

# Back to the House

## Becoming a Man in the First Palestinian *Intifada*<sup>1</sup>

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*There is no such a thing as society.  
There are individual men and women  
and there are families.*  
Margaret Thatcher

*Madness in great ones  
must not unwatched go.*  
William Shakespeare

### Introduction

Everything seemed ready for the spectacle. Even the notoriously unpredictable Berlin weather decided to contribute and framed the recently and lavishly refurbished stadium with only occasional pinkish clouds. The match was already well into extra time and it appeared highly probable that, after all, the World Cup 2006 would be decided by penalties. And then it all happened: presumably reacting to a “Yo-Mama” kind of provocation by the annoying Italian player Materazzi, the French Zidane first walked away, reflected and – the hell with the laurels – decided a proper reaction was mandatory: he came back and butted his head directly against Materazzi’s chest, the *geste* that would cost him the red card and his definitive departure from the tournament. Three days after the incident, the following was all Zidane provided by way of explanation to an avid multitude of journalists:

— I am a man.

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The Abu-Ghraib affair began well before the adoption of the opprobrious technique of interrogation of its inmates. Disappointed by the meagre results produced by the questioning of Iraqi detainees, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld decided that the secrecy that had been safeguarding the hunt for Al-Qaeda members would be expanded to also cover inquiries conducted inside prisons. In practice, this meant that, in disregard for the rights conferred on prisoners of war under the Geneva conventions, a green light was granted to the garrison to submit inmates to physical abuse and sexual humiliation in order to generate intelligence data. It was expected that detainees, menaced with the potential release to their families and neighbours of photos depicting them naked, submitting to a smiling female reservist or terrified by a barking dog, would agree to co-operate with American intelligence services after being freed and reinserted into their original communities.

Such an expectation – which short-circuited upon the publishing of photos by the press and the uproar of indignation and solidarity from international and local communities that ensued – was informed by the work of Princeton and Columbia cultural anthropologist Raphael Patai. Patai's book, *The Arab Mind*, first published in 1973, portrays Arabs as especially vulnerable to sexual humiliation and, according to one scholar interviewed by *New Yorker* journalist Seymour Hersh, became “the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior”. Its posthumous 2002 edition was prefaced by a retired Army colonel, who recommended the material on the basis that it illuminated “the modal personality traits that made [the 9/11 hijackers] susceptible to engaging in terrorist actions” (cited in Starrett 2004: 2). Patai reserves a whole 25-page chapter to demonstrate how sex has supposedly become taboo for Arabs, inescapably vested with repression and shame. In that chapter, he states:

“The segregation of the sexes, the veiling of women [...] and all other minute rules that govern and restrict contact between men and women have the effect of making sex a primal preoccupation in the Arab world. [...] [All] expressions of sexuality [...] [are] never given any publicity. These are private affairs and remain in private”. (cited in Hersh 2004: 11)

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I could very well dwell on Zidane's Algerian roots and propose that the two events depicted above constitute mere variations on a single theme. Both

supposedly serve as illustrations of Arabs' unavoidable entrapment by the all-too-infamous pair of honour and shame. A fairly large literature has been produced along these lines: an Arab man cannot allow himself to lose face in public (as if this were an option for any of us); he needs to protect his honour, inextricably linked to the behaviour of his female kin. Were I to maintain this concept, I would merely be giving my own humble contribution to the immemorial and on-going process of exoticization of Arab societies. Yet, if there is one thing that we definitely do not need, it is another Orientalism.

I propose to take a different route and, playing the first vignette against the second, suggest that the Abu Ghraib example simply serves as a definite illustration of anthropology's proverbially uneasy relationship with colonialism, including its newest versions. For what Zidane's claim invites us to consider is the image of a man whose very personhood is complexly informed by various social links – an image that the occasionally very opaque and fully gendered shame-honour<sup>3</sup> stereotype does not always seem able to account for.

One of the reasons for the frustration of American intelligence's expectations in the Abu Ghraib affair is that it was informed by an unequivocally crude anthropology; besides, no aura of scientism could render the imperial project more palatable. Patai's questionable "masterpiece" simply reifies worn-out stereotypes of Arab societies. It cannot account for the upheaval of indignation on the part of local communities upon the publishing of the photos, for it seems to expect that only men strive to protect their honour,<sup>4</sup> failing to grasp how both male *and female* relatives of the inmates would vociferously react against the assault on one of their kin – understandably enough for here (as everywhere, I suspect) their very personhood was informed by relationships with significant others. Moreover, Patai's book takes for granted a decisive public-private division, forcing men to promenade almost exclusively in a public sphere, hardly willing to pay attention to the kind of inter-gender interaction that necessarily goes on inside households.

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3 It would be interesting to investigate how the shame-honour pair relates to the one that will be occupying us in the coming pages, public-private. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to develop that thread. My belief is that the honour-shame pair is more part of the problem than of the explanation, for it raises more questions than it answers.

4 Dubisch (1995) states that, in her fieldwork, no informant ever characterized honour as a male prerogative. Wikan (1984), in turn, categorises honour as "experience-distant".

It is precisely the facile dichotomy of public-private – with its eventual conflation with the yet more infamous male-female or political-apolitical divisions – that will be my target in this paper. First, I plan to indicate the particular role the dichotomy played in the history of European political thought and its corresponding links to a specific political-economic setting. Its unavoidable gender bias – since, from the very beginning, contract theorists have erected a philosophy suitable for a male, propertied (and probably white) setting – remained intact when this “entrenched dichotomy” gained a new face in the writings of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists and early feminists and started being depicted as political jural-domestic or public-domestic. Understandably, later feminist anthropologists, as I will show, reacted to this gender bias and disputed the very validity of the dichotomy. When we head east, in a subsequent section of this study, I will register how feminist anthropologists conducting fieldwork in Arab societies also contested the conflation of the dichotomy with male-female and political-apolitical: women’s worlds could indeed become very political and subversively critical, be it through poetry, weaving or possession. Ironically enough, though, one voice ends up muted in some of these latter studies: men’s. As a matter of fact, even recent performative theory tends to focus on men’s actions in public, perhaps because that is what anthropologists could effectively have access to. Nevertheless, recognising the methodological difficulty of access cannot justify pretending that such a presentation of men’s public performances is the whole story. My argument is that it is not enough to pay attention to men’s or women’s conduct in public: a micro-sociology of the family is not only mandatory, but also urgent.

