

# **The Arming Act, Reflections on Cultures of Popular Education**

*SAJA AMRO*

## *Introduction*

Education should encourage and support you to be yourself, to have enough confidence to try and fail, to live, to experience, to love, to enjoy, to listen to the inner voice, to resonate, to initiate, to liberate, to take your time to reflect and make up your mind, to form an original opinion, to think outside of the mainstream, to help, to feel, to dance, to sing, to connect, to choose to stay or walk away, to trust, to speak, to articulate, to appreciate little things, to underrate big things, to celebrate, to mourn, to express, to ask for help, to reach out, to plan, to contextualise, to transfer knowledge through stories, to physically and emotionally engage, to learn from the lived experiences of others.

However, what institutionalised education actually prepares you for is how to perform for a deadline, to study for a test, to quantify, to measure the value of a person with grades, to think through the alphabet, to speak through academic language, to explain through theory, to disconnect from sensed reality, to withdraw from nature, to restrict learning to limited tools and methods, to legitimise the dignity of humans by their education and certificates, to claim absolute knowledge of the truth, to claim that there is only one truth, to perceive the world through reading and seeing while ignoring other senses, to encourage discipline over-excitement, to situate the teacher and the book as the only sources of knowledge.

### *From where I stand*

I am a product of the institution; I'm guilty of wanting to excel in the system, of thinking it defines my self-worth. I derived my self-confidence from my social status provided by my engineering degree. Every time I was described to be intelligent by a teacher, mentor, or peer, I felt flattered and confident. I felt validated for having attained straight A's my whole life, for being top in class, for being popular, for being a favourite student of my teachers, for winning local and regional math competitions for my school, for leading many initiatives and being involved in extracurricular activities every year at school, for being the students' representative. I received approval from my parents when I was ahead of my peers when compared to them on the metric scale. The feeling extends to pride when answering "both engineers" when asked what my parents do for a living. I felt blessed for getting the dream job in an elitist institution, for being paid well. When I introduced myself I threw around the names of the places I had worked for or the institutions I went to, and the names of intellectual people I know. I cared about my CV, I only did things that would look good on my CV. I wrote it on my bio on social media. I became friends with people just because they were intellectuals, I felt inspired by their status. I wanted to be an intellectual. I'm writing this essay and I want my sentences and ideas to seem smart. I came to this masters hoping this certificate would guarantee me a higher level of credibility and would lead to more job opportunities and social respect for me.

I'm also a human, a daughter of rich culture and a warm household of stories and love. I'm part of a society deeply rooted in the land and connected by its long history of neighbouring and collaboration.

I obtained my harmony by walking in a beautiful green and brown mountainous landscape where hikes are mesmerising. I enjoyed eating the olive oil and Zaa'tar every morning picked from my grandfather's generous land. I regularly sat at a table full of traditional recipes passed on from my grandmother to my mother to me with my extended family. I learned from the love, sacrifice, and humorous stories of my witty grandmother. I sang along with my friends and family while picking olives, every November I've lived in my life. I sat down in the courtyard under the lemon tree to drink mint tea and gossip all summer. I celebrated in an endless number of wedding ceremonies, dressing up and dancing in a joyful atmosphere, gathering the old and the young. My skin got tanned every year in the long hot summers and regained its original colour in the winters. I spoke in a language where there are twelve words to express every level of love, a name for every hour of the day, and an endless amount of proverbs. I lived by a collective hope of a free Land where no soldiers or checkpoints exist. I shared the inevitable belief of freedom and peace with every single one of my people for the land that never saw peace. I lived and experienced all of that and more, but never learned it at any educational institution.

The gap I witnessed between my embodied experience of living and seventeen years of institutional education, the pure distinction between life and school, the bold barrier between the process of learning and the process of living, led me to question traditional education; what does it mean and where does it actually come from?

### *Words were no longer my allies*

As a child, I enjoyed using words to express myself when asked to prepare something to read on the morning school broadcast. I remember thinking how enjoyable it was to write a song or a poem; to create a body of text to argue an idea or tell a story. I lost that gift growing up. My vocabulary shrunk and my poetic ability to express myself faded away. I started to speak in equations instead of full expressive sentences; words were no longer my allies.

