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**PERFORMING ARTS AS VEHICLE FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT
THE CASE OF THE PALESTINIAN CIRCUS SCHOOL**

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Abstract

De Israëliësch militaire bezetting van Palestina duurt reeds meer dan vijftig jaar. Studies over de psychologische gezondheid van de bevolking rapporteren dat de meeste Palestijnse jongeren een groot gevoel van verlies ervaren, naast andere gevoelens zoals vernedering, hopeloosheid, frustratie en woede. Die destructieve emoties uiten zich in berusting en passief gedrag, wanneer ze niet door riskante en gewelddadige actie in weerwil van het Israëliësch leger naar buiten worden gebracht. In die omstandigheden werd de “Palestinian Circus School” opgericht om een veilige uitweg te leveren aan jonge Palestijnen, waarin ze hun energie in een constructieve actie kunnen verwerken. De pedagogische dimensie van circus wordt ook gebruikt als empowerment-instrument om een set van maatschappelijke waarden en een gevoel van zelf - en collectief vertrouwen te creëren voor jongeren met een gebrek aan positieve ankerpunten.

Het theoretisch deel van deze masterproef start met het onderzoeken van de historische, economische en sociaal-culturele Palestijnse realiteiten, waarna dit werk zich verdiept in het gebruik van dramatische kunsten in “sociale actie-contexten”. Dit deel eindigt met een focus op de troeven van sociaal circus in empowerment benaderingen.

Het empirisch deel van deze paper biedt een case study van de “Palestinian Circus School”. Dit laatste deel steunt op een kwalitatieve methode van participerende observatie en semigestructureerde interviews. Op basis van de hypothese dat circuspraktijk als een empowerend werktuig voor de Palestijnse jeugd kan dienen, legt dit onderzoek zich toe op het verkennen van de concrete impact van “sociale circuspraktijken” op jonge Palestijnse deelnemers. De resultaten tonen aan dat het pedagogische aspect van circus een bijzonder geschikt instrument kan zijn om te beantwoorden aan de persoonlijke en collectieve noden van Palestijnse jongeren. Verder worden aan de hand van deze resultaten ook de beperkingen van zo’n sociaalartistieke interventie onder het licht gehouden.

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If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.

Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

Last spring, with a group of university classmates, we decided to undertake a political tour of Palestine. In the framework of our postmaster in Conflict and Development Studies, our awareness about the Palestinian question had been nurtured by our theoretical training, and we aspired to go and explore in the field what we had studied in our books.

During our expedition, we encountered several Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations and heard many alerting testimonies from Palestinian civilians; all denouncing the great psychosocial and economic damages resulting from the Israeli occupation upon Palestinian land. Our experience was incredibly rich, but also emotionally hard, as our group started to share the feelings of frustration and hopelessness of the local people. After only a few days, we could conceive how emotionally destructive the Israeli military occupation was on the Palestinian people, whereas this state of civilian oppression has lasted for almost fifty¹ years.

On the fifth day of our visit, we came across the Palestinian Circus School (hereinafter called PCS); a rather atypical experience given the heavy context we had encountered in the previous days. We were greeted by a staff employee who enlightened us about the organization goals: the main idea of their project is to use circus performance to counter the negative psychological impact of the military occupation on young Palestinians. Indeed, they believe circus can serve as an educational tool to transform feelings of fatalism, resignation, and hopelessness into positive action.

The oxygen injection the PCS aims to instil to its young participants had exactly the same effect on myself. I felt really cheerful and relieved to discover this project, since it was the first Palestinian initiative I encountered that was entirely devoted to foster a sense of happiness in Palestinian children's lives. In my view, while engaging in the circus ludic and joyful universe, those young people could finally get away - although only for a short while - from the military occupation upsetting every aspect of their lives.

¹ As we shall further see in more details, Palestine is occupied by Israel since 1967.

In fact, this project is much more meaningful than it could appear at first glance, as circus seems to serve as a genuine catharsis for Palestinian youth. According to the PCS credo, the educational use of circus performance allows escaping the vicious circle of a lost generation; youth born in such a deleterious climate sink into violence because they have never known anything else. The PCS has indeed the ambition to offer positive landmarks to young Palestinians, inducing a different and constructive energy in their society. Through performing arts, the PCS believes young Palestinians can acquire a sense of self-confidence and identity. This self-fulfillment feeling can drive away the victimization of this generation and help youth to become stakeholders of their own development and that of their society. This psychosocial dynamic refers to the concept of empowering: resisting the outside oppressing forces by finding the ones contained inside oneself.