We will then be in a position to present our case-test: that of becoming a man in the context of the first Palestinian *intifada* (1987-1992). The gendering of young men in that specific context cannot usefully be explained within the frame of the public-domestic dichotomy. The borders of public-domestic become blurred and all one can say – which may not be much – is that an event is happening inside or outside the house: the depiction of such events as public or domestic normally entails unwelcome gender and political biases, which seem completely out of place in this specific situation (and in other ones as well). The next step will be to show that a concept of the polity not based on the public-domestic dichotomy is informed by different notions of personhood, not necessarily vitiated by the ideological device of the “isolated

individual”. Different polities opt to place emphasis on different concepts of personhood and it takes a particular frame of mind to believe in the allegory of individual men and women and isolated families, necessary for the implementation of a specific set of deconstructionist policies that resulted in the dismissal of the welfare state in certain parts of the world, as the conclusion of this essay suggests.

### **Public-private: an entrenched dichotomy**

Given the elongated persistence of the public-private dichotomy over several centuries of the history of Western philosophical thought, it may not be surprising that each of its components has assumed several meanings through time. Thus, a cursory investigation of the polysemic references for public-private attests that, in certain instances, the dichotomy relates to spaces (e.g. streets or houses); in another, to institutions (e.g. nations or families); while in other situations to types of relationships (e.g. between different *paterfamilias* or between mothers and children). As might be expected, “public” has, in different contexts, received manifold glosses, such as, *inter alia*, “government”, “political society” and “social”. The same happens to “private”, which has been variously interpreted as “domestic”, “family-like”, “household”, “intimate” and “apolitical” – with a bundle of concepts, such as “civil society” or “community”, seeming to stand in between. What is definitely startling is that, despite such variations, the same gender bias – that attaches “public” to males and “private” to females – has remained more or less intact throughout, though admittedly assuming different guises.

The conceptual divide that opposes public and private certainly predates the emergence of capitalism and bourgeois “democracies”. Hannah Arendt (1958), for instance, identifies its presence already in ancient Greece and it is with a certain gloomy nostalgia that she regrets its replacement by an overarching “social” in recent totalitarian regimes. In the Middle Ages, there seems to have existed more of a continuity between the two spheres – which further confirms the artificiality and non-mandatory character of the division. Philosophical defences of medieval monarchies thus proposed a similitude between state and home, with patriarchal sires busy with the “housekeeping” of their kingdoms (Collier, Maurer & Suárez-Navaz 1995). It was with the dismissal of the *ancien régime* that the contrast between public

and private became fully one of kind, rather than just one of scale (Idem). Families now started being understood as in opposition to states: accordingly, they had to be policed and disciplined, through the proper deployment of apparatus such as schooling and (private) philanthropy, which, by means of its assistance-like and medical-hygienist mentality, would take charge of eventual outcasts and emphasise the norm, without burdening the emergent bourgeois states with the tasks of having to provide for deviant dropouts (Donzelot 1979). Families ceased to be *models* for government and became *instruments* for it (Foucault 1978). Social contract theorists would aid this process, supplying the philosophical underpinnings for the distinction of a public sphere, established by common agreement between “men of reason”, from a less-than-social private one, governed by the rules of God or nature – in any case, beyond human control – with homes seeming to stand outside of or prior to human laws (Collier, Maurer & Suárez-Navaz 1995). It is not difficult to guess what kind of gender prejudice would ensue, which would blossom in the construction of the “domestic woman” in eighteenth and nineteenth-century imagery (Jones 1990).

Macpherson (1962) cogently argues that the possessive individual who serves as a basis for Hobbes’ and Locke’s contractualism is a direct reflection of the market relations prevailing in seventeenth-century England. This anxious individual, condemned to a never-ceasing pursuit of his needs (a quest that Sahlins (1996) prefers to ascribe to a structure of the long-run pervading Western philosophy, the Adamic fall, which established that the plentiful paradise is off-limits for us) is propertied. He is skin-bounded: he does not depend on others; he exists autonomously of relationships with others; if nothing else, he owns his own person and his attributes. All he wants is to make sure that his property rights – of himself and, especially in Locke, of his material belongings – are duly observed and the solution to this – which allows overcoming the permanent insecurity of the state of nature – is the contract. Increasingly with Locke, our “men of reason” (and the use of the gendered word here is fully purposeful), willing to subscribe to a contract good enough for them to take up their market activities unencumbered by royal privileges, aristocratic monopolies and guild constraints, never for a moment thought that their propertyless dependents – servants, children and wives – should have their own word and participate as equals in the social contract (Collier, Maurer & Suárez-Navaz 1995). The irony of social contract theory is the irony

of the market: that whole parts of the population are simply not taken into account. In Macpherson's words:

“The greatness of seventeenth-century liberalism was its assertion of the free rational individual as the criterion of good society; its tragedy was that this very assertion was necessarily a denial of individualism to half the nation” (1962: 262)

Included in this unpropertied half were of course women. This is Carol Peteman's (1988) line of reasoning, when she presents the “sexual contract” as the “repressed dimension” of the social contract. Those that, following Locke, did not want to submit to a self-perpetuating authority, not liable to the majority consent, were at the same time advocates of preserving the patriarchy unscathed in their homes. Thus, the social contract based on supposedly universal reason settled on the public sphere disguised another contract – marriage – which preserved hierarchical relations between unequals in the private domain. The private was thus established as the realm of exception and difference and the gender underpinnings of such a depiction would produce effects well beyond the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup>

This gender complex – the universality of which is far from unquestionable, as feminist scholars have recently been eager to argue (Rosaldo 1980; Yanagizako & Collier 1987; Ortner 1996) – has nevertheless found its way to the pages of anthropology, when the public-private dichotomy was transported to the confines of this minor inheritor of the intellectual tradition I have been portraying here. Fortes, for instance, proposed, in his mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century studies of African societies, an analytical differentiation between filiation and descent. The latter refers to the relation between ego and an ancestor, mediated by a parent and, as advocated by Fortes, it needs to be distinguished from filiation – the relation deriving from the *natural* fact of being a child to a parent (actually, in his perspective, mostly to a mother). Descent was fully political – a phenomenon of the political-jural domain, regulated by “external” and “public” sanctions -, whereas filiation, centring around the mother-child dyad, pertained to the domestic sphere, characterised by the “private”, “moral” and “affective” norms of altruism linking kinsmen (Holy 1996). Reflecting

