**RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

**Geopolitical Ecologies of Agricultural Development: A Comparison of Olive Oil Production in Jordan and Palestine**

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

This research builds on my dissertation work (2013-2017) in Jordan and Palestine in order to conduct a more in-depth comparison of olive oil production in the two regions. Although there is a long history of olive oil production in Jordan and Palestine, the particular landscape that you see today is the result of changing environmental management, political configurations, and global economic systems. I will examine how agricultural development in the form of organic and fair trade olive oil production in Palestine and Jordan has been intimately yet differentially bound with (neo)colonialism from the British Mandate until today. Grounding state-making in the orchards will help us better understand how social and physical practices around crop cultivation, standards, and marketing change according to shifting regimes. This project asks, how has the changing economic and political system in Palestine and Jordan affected environmental management and agricultural production in the olive oil industry? Tracing the oil olive sector’s development will further our understanding of the environmental and social stakes in rural development strategies.

This research will take place over the span of the next three years. I plan to go to Jordan once a year in the summers for at least six weeks each time. During these visits, I will conduct historical archival research, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. I will conduct further interviews with fair trade and organic olive oil companies and key actors in the industry. I will also conduct oral history interviews and archival work in order to gain historical context of the importance and changes in olive oil production. I plan to begin applying for funding for this project from National Science Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies, Fulbright, Council of American Overseas Research Centers, and the Social Science Research Council.

The results of the this next phase of my research on the historical trajectories of organic olive oil and state-making in Palestine and Jordan will be published in interdisciplinary journals such as the International Journal of Middle East Studies in addition to prominent Geography journals. I will also present my findings at major national and international conferences such as the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers and the Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association. Data from the work in Palestine and Jordan will also be the basis for a book manuscript that compares the divergent development of olive oil cultivation between the two sides of the Jordan River. Although occupation and environment have played a role in these differences, I expect to find that other factors such as differences in labor organizing, levels of state control, and international involvement have also played key roles.

1. **FRAMEWORK**

Work on organic and fair trade commodity chains (Guthman 2002; Lyon 2010; Besky 2014, 2016) is part of a long history of using commodities as a lens for studying global economic and political relationships (e.g. Mintz 1986). Despite the large volume of work on organic commodity chains, work still needs to be done to elucidate how development shapes organic and other ‘alternative’ initiatives differently than in European and North American contexts (Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018). In order to do this, I incorporate postcolonial critiques of GPN (Hughes, McEwan, and Bek 2015) and critical development studies (Ferguson 1999; Li 2007; Escobar 2011) to further our understanding how of these certifications and standards are taken up, challenged, and sometimes abandoned in favor of other production methods in local spaces of the Global South.

Furthermore, this research project puts organic production within a longer history of agricultural capacity building and international development (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; McMichael 2006, 2007). By shifting from looking strictly at organic certified farms to examining the larger context of capacity building and international development and food systems, I identify how organic is just one strategy in a larger effort to diversify Jordanian and Palestinian agricultural production and to access global markets. One way to put commodities into context is take into account the hybridity of institutions in postcolonial contexts (Hughes, McEwan, and Bek 2015). While I do not want to define Jordan or Palestine primarily in terms of postcoloniality, it is important to note the ways in which policies supporting organic agriculture, for example, take place within governmental systems that are, in part, a product of colonial histories and international development aid. Therefore, in comparison with other countries such as the United States or the UK, rural development in Jordan and Palestine often works through these unique postcolonial institutions in which the government’s economic limitations are supplemented by aid and development networks.

While organic and fair trade agriculture are touted as alternative, they often so embedded in the development context and that it is increasingly hard to see anything alternative or oppositional about it. Within this development context, seemingly celebratory promotion of heritage and tradition in agro-food systems often masks appropriation and commodification and the related changes to production (Grasseni 2011). Therefore, research must examine how this process of promoting local tradition under the guise of development is often in the interest of the funding country in order to create imports (Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018). Focusing on the ways in which capacity building and agro-industry is “the system of socio-technological relations that produce one product or related products” (Ouma and Whitfield 2012, 302) shifts the focus away from topologies of standardized and industrial food production on one end of the spectrum and specialized and alternative on the other (Storper and Salais 1997; Marsden, Banks, and Bristow 2000). Instead, I investigate the ways in which organic and other ‘alternative’ development strategies are part of larger, historical local and international networks of agricultural development and change.