Besides my clear interest for the cultural empowerment thematic, my enthusiasm also found its resonance in my personal and academic background. During my childhood, I followed various classes of dance, gymnastics and theatre, and I also participated in several circus summer camps. My early interest for performing arts continued throughout my teenage years and also determined my university training choices: I enrolled in a Sociocultural Work and Lifelong Education Master after having completed a Bachelor degree in Communication Studies. During the circus school visit, I realized I had probably just found the ideal subject for my postmaster thesis: besides fulfilling my personal interests, this thesis would conclude three years of studying and reflecting upon cultural, social, conflict, and development issues.

This sudden impulse - though matured for several days - led to the decision to return four months later to the PCS for conducting my thesis fieldwork. Relying on the presupposition that **circus practice can serve as an empowerment vehicle for Palestinian youth**, I had a four-week field investigation ahead of myself to answer this hypothesis.

In aiming to validate my statement for this thesis, I articulated my theoretical and practical research around the following key questions, that I organized under three groups:

The first set of questions will be explored in my literature review:

- What are the negative psychological effects of the Israeli military occupation on Palestinian people, and especially on the youth?
- How can performing arts serve as an empowerment vehicle for an oppressed population?
- What are the specific circus assets making this artistic discipline a successful empowerment tool?

The second set of questions will be treated throughout my case study:

- Does circus practice lead to a sense of well being among the young Palestinian participants?
- How does the empowering impact of circus activities concretely manifest itself in young Palestinians' lives?
- Is this empowering impact more discernable at the individual or at the collective level?

The last set of questions will be discussed in the light of my fieldwork results:

- Can circus empowering effects lead to broader change within the Palestinian society?
- Within the Palestinian specific context, what are the limits to the model of empowerment through performing arts?

Beyond answering those main questions, the following argumentation also investigates how artistic empowerment can result in relief actions without losing political commitment necessary to tackle society numerous challenges.

Before revealing the outcomes of my field work in the PCS, I will explore the Palestinian historical, economic and sociocultural context. The relationships between performing arts and empowerment will also be developed in the light of Freire and Boal's theoretical contributions.

1. Literature review

1. 1. Contextual overview

This chapter aims to briefly look at the historical context of Palestine² and to situate the current political, social and economic realities the Palestinians are daily living in.

1. 1. 1. Historical, political, and socioeconomic realities in Palestine

Short history of the conflict

Palestine has been at the center of a protracted conflict for almost a century. Many scholars consider the conflict started in 1917³ with the Balfour Declaration⁴. In this open letter, the British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour offered to Lord Rothschild, the leader of the British Jewish community, to create a National Home for the Jewish people in the British Mandate of Palestine (Balfour cited in Lynk, 2011). This proposition was genuinely ambiguous, since it assured the land both to the Palestinian indigenous inhabitants and to the European Jews, who considered the establishment of a Jewish State as the only way to escape European anti-Semitism (Adams, 1988).

In its resolution of 29 November 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted a partition plan to replace the British Mandate with an independent Arab state, an independent Jewish state, and the City of Jerusalem under international regime (U.N. RES 181 (II)). The Arab state rejected the terms of the partition, arguing it gave the Zionist movement 55 % of the best land, yet Jews constituted less than 1/3 of the total population and were mostly immigrants (UNSCOP cited in Çuhadar and Hanafi,

² In this thesis, the words « Palestine » and « West Bank » will be equivalently used to designate the « Occupied Palestinian Territories », which comprise the West Bank - including East Jerusalem - and the Gaza Strip. Since Palestine sovereignty has been recognized by the United Nations in November 2012 as « non-member observer state » (U.N. RES/67/19), I will mostly refer to the appellation of « Palestine » in my work. Having completed my fieldwork in the suburbs of Ramallah in the West Bank, I will concentrate this thesis on the specific context of this part of Palestine, whose political, economic and social realities differ from those experienced in the Gaza Strip under Israeli blockade.

³ Another date referring to the beginning of the conflict is 1898, with the Jewish immigration to Palestine and Zionist Jews' search for an independent state (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

⁴ In his letter addressed to Lord Rothschild, Lord Balfour states that the British government “views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”, with the understanding that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country” (Balfour cited in Adams, 1988, p. 72).

2010). This opposition precipitated the first war between Arabs and Israelis in December 1947. From the time the armistice was signed in 1949, over 750,000 Palestinians were chased from their lands⁵, representing perhaps 70 % of Palestine Arab population at that time. The building of the Israeli state also resulted in the destruction of many Arab localities, as 530 towns and villages were reportedly erased from the map. For Palestinians, this event was baptized “*Al Nakba*”, meaning disaster in Arabic. (Çuhadar et al., 2010; Qumsiyeh, 2011).

