian territories, system of Apartheid, and transformation of Palestinians into monolithic “its” and “terrorists” are re-established as INEQUITIES and ATROCITIES writ large. Many Palestinians have not acquiesced or submitted to being disenfranchised but continue to resist. Many Palestinians (and Israelis) understand the dehumanization that Palestinians have undergone. Those supportive of Palestinian civil and human rights are screaming INEQUITY! With this essay, I add my voice to this chorus.

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