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5 A potentially revelatory exercise would be to compare the gender biases of authors that inform the Western tradition of juridical thought – such as Pufendorf (1673), Kant (1785) and Hegel (1821) – to those eventually present in the works of authors that inform other traditions – for instance, Nasir ad-Din Tusi (1232).

the designs of the British colonial enterprise – and, one imagines, the guiding principles of its financing agencies – anthropologists working within the structural-functional tradition busied themselves with attempts to explain the political functioning of the “societies without states” of Africa. The consequence was that disproportionate attention was given to the political-jural dimension of kin relationships, whereas domestic arrangements, where emotions were thought to be lived and women enclosed, were taken to be universally constant and almost totally ignored or at most considered more appropriate for psychological rather than sociological investigation. Moreover, while filiation cannot provide a transparent structuring principle for the establishment of clearly bounded and non-overlapping segments – for ego, from this perspective, is simultaneously a member of various groups – the same does not happen with descent: Fortes and his disciples were happy to study the intricacies of unilineal descent groups and British colonisers were properly provided with chiefs of bounded segments, to whom they could talk.<sup>6</sup> Besides artificially seizing upon unilineal descent as the *one* aspect of social life that should be given attention to – eventually inflating its importance far beyond what on-going social processes could justify – structural-functional anthropologists contributed to the endurance of the gender biases imbued into the analytical categories they adopted, such as “political-jural” and “domestic”. The fact that such gender preconceptions might possibly be alien to the societies under scrutiny was not even considered.

The seeming “naturalness” of gender hierarchies was denounced by feminist scholars from the 1970s onwards and the fully cultural grounding of gender asymmetries was exposed. Several of the papers reunited in the influential volume “Woman, Culture and Society” (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974) proceeded along those lines. In one of those papers, Rosaldo (1974) suggested

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6 Native social scientists working in the developing world have also come up with dichotomies similar to the ones problematized here. A case in mind is DaMatta’s (1984) explanations of Brazil based on the oppositions between the street (*a rua*) and the home (*a casa*), the individual and the person and, finally, the sub- and the super-citizen. While this may be sufficient an indication that the tendency to reason along dichotomous pairs is not solely characteristic of the discourse produced in and by the colonial powers, I still consider it necessary to exert proper methodological caution prior to the hasty utilisation of such oppositions in different places. Sometimes the dichotomies do not function smoothly when transplanted to various latitudes and the borders between the two poles of the oppositions become blurred. Eventually, as argued below, the “combination” found in several societies between the two poles of the dichotomies is judged negatively, as a failed attempt to achieve “modernity”, as if a golden standard existed as to what it means to be “modern”.

that a universal opposition between “public” and “domestic” served to organise gender hierarchies everywhere. Women, confined to the domestic domain due to their specialised role in the reproduction of the human species, were denied authority and prestige, prerogatives of men who paraded in the public sphere. While such studies did play an important role in unveiling the hardly-admitted gender prejudices of previous approaches – in reality, one of the side-effects of the fact that, in “the palpably androcentric discipline of anthropology” (Comaroff 1987: 54), fieldwork until then had chiefly been conducted by male ethnographers with male informants – feminist scholarship still appeared to accept the same terms in which the debate was cast, orbiting, thus, within the same semantic field. If, understandably, feminist anthropologists did not want to view politics “as a male pastime” (Collier 1974: 89), part of this scholarship nevertheless, and somewhat ironically, continued to be mesmerised by the public sphere (e.g. Sanday 1974). A sharp public-private divide tended, therefore, to be taken for granted: studies at the most limited consideration to how variations in the integration between “public” and “domestic” would impact on women’s status (Sacks 1974). Only scant attention ended up being reserved, at least at this first moment, to the myriad ways in which men and women effectively interacted inside the families, which remained, to a large extent, concealed.

### **Where have women been hiding?**

Rosaldo herself recognized, in a later paper (1980), some of the pitfalls of her 1974 article on the public-domestic division. Even though stating that she still thought that “in probing universal questions, domestic-public [...] [was] as telling as any explanation yet put forth” (399), she realized that the opposition took for granted too much about how gender effectively worked and, in that sense, ceased to be illuminating but started instead having troubling analytical consequences. Rosaldo now came to appreciate that she had been pursuing “something of a ghost” (401) and that the domestic-public divide relied on an essentialist view of what women were, due to their roles in giving birth and rearing children. Moreover, anticipating the recognition by later works of the inescapable interaction between kinship and gender – actually, mutually constituted disciplines, as Yanagizako and Collier (1987) argued – Rosaldo admitted a link between her own reasoning on gender in the 1974

piece and Fortes' discussions about kinship and the domestic-politico-jural domains. Both depictions were unwitting heirs of a certain Victorian ideology – sensed Rosaldo – which cast the sexes in a dichotomous light, as if a difference necessarily needed to mean an opposition or the creation of a hierarchy. Such an ideology restricted women to the “safe havens of homes”, while men were forced out, to act as breadwinners in a heartless public sphere, where the harsh competition of the market relations of capitalism prevailed. As a matter of fact, public-domestic and political jural-domestic – as well as this other over-arching dichotomy, nature-culture – seem to be just transformations of one another, to use Ortner's and Whitehead's (1981) felicitous expression. All have the effect of “flatten[ing] dynamic transformations into static structural sameness” (Yanagizako & Collier 1987: 18).

In a general review of the literature on domestic units, Yanagizako (1979) chooses Fortes' contrast between the domestic and the political-jural as one of her targets. She convincingly demonstrates how it depends on normative premises of what such realms should be like, the former based on prescriptive altruism – which supposedly belongs within the home – and the latter subjected to external rules, represented by contracts, law and force. Vitiating, from the very beginning, by the difficulties of defining precisely what the domestic really was (a point I develop below), while, simultaneously, keeping largely blind to the conflicts occurring inside homes, which should reveal their fully political nature, Fortes' distinction also implies a hierarchy, due to our particular and possibly culturally-specific mindset that re-puts an external sphere as always encompassing an internal one. Following that thread, anthropology literally became “the study of man embracing woman” (Malinowski cited in Moore 1988) and a whole set of issues in terms of the representation of women followed. As Moore aptly remarks, sexism cannot be overcome by the simple accretion of a woman's point of view to our studies. The “add-women-and-stir method” (Boxer, cited in Moore 1988: 3) runs the risk of reproducing androcentrism in inverted form (Yanagizako & Collier 1987: 26). Besides, the idea that only a woman can comprehend another woman – as if some kind of “universal female” actually existed, independent of variables such as class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation, and a common sympathy between a female informant and a female ethnographer would immediately sparkle, in spite of the power relations characteristic of the ethnographic encounter – casts doubt on the very premises of

anthropology. If it takes one to understand one, the whole comparative endeavour at the core of our discipline is undermined (Shapiro cited in Moore 1988: 5). Thus, the challenge facing an anthropology of gender is not just that of incorporating “women’s points of view” but that of learning to ask the proper questions and searching for the appropriate representations of women’s and men’s lives, without being encumbered by *a priori* interpretive frameworks, such as that represented by the domestic political-jural dichotomy. The problem of the structural domains has therefore to be “rethought *sui generis*”, as Comaroff (1987) advocates. His diagnosis of the debates surrounding the divide is forceful:

“Critics of the classical concept of the domestic and political-jural fall along a continuum: those who reconsider the substance and the functions of the domains, without questioning their sociological reality or the relationship between them; those who acknowledge the existence of these domains, but stress the variability of their interconnection; and those who view their emergence as a historically specific phenomenon, often arising from transformations in political economy, and who treat them as problematic forms and ideological representations” (1987: 57)

At the heart of the problems created by the dichotomy lies a particularly obscure and circular definition of the domestic. Whatever women do is taken to be domestic and domestic will be whatever women do (Yanagizako & Collier 1987; Harris 1981). The mother-child dyad assumes, as expected, a central position in such a depiction and, because women everywhere are the ones who give birth, this concept of the domestic introduces an unwarranted assumption of universalism: all around the world, women now had to hide in the house to gestate babies and look after them. Furthermore, because what is thought of as universal tends to be considered natural, the mother-child dyad and families become naturalized – as if everywhere families were the same and as if motherhood would always be essential for the definition of womanhood cross-culturally. The adepts of a strict domestic-public divide never tackle such complicated issues as to what extent families and households coincide and whether families at all times have to be identified with a taken-for-granted ubiquitous head of household (Harris 1981). Naturalized – and nature normally serves as an ideological instrument for the justification of hierarchies and subordination (Idem) – families are represented as closed units:

a politicized view of them (Hart 1992), including an analysis of what is going on inside – precisely what a micro-sociology of the family might unveil - is *a priori* discarded.

In his revealing ethnography of the Tshidi, Comaroff (1987) ingeniously demonstrates how, even though the distinction public-domestic was more accentuated in periods of hierarchical centralization of the social field, the very contours of the divide were intrinsically fluid and assumed different guises in the three instances of centralization he analyses: the pre-colonial, the colonial and neo-colonial (e.g., under the South African state) and the industrial capitalist. His conclusion is that a clear-cut public-domestic division, which is unchanging over time, simply does not hold. He exposes the full historicity of the shifting features households, as well as the interrelation between them, showed through time, according to varying situations. “Domestic relations” – states Comaroff – “are always affected by the [changing] exigencies of political economy, just as wider political and economic structures are predicated on the division of labour and the production of value within the household” (83). He argues that his analysis concurs with Nelson’s (1974) who, when evaluating anthropological studies of the Middle East, asserts that the conflation of the public with the political and the private with the domestic is unsustainable. Her point is that, in the ethnography of the Middle East, the contrast between the realms is an objectionable imposition of categories produced by Western social science. Let us move east, then, to investigate what precisely she means.

### **Heading east, following the lead of women**

It is almost a truism that the relation between the public and the domestic changes over time and space and that the level of overlap or segregation between these domains fluctuates ceaselessly. Yet tautologies do not always seem to be obvious and analysts have tended to reify each of these spheres into static sameness and, by “heuristic fiat” (Comaroff 1987: 56), have carved up a somewhat more untidy social reality. In the case of scholars working with the Middle East, the imposition of a clear-cut distinction between public and domestic has produced yet another Orientalism: lived experiences were “dislodged by a dictionary definition” (Said 1978: 155), essentializing, orientalizing and generalizing the Orient on the move, through a dichotomy that had

more meaning to Western scholars than to the realities purportedly being portrayed. Due to the alleged sexual insatiability of Arabs, women had to observe modesty and be kept veiled and condoned off in a theoretically apolitical domestic sphere. Their exoticization was the price to be paid to maintain the boundaries between public and domestic, and Western colonizers were accordingly provided with a reality that they could grasp, cope with and submit.<sup>7</sup>

Based on her appraisal of ethnographies of the Middle East, Nelson (1974) is convinced of the fragile foundations for the association of women with the domestic, private and informal and men with the public, political and formal. According to her, it is a very narrow definition, inspired by Radcliffe-Brown, of the political as the maintenance or establishment of social order within a territory through coercive authority, which blinds students to the fully political character of women's purposive action in articulating the relationship between the so-called domestic and public. "Private" and "political" –Nelson believes – are not useful metaphors to describe the domestic and the public respectively and data from the Middle East precisely shows women exercising public power when transacting relationships between households.

In probing why segmentary theory with its focus on men became a zone of prestige in the anthropological literature of the Arab world in the 1970s and 1980s, contributing to consolidating the image of Arabs as divisive and violent, Abu-Lughod (1989) speculates that this is due to the association of men with politics in *Western societies*. Throughout the 1980s, anthropologists working with sexuality and gender confronted such a view and produced an alternative emphasis on women's worlds, establishing a new zone of prestige, which Abu-Lughod provocatively calls *the harem*, with all its Orientalist evocations. Works along these lines challenged depictions of Arab women as compliant and futile and insisted on their multi-layered and complex

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7 In this sense, feminism – in spite of all its good intentions – may have contributed to the Orientalist project. Mahmood (2001, 2005) persuasively exposes the Western parochial roots of some of the concepts adopted by feminist theory, such as agency, which leads yet again to silencing Arab women and to scholars seeing it as their task to speak for them. Defining agency only as resistance to domination – as feminists sometimes do – contributes to denying it to women who accept culturally specific relations of subordination, such as participants of the mosque revivalist movement Mahmood studies. These women do not react to male domination, but learn to accept subordination in their search to attain a pious life. Agency here is taken to mean the capacity for action within historically specific relations of subordination. Abu-Lughod (1998), for her part, disquietingly identifies some commonalities between feminism and Islamism in Egypt, in the selective acceptance or repudiation of images of the "Western woman", in order to create a vision of modernity, in the former case, or to invent a tradition, in the latter.

relations with each other, their offspring, their relatives and husbands. Women now left home and could engage in active politicking and influence decision making, through upholding or releasing to their husbands and relatives information collected in other households, participating in marriage arrangements, visiting friends and relatives and gossiping.