For the next four decades, the Arab-Israeli wars continued intermittently: the 1956 Suez War, the 1967 Six-day War, the 1973 October War (also known as the Yom Kippur War), and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. According to Çuhadar and Hanafi (2010), the conflict dynamic was radically modified by the 1967 Six-day War, which led to Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and other territories belonging to Egypt, Syria and Jordan⁶. These are, since then, referenced to as the ‘Occupied Palestinian Territories’ and still lay at the conflict epicenter today. Since the West Bank and Gaza Strip occupation by Israel and its direct control upon Palestinians living there, what had been until then a regional Arab-Israeli conflict turned into a protracted period of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. (Çuhadar et al., 2010). Against this situation of oppression, local Palestinian resistance towards Israeli military occupation began in the 1970s and increased in the 1980s, to eventually culminate in the first popular uprising - *intifada* in Arabic - in 1987 (Qumsiyeh, 2011).

The Oslo Peace Process initiated in 1993 was an important move towards a two-state solution, since it put Palestinians - represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) - in direct position to negotiate peace with Israel. As a result of Israel recognition by PLO, the Palestinian National Authority (hereinafter called PNA) was created under Oslo II in 1995 (Çuhadar et al., 2010). Oslo II established an Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, intended to organize the gradual transfer of power and responsibility from the Israeli Civil Administration

⁵ The thousands of displaced Palestinians still represent the largest refugee population in the world. While the majority fled to neighboring countries, many were internally displaced, and the few who remained behind in Israel became the Arab citizens of Israel (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

⁶ Egypt and Jordan engaged in peace treaties with Israel, respectively in 1979 and 1994 (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

(ICA) to the PNA (UNOCHA, 2009). This arrangement resulted in creating three distinct zones in the West Bank⁷: Areas A, B, and C⁸. Each of them was to be controlled in varying degrees by Palestinian and Israeli authorities during an intended transitional period, until a final status agreement would be completed within the following five years. (PASSIA, 2012).

However, the Oslo Peace Process was a complete failure, as both parties disrespected the promises they had signed in the accords. Israeli illegal settlements in the West Bank increased threefold during the negotiations, while a series of suicide bombings by Palestinian occurred inside Israel (Çuhadar et al., 2010; Schattner, 2002). The collapse of the peace agreement eventually gave rise to the explosion of the second uprising - the “*Al Aqsa intifada*” - in 2001⁹ (Schattner, 2002).

Since the outbreak of the second *intifada*, the conflict bogged down into a succession of unilateral actions by both parties - such as *Hamas* taking over Gaza in 2007¹⁰ after winning democratic Palestinian elections - which further undermined any chance for peace (Çuhadar et al., 2010). Israel responded to the second Palestinian uprising by toughening its control over Palestinians, resulting in severe deterioration of the living conditions in the Occupied Territories: establishment of hundreds of army checkpoints, curfews, invasions, detentions, use of violence against civilians - leading to thousands of death or disabilities -, land confiscations, and house demolitions, “all allegedly intended to protect Israelis from Palestinian violence” (Sarraj and Qouta, 2005; Giacaman et al., 2011, p.95). In addition, the “separation wall”¹¹ erection by Israeli forces between the West Bank and Israel caused the tear apart of many families

⁹The *Al Aqsa intifada* was triggered in September 2000 by Ariel Sharon’s visit to the *Al Aqsa* Mosque in East Jerusalem, among the holiest places in Islam. Israelis also know this as Temple Mount, considered holy for Judaism (Schattner, 2002; Çuhadar et al., 2010). The ending date of the Second *Intifada* is debated, as there was no final event that concluded it. According to some scholars, the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004 and the consecutive rise of *Hamas*, together with Israel “disengagement” from Gaza, marked the end of the second uprising. (Tenne, 2007). However, Baroud (2006) argues that “the Palestinian resistance will continue as long as the circumstances that contributed to its commencement remain in place” (cited in Tenne, 2007).

¹⁰ Israel had previously withdrawn from Gaza in 2005 (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

¹¹ This separation wall consists of a barrier made with concrete walls, fences, ditches, razor wire, groomed sand paths, an electronic monitoring system, patrol roads, and a buffer zone. The barrier total length (constructed and projected) is approximately 712 km, more than twice the length of the 1949 Armistice agreed upon border (the “Green Line”) (UNOCHA, 2013).

and communities, and restricted access to work, school and natural resources, as well as to health care and other basic services (UNOCHA, 2013).