Olives are an important lens for discussing this production, because, unlike many other organic certified and fair trade foods in the Global South, the olive industry is not export oriented in Jordan. Instead, olive oil production in the Levant has a long history (Cohen 1993; Doumani 1995; Kapellakis, Tsagarakis, and Crowther 2008; Namrouqa 2017). Furthermore, unlike other organic crops such as coffee, tea, and bananas (Fridell 2007; Dolan 2010; Blowfield and Dolan 2014), most olive oil production in Jordan and Palestine is for local consumption instead of export. The local embeddedness of olive oil production and the relative recent history of export provide a unique opportunity for examining how producers, organizations, governments, and universities create new export industries. Work in Palestine has critically examined the challenges to export and maintaining international quality (Meneley 2008b, 2011, 2014), but it has focused more on how quality is constructed instead of how this sense of quality and the developments in the industry are linked to different development and capacity building networks.

In sum, my work, at the nexus of feminist political geography and political ecology, examines how (dis)engagement with transnational institutions and market frameworks affects rural space and agricultural development in Jordan and Palestine. This approach incorporates the cultural into a political economic analysis in order to look beyond narrow conceptualizations of capitalism[[1]](#footnote-1) (Hudson 2008; Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008) by focusing on the interplay between the material and cultural constructions of quality (Mansfield 2003b, 2003a) and agriculture decision-making within and beyond organic production. My approach also draws heavily on science and technology studies and feminist political geography in order to highlight the material biological realities in everyday processes of politics and development in the Middle East. An understanding of the role of rural spaces in global political and economic development is not only important to protecting and improving rural livelihoods, but also for environmentally sustainable and socially viable long-term planning.

1. **METHODS**

This research can be divided into four sub-studies: 1) women’s organizations in Jordan (who produce olive oil-based products), 2) the Olives Without Borders project, 3) current organic olive oil production in Palestine, and 4) historical context of Jordanian and Palestinian olive production. The sub-studies 1, 2, and 4 will be conducted simultaneously during summers over the next few years. Sub-study 3 will be conducted over a longer-term period during a semester-long sabbatical in the 2020-2021 school year. In the following sub-sections, I summarize the goal of each of these sub-studies and then outline in more detail the methods and data management to be used.

* 1. **Sub-study Summaries**

*Sub-study One: Women’s Organizations*

During the summer of 2016, I conducted interviews with several women’s organizations in order to further understand how they engage with development agencies in order to produce rural goods, including olive oil and good preserved in oil. I want to further investigate how these businesses have progressed since then. I also want to interview more organizations about their projects, products, and social networks. I will also interview people who are involved in development programs that support women’s small businesses such as the Women’s Fund, USAID LENS, and other funders.

*Sub-study Two: USAID – Olives Without Borders*

The Olives Without Borders project is a USAID sponsored project involving farmers, producers, and women’s organizations in the olive sector across Jordan and Palestine. While in Jordan in 2018, I discussed this project with several participants and hope to do formal interviews in December 2018/January 2019. Interviewees would be participants (farmers and agricultural business people) and project implementers (under USAID).

*Sub-Study Three: Palestinian Industry and Follow-up in Jordan*

Like I did in Jordan, I want to investigate the ways in which organic olive production affects local practices and commodity networks by discussing production practices with organic producers. I have previously interviewed people at Canaan Fair Trade, PARC, and Al’Ard olive oil companies. I will conduct follow-up interviews with these producers and find new organic olive oil producers. I will also interview non-organic producers for context. In order to stay relevant with the industry in Jordan, I will also conduct follow-up interviews and potentially new relevant interviews with farmers, NGO workers, academics, bureaucrats, and other people in the olive industry.

*Sub-Study Four: Historical Context*

In order to gather information regarding the history of olive oil production in Jordan and Palestine, I will gather national bulletins, agricultural statistics, UN and FAO documents, other policy documents, and secondary historical work. I will also visit the Kadoorie University, a center of agricultural research since the 1930s. In order to collect information not present in written archives, I will conduct oral histories with older people in rural areas and in the government in order to get more information about land change, practices, and different government programs.