At home, my family called me ‘the philosopher’ as mockery, referring to my non-stop attempts to articulate and explain my thoughts. I spoke a lot, I annoyed my mother and my teachers a lot, I was silenced most of the time (being told frequently: *Speak a lot, make a lot of mistakes, brevity is the soul of wit, no man will tolerate how much you speak, you’ll get a divorce for sure*). As a fast learner, I learned to be silent, until today I’m silent.

### *Tabula rasa*

Tabula rasa<sup>1</sup> is a theory of Latin origin. It implies that individuals are born without built-in mental content, and therefore that all knowledge comes from experience or perception. This theory was developed and debated from multiple perspectives by many scholars over time. However, in the schooling system, the 6-year-old student entering elementary education is considered to be a tabula rasa. They are seen as empty vessels to be filled with curricula. Although students perceive knowledge and respond to it differently, the

1 Aristotle’s *De Anima (On the Soul)*, 4th century BCE.

problematic part is that the previously curated and standardised set of knowledge funnelled by the teacher is considered the only knowledge worthy of learning. That the focus of education is on what will be taught and what can be known, instead of showing *how* one can know, is, in my opinion, oppressive. By not taking into consideration the personal life experiences and the uniqueness of each and every individual, or the social and cultural richness that already started forming their personalities, the systematic act of ignoring the packages that these individuals hold while walking into a classroom is violent. It forces everyone to submit to the same set of knowledge without giving them a chance to explain their desires and aspirations. It's an act of neglect and humiliation, which starts at a young age and grows to shape an unconfident human, always waiting for an authority to steer their life and make decisions.

I do not understand where the word education comes from, or why there is a single word to describe something very essential and innate to the human that does not describe it properly. Education is a limiting word. As humans we are born with a genetic code and instincts, we come to life and start to adapt to the nature and society around us, and we learn to do that through our senses, cognition, and emotions; we are learners by nature. None of that is judged or measured on a scale by nature. The institutionalisation of education limits the learning experience to a singular format and defines its means, tools, and goals. It restricts the endless potentials of human geniality and tends to create copies of the same model. It puts humans in competition with each other and gives the trophy to one or two people, leaving the rest rethinking their self-worth. It's oppressive and traumatising for many. For those who realise it, it takes years to heal from the stains left on the body and the soul.

For those who don't realise it, the institution wins the battle of blinding the senses from seeing what could be beyond the norm and the mainstream. To me, it became more and more apparent how mainstream education is a product in line with the colonial project that exists in a capitalist system, and that this is how both are reserved and regenerated. What a waste.

### *The Act of Arming*

Since I started researching the dynamics of institutionalised education, many people directed me to use the First Intifada as an example of deinstitutionalisation. We Palestinians glorify the First Intifada,<sup>2</sup> but what has survived time only shows little of what actually happened. The archives only show iconic pictures of people throwing rocks and confronting war machines. When searching for it, I could hardly find pictures or written testimonies on the popular education model that was developed in response to urgencies during that period.

According to my mother, who lived through that intifada and was teaching in one of the Palestinian universities at the time, institutions were locked down and people were bound to get creative. As a form of resistance, people declared civil disobedience

2 The first intifada: Intifada is an Arabic word that literally means “shaking off”, and in the Palestinian context, it is understood to mean a civil uprising. The First Palestinian Intifada erupted in Gaza in December 1987, after four Palestinian were killed when an Israeli truck collided with two vans carrying Palestinian workers. Ensuing clashes spread rapidly to the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Intifada was primarily carried out by youth, and was directed by the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising, a coalition of Palestinian political factions committed to ending the Israeli occupation and establishing Palestinian independence. Israel's heavy-handed response included closing universities, deporting activists and destroying homes.

and initiated organisational committees to operate life. My mother says that the barbershop next door turned into a classroom and welcomed pupils inside. The women in the neighbourhood started teaching crafts and culinary art, the farmers taught farming, and the whole neighbourhood became a melting pot of knowledge-exchange. Palestinians were not helpless.