West Bank management after Oslo

Since no permanent resolution to the conflict has been reached to this day, the status of the Interim Agreement is still in effect, leaving the PNA with a great lack of control over the Palestinian Occupied Territories: Area A¹² - including the major cities of the West Bank- is the single zone under full Palestinian control and constitutes only 17,2 % of the land; Area B - comprising most Palestinian rural area - is under full Palestinian civil control, and joint Israeli-Palestinian security control, and covers 23,8 % of the territory; Area C is under full Israeli control¹³ over security, planning and construction, and represents the remaining 59 % of the West Bank (PASSIA, 2012).

The situation is particularly problematical due to the administrative status of Area C, where the PNA has no right to exert control over borders, movements of people and goods, land¹⁴ and water (UNOCHA, 2011). Yet Area C represents almost 60% of the West Bank territory, and harbors most of its fertile land and its natural resources (particularly water and minerals). Limitations on movement and access to these vital resources severely destabilize Palestinians livelihood, restrict economic activity, and hinder the potential of Palestinian agriculture to compete in regional and international markets. (PASSIA, 2012).

A particularly alarming issue concerns water access in the West Bank. With Oslo II, water was an interim issue that came under control of both Palestinian and Israeli authorities. However, Israel abused the Oslo juridical framework in order to retain control of all underground and surface water resources, preventing the construction of new wells and cisterns for Palestinian use, and the upgrading of existing wells and other water infrastructure (UNOCHA, 2012). As illustrated in a World Bank report, “the Israeli Water Authority has used its role as *de facto* regulator to prevent

¹² See appendix 1 for a map of the West Bank division in Areas A,B and C.

¹³ The PNA exerts control over the delivery of some services in Area C, such as health and education, except those requiring infrastructure and construction (PASSIA, 2012).

¹⁴ 70% of area C (about 44% of the West Bank) is labeled as settlement areas, firing zones, or nature reserve and is thus off limits to Palestinians. In the remaining 30%, construction is strongly limited, with less than 1% authorized for Palestinian development. Furthermore, an average of 500-600 Palestinian structures are destroyed annually in area C by Israeli forces (PASSIA, 2012).

Palestinian drilling in the western Aquifer, despite growing demand from Palestinian consumers and whilst increasing its own off take from the aquifer above agreed levels” (2009, p. vii). This unfair control translates into serious water scarcity for Palestinians in the West Bank: approximately one million of them have access to an average of 70 liters of water per capita per day or less, which is 30 liter under what the World Health Organization recommends. This situation is in sharp contrast with Israelis’ water consumption (both in Israel and in the West Bank settlements), which stands at more than four times the Palestinian consumption¹⁵ (300 p/c/d) (UNOCHA, 2012).

Economic situation

The influence of the conflict on the economic situation is also strongly asymmetrical. According Çuhadar and Hanafi (2010), Israel managed to preserve a decent economy during the second *intifada*, whereas the Palestinian side suffered considerably more. The closures following the two *intifadas* resulted indeed in the rise of transaction costs for Palestine, while it drastically reduced the Palestinian labor movement to Israel (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

The Palestinian economy was further undermined by two major financial crises. The first one occurred after *Hamas*’s electoral victory in 2006 and his consecutive Gaza takeover in 2007: this resulted in Israel withholding tax and custom revenues¹⁶ owed to Palestine, and western donors stopping financing the PNA (Le More, 2006; Tocci, 2007).¹⁷ This move also triggered a violent intern political crisis: *Hamas*’s seize of power in Gaza led Mahmoud Abbas, the head of *Fatah*, to dissolve the government and assign an emergency leadership in the West Bank that excluded *Hamas* (Morro, 2007).

¹⁵ In addition, some 313,000 Palestinians in the West Bank lack connection to a water network, and only 31% are connected to a sewage system, due to the Israeli authorities refusal to grant the necessary permits for the construction and improvement of water treatment infrastructure (UNOCHA, 2012). For more information about those facts, see the various reports by UNOCHA on <http://www.ochaopt.org/>.

¹⁶ This equals a shortfall of approximately \$50 million per month, amounting to one-third of the PNA’s monthly revenues (Tocci, 2007).