Women's worlds are not only wholly political, but also eventually utterly subversive, as studies inspired by performative theory illustrate. Through weaving, Messick's (1987) female informants from Azrou in North Africa elaborated a "subordinate discourse", which portrayed them as the exclusive agents who bring life into the world, functioning thus as an alternative to the official androcentric ideology. Bedouin Awad 'Ali women, for their part, while submitting to moral canons through their strict observance of practices of modesty, rebelliously defied such codes in their poetry (Abu-Lughod 1986, 1990). Through Zar possession, Hofriyati women from Southern Sudan go even farther (Boddy 1988, 1989). Zairan spirits enable the possessed women to look at their culturally over-determined world – where their own selfhood is very much bounded by their role in human reproduction – from a non-Hofriyati perspective. That is why Boddy describes Zar possession as a "folk" therapy: through trance, women step outside of the normative content and constraints of their world and may see the sources of their suffering as less naturalized and less unquestionable.

Of course, such an intellectual move, as any other, is not devoid of difficulties. Morris (1995) recommends caution to avoid romanticising all these performative acts and the hasty equation of the criticism of the *status quo* they entail with active resistance. She regards it as more appropriate to speak of ritual reversal, liminality or anti-structure, rather than subversive confrontation. Even segregation, which beforehand was considered as severely curtailing women's movements, has tended to be recast in a new light by these recent works, as facilitating an all-female exchange of information in a realm from which men are banned. Furthermore, as Abu-Lughod (1989) lucidly observes, the pitfall to avoid is to become entrapped by the harem: one needs to move beyond it. Through its deconstruction, the ethnographer, even when focusing on women's worlds, should be able to acknowledge their dialectical relationships with men's. The danger to be overcome is that, after all this effort to problematize the automatic conflation of political jural-domestic with political-apolitical and male-female, all we come up with is the

provision of an all-female audience and public to other women. Awad 'Ali poetry, Azrou weaving, Zar possession and other performances by women should encounter some kind of echo in men's worlds. In her finely elaborated ethnography of Zabidi elite families in Yemen, Meneley (1996) faces this difficulty and cogently indicates the faux pas of characterizing reciprocal visits by women as private and as producing repercussions only in the female's world. These visits exhibit an agonistic feature and, because they provide opportunities for the display of hospitality and wealth, are instruments in a "tournament of values", in a dispute among families to conquer and preserve public recognition. They are about the social standing of the households, with their female *and male* members.

We continue to be haunted here by the public-private divide and the analyst needs to be careful not to be seized by it. If the studies examined under this topic definitely reject the conflation of the public with men only, they remain timidly hesitant when it comes to disputing the characterization of the domestic as a female world. It seems understandable that the age-old mesmerizing by the public is once again repeated here. Performances require spectators and are public statements: the result is that studies of performative acts end up paying almost exclusive attention to the public side of the dichotomy – an obstacle which, as we will see in the next section, confronts even more strongly the analysis of men's worlds, partly as a consequence of fieldwork conditions in segregated societies. But a lot remains to be said about what goes on inside homes. Dubisch (1995) is rightly dismayed by the characterization of women's performances in rural Greece as private, such as participation in pilgrimages or public displays of suffering – which has the surprising effect of rendering suffering empowering, a point very relevant to my discussion below. In the same sense, we should be even more disheartened with the description of men's actions inside their homes as *public*. To avoid the contradiction, analysts tend to consider men's actions as necessarily public, opting to ignore what the latter do in the "domestic". Actually, as my Palestinian case will hopefully show, the public-domestic dichotomy is simply out-of-place here.

### **And so, where did men go?**

To avoid being ensnared by the harem, running the risk of reifying walls to organise a strictly dichotomous world, the value-loaded domains of

which have serious consequences in terms of our views of gender,<sup>8</sup> we have to learn how to “traffick in men”, to make use of Gutmann’s (1997) thought-provoking re-appropriation of the title of Gayle Rubin’s (1975) influential article, which inaugurated a path of investigation for feminist anthropology. Thus, while ethnography has throughout its history involved mostly men talking to men – producing a bias rightly criticized by feminist analysts – only recently have scholars within the discipline started paying attention to men *as men*, that is to how they act as “engendered and engendering subjects”<sup>9</sup> (Gutmann 1997: 385). As a matter of fact, there seems to be no legitimate reason why gender studies should automatically be equated only with *women’s* studies. That obviously does not mean that accounts of manhood should content themselves with representing some kind of a “men’s turn” (*Idem*: 403) in gender inquiries. This would ignore the essential advances accomplished by feminist scholarship. As the feminists did before, the literature on manhood must also overcome the “overly dichotomized [view of the] world in which men [...] [are] men and women [...] [are] women, and women contribute as little to ‘making’ men as men [...] [do] to ‘making’ women” (*Idem*: 389). Relationships between men and women must be properly positioned at the centre of our efforts – a standpoint that the focus solely on rituals or performative acts in public eventually obliterates, as rightly detected by Gutmann:

“Whether women and men absent themselves from the others’ presence during rituals [and eventually in performative acts] [...], women and men do regularly interact in other times, and they profoundly affect each others’ lives and identities. We must not confuse formal roles and definitions with daily lives” (401; addition mine)

This is precisely the difficulty with Gilson’s (1996) depiction of the

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8 Perhaps I should state very clearly that I am not negating here the existence of sex segregation, in varying degrees, in Middle Eastern societies; as a matter of fact, this would simply be implausible. I also fully recognize that certain phenomena happen inside the homes, while others occur outside. I have difficulties, though, as it is certainly clear by now, with the description of these domains as “public” or “domestic” or as “male-only” and “female-only” for that normally implies another value-loaded and infamous dichotomy: political and apolitical.

9 In the case of the Middle East, initiatives along these lines (such as Ghousob & Sinclair-Webb 2000 and Ouzgane 2006) are very few and recent, and eventually exhibit uneven results which, though laudable for their ground-breaking character, are still understandably of a very tentative nature.

lords of the Lebanese marches, the *beys*, and of their agents, the *aghas*, and the local *fellahin* sharecroppers in Akkar, in the north of the country. While Gilsenan compellingly shows the role narratives play in the construction of violent political and economic relations between these men – and which are decisive for their gendering – his analysis does not explore the way women might affect the process. He is unapologetic about the fact. Yet the question of women’s participation cannot easily be dismissed due to the difficulty of access to them for a male ethnographer conducting fieldwork in a segregated society. Justifications based on lack of access do not amount to solving the problem.