My mother, who worked for the Palestine Polytechnic University, recalls how the university was closed for three years. However, the lectures were held in multiple empty rooms and spaces around Hebron. Hebron is an industrial city with a lot of trading, and therefore a lot of storage spaces. She says the students would finish their classes and start organising protests and clashes. Some would be busy making posters and flyers. Others would be preparing Molotov cocktails to harass the occupation army patrols.

This situation wasn't unique to Hebron alone. One of the most famous stories was about the town of Beit Sahour, which I heard from the Palestinian educator Munir Fasheh;

*Beit Sahour has also become an inspiration, a place of radical pedagogical experiments. Indeed, during the First Intifada, when schools were closed by military order, self-organized neighborhood committees established a network of alternative education study groups within homes and car garages, where the reading list included Ghassan Kanafani, Mao, Hanna Mina, Sabar Khalifeh, Trotsky, Naji al-Ali, Karl Marx, and Emile Habibi.<sup>3</sup>*

3 Maysoun Sukarieh, "Decolonizing education, a view from Palestine: an interview with Munir Fasheh," *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 28, no. 2 (2019): 186–199.



While searching for the missing pieces of the puzzle, I heard from my tutor, Lara Khaldi, who was a teenager at that time, how her school in Ramallah shared a wall with a military complex. One can imagine the level of tension resulting from this unfortunate placement. Students had no choice but to be highly involved in political acts, reading condemnation and mobilising statements every morning on the school broadcast. Organising and innovating ways and tools of resistance, harassing their unwelcome neighbours. Her teachers were previous political prisoners, aware of the role every Palestinian should play in standing in the face of oppression and land theft, developing a pedagogy centralised around responding to urgencies of the right to self-defense and self-determination, and building personalities capable of holding on to the dream and establishing a strong foundation for armed resistance. Dabke to the melodies of traditional revolution songs was a daily activity as an attempt to preserve, celebrate, and activate the culture and identity, and to imagine a future of joy and freedom.

Uncle Mahmoud was a man of a strong personality. He played the role of the principal at the boy's UN school in Dura, my hometown, although he was employed as a science teacher. His teenage sons Hasan and Ali inherited his characteristics and attributes, and never settled for his continuous reluctance against their involvement in politics and resistance. At school, he used to punish the students who gathered glass bottles to make Molotov cocktails. Little did he know that the leader of this whole movement was his son, Ali. One day, while taking his kids to school, a siren sound ascended from the car trunk. It was a megaphone that Ali had packed to lead the protest he was organising after school. Ali was busted. He was kicked out of the house to live in the room where my

grandmother keeps the chickens. Years later, I sat down with my Aunt Yusra while she was rolling vine leaves and crying while singing a Tarwedeh,<sup>4</sup> grieving after the occupation forces broke into their house and arrested her son. Ali, the same teenager participating in political acts in the First intifada. After hiding in the mountains for months and months during the Second Intifada,<sup>5</sup> he wanted to see his mother and family. His mother knew he loved rolled vine leaves and wanted to cook some for him. He was arrested, while she had no choice but to keep rolling.

The knowledge and practices developed during the first intifada were born in the heat of the moment. Notions like economic autonomy practices, alternative educational endeavours, communal farms, sovereignty over food and water, and the call to self-governance were all criminalised by the occupation and so were practised in strict secrecy. As a result, it's very hard to find visual evidence or traces of such narratives. What is known today was only transferred through the stories and testimonies of people who participated in the liberation movement. When taking the legacy of the First Intifada as a reference for the deinstitutionalisation of life as a form of refusal and resistance, we look at the preserved archives