¹⁷ The U.S stated that foreign aid would not resume until *Hamas* - considered by the U.S and the E.U as terrorist organization - disavowed violence, recognized Israel, and accepted previous peace agreements. From the moment Abbas rejected *Hamas* in 2007 and founded the new *Fatah*-led government, the Bush administration restarted its assistance in order to back *Fatah* efforts to counter *Hamas* and its attempt to build a sustainable government (Morro, 2007).

A new crisis has afflicted Palestine since 2012, as the FMI recorded a drop in economic growth from 11% in 2010 to 6% in 2012 (Zecchini, 2013). This economic plunge can once again be partly attributed to a political move: Abbas “unilaterally” asked and obtained the status of non-member observer state in the UN in November 2012, hence Israel reaction of withholding custom and tax payments due to the PNA, like it previously did in 2006 (Zecchini, 2013). A second reason for this economic breakdown relies in the decline of foreign donor commitments. While European countries seem to honor their financial promises¹⁸, a number of Arabic countries stopped their funding (European Commission, 2013). This economic decline caused a rise in unemployment, which reached 18% in the West Bank (28% among young people), and 32% in Gaza (47% among young people). According to Zecchini (2013), “those pessimistic rates are all the more problematical for the political stability of the PNA, since the prevalent social revolt is coupled with popular frustrations - especially among the youth - due to the lack of political perspectives” (my own translation).

1. 1. 2. Palestinian youth coping with trauma

As reported by Dr Khaleel (2003), “Illegal Occupation has been the experience of the Palestinian people for over 55 years”. According to the psychologist, the deterioration of economic and social conditions under the occupation has been coupled with an escalation in psychological problems: “The traumatic related stressors that are inflicted on the Palestinian people have developed into a diverse spectrum of inter-related psychological symptoms”.

In the past two decennia, many studies have underlined the deleterious emotional impact of the military occupation on Palestinians and their children (Altawil, Nel, Asker, Samara and Harrold, 2008; Barber, 2007¹⁹). Besides the obvious harmful influence of direct exposure to violence, studies demonstrate that the ongoing political

¹⁸ The European Union announced in October 2013 the payment of an amount of 52 million euros to Palestine in order to support its social, economic and institutional development (European Commission, 2013).

¹⁹ See also Garbarino and Kostelny (1996), Giacaman et al., (2011) and Qouta, Punamaki and Sarraj, (2008).

conflict also impacts youth through reducing parental capacity to provide emotional support to their children (Loughry et al., 2006).

During the first *intifada*, awareness rose about the fact that Palestinians were suffering from Israeli military occupation, life dwelled in refugee camps, and continuous exposure to physical and mental violence (Altawil et al., 2008; Qouta et al., 2008). This period marked a watershed moment as new psychosocial health approaches began to demonstrate the noxious impact of severe warlike conditions on mental health, especially among children and youth (Giacaman et al., 2011).

However, a number of Palestinian mental health specialists regret that the main focus of that period was on “trauma”. This translated the export of western cultural approaches favoring medicalization and use of psychological therapies to cope with distress (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008; Giacaman et al., 2011). These experts wonder whether those methods based on a western mode of counseling are compatible with the population needs. In their opinion, the western emphasis on individualized relief and intervention curtails the Palestinian collective type of support and care (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008). Moreover, this medical approach denatures the social suffering of war into individual illness and fails therefore to address the root cause of the problem (Summerfield in Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008). As Nguyen-Gillham and his colleague argue (2008 and 2011), pathological effects of war are examined inside a person, as if the latter suffered from an illness rather than from collective political injustice.

Besides, it should be noted that those mental and psychosocial health initiatives took some time to materialize. Many reasons accounted for this delay. First of all, mental health in Palestinian society seems to be more disregarded than physical disability, as those injured through the uprising - called “martyrs” - are given a great social status (Costin, 2006; Giacaman et al., 2011). A second societal obstacle relies in the existence of patriarchal norms legitimizing violence inside Palestinian society (Jacoby, 1996). As stressed by Giacaman and her colleagues (2011), “Not only was violence against women, children, and young people accepted, it was used by men as an instrument of social control and maintenance of the status quo, that is, a patriarchal society in which seniority of age determines power relations” (p. 92). Thirdly, given the national liberation struggle was seen as a priority for action, addressing social

problems at that time was perceived as risking to digress from this primary necessity (Giacaman et al., 2011).

The collapse of the peace process in 2000 followed by the 2002 Israeli re-invasion of Palestinian land made violence an inevitable and daily facet of Palestinian society, in addition to increasing direct exposure and participation of Palestinian children in political violence (Loughry et al., 2006, Sarraj and Qouta, 2005).