Gilsenan draws heavily on Herzfeld’s (1985) landmark book on the “poetics of manhood” in Glendi, Crete. For Glendiot men, the issue was not just that of “being a good man”, but also of “being good *at being a man*”. They had to exceed themselves and others in their “performative excellence” when playing cards, abducting women, dancing or stealing animals. Moreover, deeds must be narrated and displayed in public by their perpetrators, to gain *simasia* (meaning). It is self-regard, *eghoismos*, as a social and not individual value only, that drives men to the celebration of their actions. Herzfeld’s is still very much an “anthropology of the spectacle” – or so it seems to me - with men striving to excel each other when dancing in the town square, playing cards in the coffee-houses or boasting of their latest daring goat theft. One can feel his discomfort when, challenged by Harris to discuss whether, in the sense he uses the word, a “poetics” could also be applied to women, Herzfeld (1991) replies that women perform their lack of performance and, through their silence, creatively deform their submission. My question here is whether a “poetics” (of man and womanhood) may also be performed in the humdrum routines of daily life (or in the everyday suspension of it, as we shall soon see). Moreover, I probe whether a “poetics” is necessarily so dependent on *eghoismos*, which, in spite of being a social value, inevitably implies an individual carefully trying to exert control of the situations in which his public *persona* is displayed. Can mothers, wives and sisters perform a “poetics of manhood” for their (silent) sons, husbands and brothers – gendering them and becoming themselves gendered in this process – in actions either house-based or conducted inside homes?

## Back to the house: public-private in crisis

As soon as Hala stepped out of the taxi that had brought her from her family's house to that of her groom's, in a village in Ramallah, her new mother-in-law, Imm Ziyad, expressed her joy by breaking into piercing ululation (*zaghru*).<sup>10</sup> Imm Ziyad was immediately censured by her husband: "Shu?!" ("What?!") – he whispered to her adamantly, as if to mean "What the hell are you doing?". Realising that her attitude – which was precisely what she was expected to do before the *intifada* – was not appropriate in the new hard times, Imm Ziyad promptly interrupted the *zaghru*. Other peculiarities also indicated that Hala's marriage would not be like the ones held before the *intifada*. The bride had publicly requested the wedding contract not to include a marriage payment (*mahr*). This was not only an indication of political commitment, attending to an appeal from the United National Leadership of the Uprising – which had urged the population to abstain from exorbitant *mahr*, so as not to discriminate against the young men whose participation in the strike forces had severely reduced their income. It was also a demonstration of Hala's commitment to feminist ideals, which characterised *mahr* payments as an unacceptable commodification of women. Those involved in the preparation of food for the wedding party, for their part, stressed how austere it would be: not the lavish banquets of the times prior to the *intifada* and with only immediate relatives as guests. "Not at all like old weddings" – they lamented.

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The North American and European students taking part in the 1989 Bir Zeit University's International Summer Student Programme, in the West Bank, began to be outspoken about their disappointment with some of the activities proposed to them. The Bir Zeit Programme was a public relations effort by Palestinians to make their difficult lives under Israeli occupation known to the world: the expectation was that, once students saw Palestinians' living

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10 The ethnographic data on Palestine of this section were collected from Jean-Klein's work in the West Bank (2001, 2002). My rather selective use of Jean-Klein's data in the present and the next sections and, in the case of the latter, also of Peteet's (1994) does not do justice to either. Within the limits of this article, nevertheless, I can only afford to expose the portions of their findings relevant to the argument developed here. Readers interested in more nuanced ethnographic descriptions should check the works of those authors directly (Jean-Klein 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 and Peteet 1994).

11 I use throughout this section the transliteration of Arabic adopted by Jean-Klein.

conditions, they would pressure their governments to pursue more active Middle Eastern policies and to reconsider the accentuated Israeli bias some of these policies betrayed. Students were getting impatient, though, with the feeling that they were not being shown the whole story. Particularly when it came to the activities of women's committees, it seemed to them that those organisations' relations with and eventual submission to the male-dominated and faction-ridden party politics – which, in their view, compromised a truly liberating feminist agenda – were deliberately being hidden. When it became public that some of the women describing the activities of their committees were actually sisters of the male organisers and hosts of the Programme, students became vocal about their suspicions and their questions nearly caused confrontation. A German participant provoked her hosts: if the agenda of women's committees were subservient to the national liberation movement and if they had only been allowed out of their houses to take part in an effort led by their male kin, were women not afraid that, once the struggle was over, they would be forced back to their traditional roles in their families? The members of women's committees were stunned by the provocation, as if it simply had no meaning to them. The defiant tone of some of the Programme's participants only began to wane a few days later, when lectured on the issue by a Palestinian scholar, who talked about alternative local feminisms and compared factionalism to the party-pluralism of North American and Western European democratic systems. It seemed that finally the students were being taught in a language that they could understand.

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The two sequences of events related above happened during the first Palestinian *intifada* (1987-1992). *Intifada*, from the root n-f-d, meaning “to shake off” and “to recover” and one of the few Arabic words to have found its way into 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western political vocabulary, describes the Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule, which both confronted the occupiers and sought to lay the foundations for an autonomous Palestinian society. Fuelled by the harsh conditions of life under Israeli control, by burgeoning Israeli settlements, by the virtual monopolisation of the Arab agenda then by the Iran-Iraq war and the endless Lebanese crisis, by Washington's resolute support to Tel-Aviv and the relative indifference of Arabs and the international

community, the *intifada* revealed the soaring sentiment among Palestinians that they could count only on themselves to resist the occupation.<sup>12</sup> One of the areas in which they could assert themselves was precisely that of the meaning of everyday processes, which became explicitly politicised.