4 A sort of improvisational traditional singing.

5 The Second Intifada: The Second, or "Al-Aqsa", Intifada began on September 28, 2000, when Likud opposition leader Ariel Sharon made a provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque with thousands of security forces deployed in and around the Old City of Jerusalem. Clashes between Palestinian protestors and Israeli forces left five Palestinians dead and a further 200 injured during the first two days. The incident sparked a widespread armed uprising in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. During the Al-Aqsa Intifada Israel caused unprecedented damage to the Palestinian economy and infrastructure. Israel reoccupied areas governed by the Palestinian Authority and began construction of its separation wall. By the end of 2008, the Palestinian death toll had reached almost 5,000, with over 50,000 injured. Rawan Damen for Al-Jazeera

and replicate whatever we find there. Again, the pictures you find when looking are the ones of physical armed resistance. The Second Intifada was a replication of those images, rather than what laid beneath them. The traces were also wiped from educational curricula; it's important to mention that Palestinian primary and secondary school curricula are censored by the occupying entity. Today, I wonder what happens to the opportunity to learn from such experimentation, and how it could help us imagine an alternative future while all the evidence and traces are lost?

*From the supernova  
into the black hole*

Once it became routine, not innovative, it lost its fuel. Like a star it collapsed and exploded as a 'supernova'. After all, how can one politically fragmented society maintain this autonomous lifestyle while standing alone, facing all the agendas recruiting massive resources to defeat such attempts of liberation? Once it started to be institutionalised, the intifada lost its soul and continuation. People knew the intifada was going to be long and that it would take time. And the consistent efforts of swimming against the stream will be tiring. People have different opinions on when the Intifada ended. To some, it was when they lost their loved ones. To others, it was when their communal farms were invaded by the occupation forces. Then Oslo Accords<sup>6</sup> came and crowned this

6 The Oslo Accords marked the first time Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) formally recognised one another. Many at that time believed this was a step in the right direction. But what followed over the next 20 years of negotiations reveals that Israel merely used the agreements to justify the further expansion of illegal settlements in the territories it occupied in 1967. Rawan Damen for Al-Jazeera

gradual ending into a black hole. The intifada was right, it was the right path to liberation. The fact that Palestinians were able to organise and fully govern themselves and refused the occupation was a real threat to the occupier. To prevent that threat from escalating, Oslo happened. It was the drug, the anaesthesia, and thus in turn it became the poison.

Before Oslo, the value given to a person by society was based on how much they were involved in resistance. After Oslo, the value was placed on financial and social status and class. The whole mindset of people shifted, resulting in a materialistic, pretentious, capitalist society, disconnected from the roots, living in apartments, and working for the government. The politically involved students of 'Friends School' became the elite class who live in Ramallah and work in higher positions in the Palestinian Authority, which was the main outcome of Oslo Accords. And my cousin Ali is now working for the Palestinian Authority intelligence, and benefits from it, especially when it comes to his five million ILS business.

### *Into the black hole*

The notion of learned helplessness occupies space in my brain. I think of all the practices and strategies the occupation applies to Palestinians day after day, for decades, aiming to strip them from any means of resistance. In the context of Palestine, the word 'disarming' is very negative and frustrating; it triggers me personally. We are a disarmed nation weapon-wise (with both an old and recent shameful history)!<sup>7</sup>. The educational system in Palestine teaches helplessness,

7 The constant attempts to disarm the Palestinian popular resistance, while arming the members of the institutionalised Palestinian Authority which

which paves the way for the occupation, by producing copies of men and women ready to melt and disappear into the mainstream.

The mainstream means to find a job in a governmental institution, find a partner, and start a family, usually with very little income and a lot of applause and cheer from society. No problem at all so far. What's problematic, in my opinion, is living in a troubled place like Palestine and having become numb enough to not try to change a thing. The number and quality<sup>8</sup> of individual and collective initiatives to solve problems facing society are poor and unfortunate. I wonder why? What is the problem?

In my opinion, it's education! Going to school is supposed to be an *arming* act. It should arm you with knowledge, confidence, inspiration, and hope. It should equip you to face the evolving world. With all the challenges facing the planet, Palestine has 'one more' challenge: occupation!

### *An 'Aha' moment*

For a long time, I felt frustrated looking at the Palestinian leadership and who forms it. I thought there were no real leaders within our community. As a result of the continuous disappointment living under occupation. I lived with that belief until the morning of September 6, 2021. The morning when six Palestinian political

ended up protecting the security of the occupation and preventing any act of resistance against it.