According to a study conducted in the course of the second *intifada* by the Public Health Institute of Birzeit University, the dehumanization of life under military occupation transpires as a prevailing theme in Palestinian youth testimonies. The young participants report indeed persistent exposure to violence, 'imprisonment' by the separation wall and the ailing economic situation (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008).

As the state of siege persists with the years, the feelings of dehumanization, insecurity, humiliation and helplessness tend to deepen. Those are often coupled with a certain erosion of trust, as stories about collaborators highlight an underlying climate of suspicion and anxiety (Giacaman et al., 2011; Sarraj and Qouta, 2005). Against this deleterious atmosphere, acts of resistance such as stone throwing by youth at the Israeli army began to intensify (Barber, 1997). Extreme and perpetual pressures, and the determination to respond to violation, combined with the adverse feelings named previously, can partly enlighten the increased tendency of young people - primarily men - to engage in such risky behavior (Garbarino and Kostelny, 1996).

Other explanations for these dangerous practices appear to be further deep-rooted. Those young people, who were either born or were children during the first and second *intifada*, is a generation that has been violated and dispossessed from its childhood on a regular basis (Giacaman et al., 2011). Due to growing up in warlike conditions, those children have often bypassed stages of a normal cognitive development (Altawil et al. 2008; Sarraj and Qouta, 2005). Furthermore, it seems that "their lifelong experiences have shaped their present worldviews, opinions and behavior to such an extent that even life threatening behavior is regarded by some of them as dignified, a symbol of their political commitment" (Giacaman et al., 2011, p. 96).

A second study led by Birzeit University in 2000 aimed to highlight the influence of warlike conditions on the lives of undergraduate students (Giacaman et al., 2011). The results showed moderate and strong distress related to insufficient access to university, uprooting from family and community, shortage of cash for survival, and most of all, exposure to Israeli army violence²⁰. Over half the students noticed violent behavioral changes, such as using offensive language towards their peers, fighting and shouting, and throwing and breaking things (Giacaman et al., 2011). In general, findings indicated that students living with their families endured significantly less psychological distress than those living away from their close relatives. Those results are consistent with other research works highlighting the paramount value of supportive relationships with friends, peers and families for managing distress (Qouta et al., 2008; Barber, 1997).

Other researches exploring the relationship between exposure to violence and psychosocial responses revealed that subjective health complaints were often associated with exposure to humiliation; a war tactic that Israeli forces daily use against Palestinian civilians (Giacaman et al., 2007; “Humiliation at the checkpoints”, 2003). Another highlighted trend is the fact that Palestinians girls and boys cope with distress in different ways (Barber, 1997, Giacaman et al., 2004). Given Palestinian cultural norms, boys are more permitted to spend time outside of their homes. This allows them to gather with their peers, and to participate in the national political struggle by joining demonstrations or throwing stones at Israeli army jeeps. While such activities may serve as a form of stress relief, they also put the boys in severe danger of military strike back, or at least of arrest and imprisonment (Giacaman et al., 2004). Stone throwing at Israeli forces can indeed result in jail sentences - up to 20 years²¹ -, even for minors (B’Tselem, 2011). In contrast, girls tend to be less active politically as they spend much more time at home due to family restrictions. Higher levels of subjective health complaints, such as headaches and depression, are reported

²⁰ Some particularly striking results were revealed: in the course of one month (October 2000), 57% of the participants reported that they knew at least one person who had been wounded by the Israeli army, and 18% affirmed that they were injured themselves (Giacaman et al., 2011).

²¹ As explained by the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, « Penal law does not specify stone throwing as a separate offense; stone throwing is included in the offenses that endanger life and property. When it results in injury, it is considered as any other offense that endangers life, with the penalty ranging from 3 to 20 years imprisonment, depending on the circumstances and the severity of the injury”. (B’Tselem, 2011). In 2010, the Israeli Newspaper Haaretz reported that 99.74 % of the cases of minor arrests resulted in convictions (Levinson, 2011).

among girls, while boys score higher in the adoption of aggressive behavior and the use of abusive language (Barber, 1997; Giacaman, et al., 2004).