That is what Jean-Klein's (2001) illuminating ethnography shows. With their capacity to manifest revolt through usual political channels severely curtailed, due to fierce Israeli control, Palestinians infused everyday activities – such as visiting, eating and drinking coffee together, celebrating marriages (as Hala's case shows) and preparing shopping lists – with political meaning. Jean-Klein describes Palestinian practices during the first *intifada* as resulting from a decision to suspend everyday life and not show any signs of joy, for one should not try to forget the hardships of the Situation. Wedding celebrations, for instance, should be kept to a minimum in order not to display a joy that current conditions did not justify.<sup>13</sup> Shopping lists had to be reviewed in order to eliminate all Israeli products. House decorations and bodily ornamentation were exposed as futile preoccupations that the prevailing situation did not allow. The *sahrat* – all-night visits between families spent in care-free chit-chat and game-playing – were limited to the early hours of the evening and centred on political conversation. According to Jean-Klein:

“[A]lthough domestic oriented, [...] [these practices were] not a covert form of political action. [...] [They] gave a public display of political commitment using the space of everyday life as a site and language of public expression.” (2001: 106)

The attempt, the anthropologist maintains, was to preserve as a Palestinian monopoly the capacity of assigning meaning to and presenting as self-authored activities that were nevertheless brutally impacted by Israeli control. Under the deprivation resulting from the occupation, Hala's family would have faced insurmountable obstacles to host a wedding-ceremony in the pre-*intifada* style. It made more sense for Palestinians, thus, to present the sobriety of the festivity as stemming from *their own* will not to be joyful nor to celebrate under

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12 Mine is admittedly a sketchy presentation of the historical roots for the *intifada*, the only one I can afford within the limits of this paper. Those interested in more comprehensive accounts should check the books by Rigby (1991) or Lochman and Beinon (1989).

13 It seems significant that martyrs' funerals were spoken of as “patriotic weddings” (*a'ras wataniya*) and, differently from ordinary marriages, constituted opportunities for large gatherings, during which women exploded in loud piercing ululation (Jean-Klein 2001).

the Situation. Instead of simply bowing to passive victimisation, Palestinians in Jean-Klein's account appear as also asserting the heroic position of *agents* whose capacity of assigning meaning to their daily actions remained unscathed. Thus, a mother whose son was imprisoned during an Israeli raid reacted against the description of the incident as if the boy *had been taken* by the soldiers: "What do you mean, 'They took him'? He *went!*" (*Idem*: 114).

Here, as with Gilsenan (1996) and Herzfeld (1985), talk is action and it is through their utterances that people transform the ordeals they have to face and infuse them with new meanings. We are in the presence of the illocutionary force of performative acts (Austin 1975). It was through their utterances, for example, that mothers, wives and sisters made very clear the status they wanted to dispense to the visits paid to their imprisoned sons, husbands and brothers. "*Ashan il-intifada!*" ("For the *intifada!*") – they exclaimed (Jean-Klein 2003: 561) and this way the public and political character of the visits was established beyond doubt, without prejudice of their familial and domestic contours.

Jean-Klein (2003) also identifies "aesthetic and formal parallels" between the socialities of the households and political committees, blurring once again the boundaries between public and private. In both cases, full members are distinguished from associates, on whom nevertheless they can count. Formally reckoned agnatic kinship is therefore expanded in order to incorporate associates from the neighbourhood, friends or patrons and clients. In similar fashion, associate friends (*asdiqa*) of committees supported the activities of the fully enlisted participants of these latter groups. As might be expected, gender, seniority and class distinctions decisively influenced relations inside and between both households and committees. Finally, in both situations, one finds what Jean-Klein names "subjects of combination": individual subjects or categories of persons who, unrealized if isolated, depend on on-going relationships with significant others in order to achieve a "cross-subjective enactment of the self [or of the relevant category of persons]" (Jean-Klein 2000: 102), a point we will come back to in our next section. Therefore, just as a mother's or sister's acts were essential for the very definition of the gendered personhood of her son or brother – as we shall soon see –, so the *banat* committee, congregating single young women, or the *niswan* committee of older matrons, conducted activities vital for the operation of the *shebab* (young men) strike forces. Young women, for instance, provided first aid for *shebab* (often, their

brothers) who were hurt in action or secured safe alleys for escapes. Matrons attempted to revert *shebab's* (possibly, their own sons') imprisonment, loudly and publicly reproaching Israeli soldiers on the spot for wanting to incarcerate what were, after all, just unarmed teenagers. There is effectively nothing surprising in this continuity between families and political committees. Actors involved in the two spheres – public and private, if I can still refer to them in this way at this late juncture – were the same and there was no need for *banat*, *niswan* or *shebab* to abandon and completely come *out of the house* to find their ways *into the committees* and become politically active.<sup>14</sup>

That is precisely what the international students of the Summer Programme at Bir Zeit University found hard to accept. They adopted more of a position as “auditors” than that of simple witnesses to the *intifada* and were judgemental towards what they observed in the women’s committees, rejecting it as yet another manifestation of the enduring traditional mixture of kinship and politics, unacceptable to their “gold standard” of what politics should be like, which demanded that public and private be kept apart (Jean-Klein 2002).<sup>15</sup> Reflecting on her Lebanese data, Joseph (1997) argues that the mixing of public and private, or kinship and politics, which she detected in her field, has been dysfunctionalised by Western scholarship, which reputes it as some failed attempt to achieve modernity. Those who are “modern”, as Latour (1993) reminds us, have never found it easy to live with hybrids, and the merger of kinship and politics or of private and public seems precisely to be the case. But then, Middle Easterners have never been modern. Nor, as a matter of fact, have we.

### **Je est plusieurs autres: gender-making in crisis**

Upon congregating the women of the neighbourhood in her humble sitting room in a Palestinian camp, Imm Fadi summoned her teenage son and

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14 Mahmood’s work with female participants of a revivalist Islamic movement in a Cairo mosque (2001), as well as Hirschkind’s study of Egyptian male listeners of audio-taped sermons (2001), point in the same direction, showing that “public” does not need to be irredeemably opposed to “private”. In both studies, the focus is on the processes of formation of “moral virtues” that are simultaneously “public” and “private” (and probably also “domestic”).

15 In her ethnography of Palestinians from Galilee, Kanaaneh (2002) shows how family planning and reproduction decisions acquire a political dimension, in yet another demonstration of the difficulty of establishing for good where the public-political ends and the domestic-private starts.

daughter to the presence of her guests.<sup>16</sup> In a controlled manner, she reported that both had been beaten by Israeli soldiers, allegedly for throwing stones at them. The soldiers had used their batons and rattle butts and targeted the children's kidneys, arms and face. The boy was also shot in the side. Imm Fadi requested her son to raise his t-shirt, so that the women could see his scar. Quietly, the boy consented, while Imm Fadi went on describing the abuses he had suffered. The audience eventually interjected:

— What kind of people are these? How can they do this to children?