- 8 My sister works for an organisation that crowdfunds for projects with social impact. Every year she sends out an open call for people to apply with effective and innovative social enterprises in Palestine, which necessarily must have a social impact. The number and quality of applications are very poor and limited.

prisoners managed to escape Gilboa, a high-security prison in the occupation entity. The leader of the group, Mahmoud Al-Ardah, has spent 22 years of his youth in prison and was sentenced to life. Today he practised his right to self-determination and self-liberation under the most brutal circumstances. His body was captured between four walls, his soul and mind were free and mighty. Those who attend high-end educational institutions, such as Ivy League school, are expected to invent radical solutions to complicated situations. However, Mahmoud Al-Ardah didn't need that fancy education to shake the grounds of a heavily militarised fascist entity. Being physically in prison could mean freedom to the brain. While being in institutional education could mean the limitation and dependency. Against all expectations, Mahmoud Al-Ardah managed to replace agony and misery with hope and imagination. The resourcefulness, the responsiveness, the mental strength, the refusal to be defeated; isn't this a superpower? Iron Man is fictional, Mahmoud Al-Ardah isn't.

I doubt that English words can capture the essence of the Palestinian resilience, nor that those who never experienced oppression can understand what it means, even if they spent their whole life reading about it. It's a collective agreement, a social contract. We smile when we are arrested, we innovate when we are oppressed. All the men and women who show the mindset and stamina of a leader are eventually either arrested, expelled or killed. As the racist occupier says, "a good Arab is a dead Arab". In their understanding, there is no good Arab unless they are dead. In my understanding, the good Arab, the one who managed to escape the domestication attempts of the manipulative and blinding schooling system, gets killed or imprisoned by the fascist entity or their subcontractors, the Palestinian Authority.

## *Stinky desk*

Speech is the miracle of the human, however, at school, children are expected to stay silent for eight hours a day for twelve of their most formative years. Unless it's an answer to a question or a polite request, children are expected to keep their thoughts to themselves. I wonder where else they would have the chance to share their personal achievements, to question how things work or how the universe started? How many theories and explanations remain unspoken inside those little yet growing minds? And what is the fate of those ideas, those brains, and their ability to articulate? As long as these ideas are not shared or reflected upon?

In an array of three columns and seven rows of desks sit forty-two students in a UN girls' school in Palestine. Each desk is a construction of a wooden seat and a table connected together by a metal skeleton. One desk accommodates two students, sometimes three if they are younger and hence smaller students. The wooden table has a shelf where students can keep belongings – this shelf is usually used to cheat as you can easily hide an open book on it during a test. It is used also to throw away the unpalatable compulsory vitamin pills students are obligated to swallow once a week, or to hide food since it's forbidden to eat during class time. The smell of this shelf is stinky; students only clean it when there is an inspection. It's stinky because of what is kept inside, and because the desk sits in a humid and dark classroom for years and years without seeing the sun outside.

One strong memory of early life experience is the school desk. For hours students are recording their feelings and thoughts all over this dark brown canvas in multiple ways. The desk performs as a trap,

like the walls of a prison cell, filled with engravings of whatever is going on within the prisoners themselves, counting down the days until they are freed.

The desk is the same for all students, no matter how different their abilities, interests, dreams, or bodies are. In the case of a school student, the singular desk design neglects the range of different needs and desires: it empowers some and paralyses others, it limits movement and therefore will. While my neighbour was thinking about her Dabke performance, which she developed and wanted to practise, she had to listen to a science class that was of no interest to her. Although I was very much enjoying the new scientific insights I was receiving from ‘Miss Fatenah’, I was thinking of how those rules apply in real life, and whether they come from real life at all.

School curricula are still today surreal in my memory. Sometimes I like to revisit my old textbooks, especially physics, to see how I perceive them today as an adult, to see whether I can establish this connection with a personal experience, whether I will be able to use it or be inspired by it.