Against this unstable and hostile environment, many scholars identified an obvious determination among the youth to maintain a sense of normality in their lives in order to cope with their emotional distress (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008; Barber, 1997; Loughry et al., 2006). For example, home, school, and religion, through the range of routines and rituals they imply, provide adolescents with a sense of structure and stability. The very act of attending school is even seen by some as a sign of defiance against Israeli occupation, as it fosters a sense of shared beliefs and communal belonging among students (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008). In this attempt of normalization resonates the concept of resilience, what Nguyen-Gillham and his colleague describe as “a dynamic process embedded in agency and everyday practices” (2008, p. 296). Indeed, steadfastness is here rooted in the ability to make life as normal as possible: “common activities such as going out for coffee or to eat in restaurants, going to a mall, attending church (...) promote a sense of wellness and independence. Familiar routines that minimize disruptions and chaos reclaim the ordinariness of daily life and bolster a sense of autonomy” (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008, p.296). In addition to restoring a sense of “normalcy”, such activities are also seen to prevent youth from being exposed to risky activities and environments; offer children opportunities for venting and ‘working through’ their problems; and provide a favorable setting for the development of affection and trust among adults and children (Loughry et al., 2006).

However, some studies underline a great discrepancy between the community-base approach that proved to suit Palestinian context, and the services actually provided by social institutions. A first problem comes from international donors imposing a western framework of psychosocial programming that, as explained above, does not seem appropriate to Palestinian psychological needs. A second obstacle relates to the dynamic of “de-development” which took place in Palestine since the Oslo Accords²², and has resulted in a fragrant lack of funding for the public sector. On the ground, this translates into massive salary cuts and recurrent strikes by ministry employees.

²² This issue will be further developed in the next subchapter.

Consequently, the capacity of many institutions to provide suitable care to the population is severely undermined²³ (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008). According to the specialists, the key for improving youth mental health lies in the essential nurturing qualities of the family system and community networks, as well as in the explicit recognition of young people's rights (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008).

1. 1. 3. A civil society in decline

A complex concept to define

According to Merkel and Lauth, "There is no commonly agreed- upon definition, beyond the basic idea of civil society being an arena of voluntary, uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values" (cited in Spurk, 2010, p.3). Civil society remains effectively a complex and contentious concept to define, which has been swaying theoretical debates and empirical research over the years.

Spurk attributes the philosophical roots of the term to John Locke's broadly shared conception of civil society. Locke (1632-1704) was the first modern philosopher to describe civil society as an entity separate from the state, its duty being "to protect the individual - its rights and property - against the state and its arbitrary interventions". (Merkel/Lauth and Schade cited in Spurk, 2010, p. 4).

Over the time, civil society has grown as an institution supposedly easing citizenry participation, beyond the simple act of voting in general elections. Therefore, civil society is increasingly considered as a fundamental pillar of democracy (Spurk, 2010).

In this vein, civil society is nowadays grasped as a sphere distinct from the state, the family and the market, where citizens and voluntary organizations - carrying diverse societal values - interact together, and seek to influence society and its political dynamics (Spurk, 2010).

However, the frontiers between these theoretical spheres are not so clear in the reality and they sometimes overlap (World Bank, 2006). Civil society defines indeed itself by its independence from the state, but it interacts closely with the state and it is shaped by the state. On the one hand, the state supplies civil society with legal

²³ The situation in Palestinian schools is particularly deplorable, as teachers face the challenges of low salaries, overcrowded classrooms, and a flawed supervisory system (Khaldi and Wahbeh, 2000)

frameworks, regulations procedures and, in some cases, financial resources. On the other hand, civil society acts as a link between the state and the citizens, providing institutions, information, ideas and specific values (World Bank, 2006).

According to the World Bank definition, civil society organizations are the “wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations” (World Bank, 2006, p.3). The term encompasses thus a broader category than the development-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and represents an extensive range of associations including community groups, women association, labor unions, indigenous groups, youth groups, registered charitable organizations, foundations, faith-based organizations, independent media, professional associations, think tanks, independent educational organizations and social movements (World Bank, 2006).

In contrast to actor-oriented models that focus on the performance and features of civil society actors, functional approaches maintain that various models or concepts of civil society exist, and are all of equal importance. One eminent functional model was conceptualized by Merkel and Lauth in 1998 and enables a deeper grasp in civil society detailed role in political, social, and developmental practices. Their model attributes five different functions to civil society: (i) protection, (ii) intermediation between citizen and state, (iii) participatory socialization, (iv) community building/integration, and (v) communication/ public opinion formation. Monitoring and service delivery have later been added to Merkel and Lauth’s model (Merkel et al. cited in World Bank, 2006).