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One of the areas in which Palestinians strived to preserve their capacity to assign their own meaning to their adversities was that of the beatings and torture young men had to endure when caught by the Israeli army. While Israeli soldiers tried to make use of violence to exact submission, Palestinians inverted the meaning intended by the occupiers and, according to Peteet (1994), transformed torture and imprisonment into a rite of passage into manhood. We have here all the three phases Van Gennep (1908) and Turner (1969) identified in rites of passage: separation (less evident in the case of beatings conducted in the alleys of the camps, but present, as the boy is momentarily removed from the surrounding public, which tries to intervene), liminality and re-aggregation. Moreover, the *shebab* who were tortured and did not give away the names of their companions, are re-aggregated into their communities in a new standing: almost as fully-fledged men, on whom the community can count upon to confront its problems. The reaching of the threshold of full manhood - which normally would happen several years later, upon marriage, the birth of a male son and the ageing of their own *paterfamilias* - is anticipated, as 24-year-old Hussein found out, when, right on his first evening home upon release from prison, he was called on to mediate a dispute in his camp (Peteet 1994), normally a prerogative of older men.

Here, again, talk plays an important role. As Dubisch (1995) and Serematakis (1991) discovered in rural Greece, verbal performances are not only expressive, but transformative and creative as well: they may create gender, for instance. When we compare the case analysed here with Herzfeld's

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<sup>16</sup> This incident is reported by Peteet (1994).

(1985) and Gilson's (1996) works, which also proceed along those lines, we immediately detect a difference though. If in *intifada*-Palestine, a "poetics of manhood" is creating and gendering men as in Greece and Lebanon, it is a "poetics" nonetheless conducted by women - wives, sisters and, especially, mothers - normally but not only in the space of their homes, the description of which as "domestic", "female-only" or "apolitical" simply is not adequate.

The exigencies of modesty and the secrecy surrounding the operations in which they engaged, limited the *shebab*'s capacity to signify themselves; they could not afford to go around celebrating and publicizing their glorious deeds (Jean-Klein 2000). Their mothers, sisters and wives claimed the task for themselves and it is the flow of words stemming from them that cross-subjectively and relationally defined the gendered and moral personhood of male heroes. In the process, the women themselves re-invented their gender: not as submitting to the power of the *paterfamilias*, but as "mothers of the Uprising" or as the sisters and wives of heroes.

If a new hegemonic discourse of masculinity is under construction in this process - which erects *shebab* activities as iconic and representative of manliness under the *intifada* - we should, nonetheless, not lose sight that, in the same move, another image of masculinity - a newly subordinate one (Cornwall & Lindisfarne 1994) - is perhaps humiliatingly being dislocated to the margins: precisely that of the *paterfamilias*. Having had their capacity to act as breadwinners harshly limited by the occupation and being looked down on for what was considered to be their failure to protect their families or uphold the very existence of Palestine, the *paterfamilias* never found a proper role in the Uprising. Nevertheless, as every transformation always implies reproduction (Sahlins 1981), it may be questioned whether the *shebab* were in the process of affirming themselves as new *paterfamilias*. Some reports effectively indicate that, upon their release from prisons, *shebab* returned home and tried to control their sisters' movements and dress habits (Peteet 1994).

Joseph's ethnography of Lebanon similarly illustrates how the constituting of the self through "connectivity" or "relationality" genders brothers and sisters (1994) and contributes to maintaining patriarchy (1993, 1999). She indicates as well how a "relational" concept of personhood impacts on the organisation of the polity (1996).<sup>17</sup> People expect to guarantee the exercise of

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17 Dumont (1985) also proposes that different notions of personhood correspond to different social

their rights because of the relations and access they have to those in positions of power. I am not convinced that Palestinians are as unbounded as the Lebanese described by Joseph. They are certainly not the cross-gender, composite and divisible persons of the Melanesian type (Strathern 1988). I consider, though, that the idea of bounded but permeable persons that Busby (1997) uses to describe her informants from Marianad, in Southern India, is useful when it comes to depicting the image of the Palestinians I am trying to convey. It is not that Palestinians during the *intifada* were permeable to the exchange of substances, as in India, but to the flow of words coming from significant others. This is not so exotic after all – and definitely happens among us as well. As can be expected, the valuing of this image of persons as non-isolable has weighty political consequences – be it on the level of families or on the level of states, nascent or otherwise.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the public-private dichotomy – with its gender biases – has a specific history in the Western hemisphere, which should inspire caution in scholars hastily trying to apply it elsewhere. In the case of the Palestinian *intifada*, I have shown that the conflation of public-private with political- domestic or male-female simply does not hold. Moreover, the public-private contrast depends on a particular concept of personhood – the isolable individual, who in public submits to the contract to protect his own property and who can only find rest in the safety of the hearth. Neither the organisation of the polity based on the public-private distinction nor the concept of personhood that serves as basis for it are mandatory or natural. Our Palestinian case demonstrates quite well that both polities and personhoods may assume alternative features. And this is so also among ourselves.

The definition of boundaries between public and private is a fully political process. The domains thus established are later naturalized, so that they appear unquestionable. Similarly political is the valuing, by various polities,

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settings: in his work, the Western individual as a bearer of a unique identity is opposed to the conception prevalent in holist India, where the person is enmeshed in the hierarchical ordering of caste groups. Carsten (2004), as argued below, makes the point that the emphasis on the “individual” by social scientists working in Western settings may be the result of a biased methodology.

of different images of personhood – as isolable individuals, partible composites or bounded but permeable persons. I would only be proceeding with an Orientalizing exercise if I were to propose that Palestinians are relational, while we are individuals. Palestinians are individuals as much as we are relational – it is simply that, in different settings, certain dimensions and images of personhood tend to be valued, to the detriment of others. Carsten (2004) indicates that, since Mauss' (1938) path-breaking essay on the person, it has been anthropology's emphasis on jurisprudence, philosophy and theology on its accounts of the "West" that has consolidated a dichotomous depiction according to which "we" are autonomous individuals, while "they", enmeshed in webs of kinship, are "joined-up" and relational. An alternative focus – on kinship, for instance – would bring to the fore how much we ourselves are relational as well.

Images of personhood, cherished by different polities, become political tools. Thus, there may be political agendas underpinning someone's depiction as "mother or son of the Uprising" or as "individual man and woman in families". In the latter case, perhaps with the veiled objective of transferring to families responsibilities that the State itself – or what remains of it – no longer wants to assume.

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