### *A unique classroom*

In a rectangular classroom, the composition of desks is oriented to face a black chalkboard stretching across the short western wall, sanctified by its position. Protected and operated by an also ‘sanctified’ keeper, the teacher. Despite the forty-two diverse bodies and experiences seated in the room, the source of knowledge remains one. The hierarchy this setup imposes is a metaphoric representation of the whole educational system, designed to control generations after generations. It enables “illusions such as learning is the result



of teaching and that a person's worth can be measured by a number on a vertical line".<sup>9</sup>

The door is always situated closer to the chalkboard on the right-hand side, and next to it sits the trash bin where naughty students are punished. The windows extend on the southern long side of the classroom. The sun shines its rays onto the students from the left side, so all right-handed students can write without being bothered by the shadow of their hand. On the opposite side lays a big pinboard, filled with student-made drawings of human body systems for extra credits. In the back of the class, you'll find coat hangers extending across the whole wall holding wet jackets in the winter, empty in the spring. Above will be more art projects, again made for extra credits.

Every year, the school would receive a number of new desks to replace the broken ones, and the new ones stand out because of their colour and shine. Whoever gets the new desk is crowned as the new queen, and the desk becomes a tourist attraction point to be visited in the five minutes between classes by the other students. The older desks reserve the memories, thoughts, and artworks of previous occupiers: engravings, old gum, and stickers.

In the first row sit three types of student; the short ones, those who struggle with vision, and the nerds. In the back row sit the tallest, the uninterested, and the ones who struggle with learning 'in the traditional way'. The teachers mean to seat high-achieving students next to lesser achieving students to tutor them, referring to an arabic proverb (*put the donkey and the horse in one stable, either the horse will teach the donkey to neigh, or the donkey will teach the*

9 Sukarieh, "Decolonizing education," 1.

*horse to bray*), hoping for the first to happen and not the latter.

The classroom itself with its array of desks ends up acting as one cell in another larger array. Identical to its neighbour, it sits back to back and shares a wall with the class next door, forming a row. Mirroring it is another row of the same number of classes, separated by a hallway, and duplicated vertically on the second floor. The rooms on the front of the school are the principal and the teachers' rooms, overlooking the school entrance and the garden, usually the cleanest and most decorated part of the whole school. These rooms are always prepared to welcome very important guests, such as UN inspectors, people in senior positions, and parents of students.

### *Thirty minutes a day*

We waited for the thirty-minute break between the six forty-five-minute classes we had every day to play “حجلة” (hopscotch, hopping game). This game was the best part of the day, where my most valuable friendships were established, where I learned to strategise, where I taught my little sister to count. We organised a hopscotch league and we took it seriously. However, there were only thirty free minutes a day, which also had to be split with buying food from the canteen (it was a hassle, little girls never got the chance to buy lunch because they were not tall or strong enough to reach the canteen window, I might have to write a whole essay about this particular crazy moment), eating lunch, doing late homework, and, of course, catching up, gossiping, and speaking about personal achievements. The game territory was negotiated; the best piece of land was on soil, where you could use a stick to draw the eight rectangles. With time the land would become hard because of the number of times girls would jump on it. There was this particular area under the

pine tree which was known to be the most wanted, just because you could play in the shade, but it was always dominated by ninth graders.<sup>10</sup> The second-best place to play was on the cement floor in the big schoolyard, where the floor was already hard, which was always a plus. But you needed chalk to draw the hopscotch, and you definitely needed a miracle to get some.<sup>11</sup> Every week the hopscotch rectangles would be cleaned away, which made it unsustainable. Most of the time it was also illegal, and teachers made sure to punish the girl who made the drawing by forcing her to clean it publicly.

I'm writing about those thirty minutes instead of writing about the time we spent in class. The latter is still the least interesting and the least preserved in my memory. Being a student, you don't question the system, you follow it and try to master it. You are always being told to obey in order to be rewarded, or at least to avoid punishment. Rethinking my previous statement, well! We all questioned school as children, we all thought it didn't make sense and hoped it would die: "yeah I used to wake up for Fajr prayer and pray that school dies, I know you did too".

10 UN schools have classes from first till ninth grade only, as compulsory education.

11 Every class would get a limited amount of chalks, which were kept by one student, chosen by the teacher. If you knew that student, you might be able to smuggle some chalk out of the class.