**2.2 Methods**

*Establishing Sites and Contacts*

In Jordan, I will be based either in Amman or with family in Zarqa. Although my research is focused largely on rural spaces, much of my work with NGO workers, government officials, academics, and business people is in Amman. Furthermore, Amman serves as a convenient travel hub to other regions.

In Palestine, I will establish a new rural site. At first I will be based in Bethlehem because of the academic and NGO work being done there on agricultural heritage. From this base, I will make trips to areas of Nablus, Jenin, and Bethlehem, trying to find a rural site with organic olive production. In my site selection I will identify families who are willing to talk to me and/or have an available apartment to rent.

*Participant Observation*

Participant observation will be an element in sub-studies 1-3. For sub-study 1 and 2, I will attend meetings and events to which I am invited. I will also attend public festivals in which olive products are being sold. I will participate in preparing goods with women in the organizations. I will not use women’s names or any identifying information. In sub-study 3, I will be living and helping on an olive farm. In all of the participant observation in private spaces, I will give the person the letter of information about my study. I will make my position as a researcher clear to everyone with whom I interact.

This study will involve participant observation because of its usefulness in gaining an understanding of everyday life, building relationships, and understanding peoples actions in comparison to discussions in their interviews. I will volunteer my labor in people’s olive groves and within their homes (e.g. childcare, cooking, cleaning), and spend time at farmers’ organizations and olive mills. Through these shared activities, I will gain intimate knowledge of everyday practices and conversations, and will take detailed notes during solitary moments to be consolidated into a cohesive narrative at the end of each day (Bernard 2012). I will create qualitative codes to analyze these notes using Nvivo software (Crang and Cook 2007). This program allows me to organize my notes by theme in order to compare differences and inform future interviews. Thus, I will gain an understanding of different everyday contexts in which organic production occurs.

*Interviews*

All sub-studies will include interviews. I will begin by interviewing employees at the fair trade NGOs and companies in order to gather data regarding the histories of their projects and the philosophies behind their methods. Then I will interview farmers (5-10 in each community) who were suggested by the companies in order to gather data on people’s engagement with fair trade production. Using snowball sampling, I will contact additional people including at least 5 community members from each community. All participants will be given and read aloud an information letter about the study. Their consent will be recorded orally on the interview recording. Signing a consent form would seem suspicious and overly formal.

Interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for a certain level of flexibility. These two methods will ask farmers how and why they became involved, and what has happened since their involvement with fair trade. Interviews and oral histories will be conducted using an interpreter, recorded using a smart phone, downloaded to a secure folder, and transcribed using pseudonyms. Although the use of an interpreter poses some challenges for relationship building and communication during research, an interpreter can also serve as an invaluable source of cultural information (Turner 2010). The interpreter will have conducted the CITI Human Subjects Training.

These data will also be coded like the field notes outlined in the previous step. In addition to providing a gift that I can give to participants once the oral histories are typed and printed, oral histories will also produce a deep contextual understanding of fair trade production. Results from interviews will allow me to compare how different farmers and community members discuss fair trade production outside of official company forums, in which farmers may express more of the companies’ narratives.

*Focus Groups*

For sub-study 3, I will conduct focus groups. Focus groups are a valuable method for cross-checking information and observing how people discuss topics socially. I will conduct at least 3 focus groups total across Palestine and Jordan with olive farmers. The goal will be to discuss changing practices, extra virginity, and what makes a good oil more generally. Each focus group will contain around 10 participants. Like in the interviews, all participants would be given and read aloud the information letter. I will emphasize that participants should keep confidentiality about what is discussed in the focus group.

*Data Storage*

All recordings and transcripts will be saved on an encrypted and password protected file on a password-protected laptop. It will be backed up as an encrypted file. A separate key with demographic information (location, est. age, gender, and occupation, but not name or contact information) will be saved in an encrypted and password protected excel sheet.

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1. Work such as Mitchell (2002) and Gibson-Graham (2006) have made similar arguments, but not necessarily with a specific reference to cultural political economy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)