Civil society in Palestine

In Spurk’s opinion, “Any analysis of civil society’s role must consider that armed conflict dramatically changes the lives of all people at all levels, from individual changes in attitudes and behaviour, (trust and confidence) over economic and social change, to decisive shifts of power relations among communities, regions, and society” (2000, p.18). In the face of war, the enabling environment for civil society in matters of security and law enforcement is accordingly disturbed: “It is self-evident

that ‘civil society’ (...) tends to shrink in a war situation, as the space for popular, voluntary and independent organizing diminishes” (Orjuela cited in Spurk, 2000, p.18).

Considering the evolution of Palestinian civil organizations from the 1970’s and 1980’s until today, Brouwer, Çuhadar, and Hanafi highlight several factors that have undermined the existence of an autonomous civil society in Palestine.

According to their work, the history of the Palestinian civil society is extremely rich, at least from the late 1970s and the early 1980s (Brouwer, 2010; Çuhadar and Hanafi, 2010). Following some events in the 1970s - especially the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel in 1978 and the acknowledgment of PLO as the only spokesman of Palestinians -, awareness rose about a greater need for Palestinian self-reliance, as well as for a new resistance strategy. A revival of activism occurred against this background and led to the development of mass organizations involved in the national movement, consequently enlarging the existing network of social organizations. (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

This period was followed by the outbreak of the first *intifada* in 1987, which triggered the creation of developmental NGOs and Islamic organizations. Those new structures provided the Palestinian population with services such as health, education and agriculture and other functions independent of the Israeli military government, combined to grassroots political activity (Çuhadar et al., 2010; Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008). All the freshly created Palestinian NGOs were indeed affiliated with - when not established by - one of the main PLO factions: *Fatah*, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Palestinian Communist Party, or with *Hamas* (Brouwer, 2000). Those organizations consisted of informal structures, based on grassroots volunteer work, mobilizing thousands of Palestinians “in a direct political experience that had a civic and democratic character” (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

Until the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, most of the funds benefiting the Palestinian civil society organizations originated from the Arab world. However, from the 1990’s on, those Arab funds ran out and were replaced by western governments’ contributions (Challand, 2006). As pointed out by Challand (2006), this shift of

contributors concurs with an obvious increase in the creation of peace NGOs in Palestinian civil society after the Oslo Agreements in 1993.

However, the authors suggest that the burgeoning of the civil society organizations in the 1980s and 1990s - which intensified during the Oslo peace process - did not automatically lead to more autonomy for the Palestinian civil society. Indeed, the Oslo Agreements granted the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 1995, and gave room for the commencement of state building through the development of NGOs and civic institutions. However, this paradoxically led to a phase of demobilization of civil-society. (Brouwer, 2000; Challand, 2006; Çuhadar et al., 2010).

According to Brouwer (2000) and Challand (2006), a first cause of this set back should be considered as natural. The newly PNA – though it is still not yet a fully formed state structure - took over the roles previously assumed by civil society organizations and networks. In addition, the PNA advanced that aid originally concentrated towards these organisms should consequently be redirected to the PNA, and especially insisted that funds should stop going to organizations that opposed the Oslo Agreements (Brouwer, 2000; Challand, 2006). Resulting from this new diplomatic framework, the relation between Palestinian NGOs, international organizations and donors switched from solidarity practices of help to politically driven support, aimed at reinforcing the peace process with Israel (Challand, 2006).

The other reasons for the Palestinian society's decay are less endogenous, and can be summarized in three tendencies. The first threatening factors arise from the PNA authoritarian practices. The second category of obstacles is the result of the international involvement on the Palestinian ground. Finally, the third impeaching elements are related to the restrictions imposed by the ongoing Israeli occupation. (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

Brouwer (2000), Challand (2006), as well as Çuhadar and Hanafi (2010) unanimously state that Palestinian civil society suffers from its strong dependence on foreign donors and international organizations. According to those authors, this phenomenon has been accentuated since the 1980s and 1990s, when the Arab contributions dried up and got mostly replaced by western assistance.

The growing involvement of the western donor community in Palestinian affairs in the wake of the 1990s is twofold. On the positive side, the increase of western funding led to the professionalization of civil society organizations, as well as to the creation of more complex NGOs, with improved efficiency and operability (Çuhadar et al., 2010; Challand 2006).

However, this professionalization also caused the dismantling of NGOs' grassroots bases. As explained by Çuhadar and Hanafi, "Unlike the trend in the 70s and 80s, which made grassroots activism an important civil society action, in the 90s such activities decreased in number and took a backseat to elite-based and middle class oriented dialogues" (2010, p.231). Moreover, western donors practices have distorted the NGOS' field, as they seem to favour the civic groups that follow their vision - mainly secular peace building NGOs -, and disqualify other civil society actors. Those choices resulted in weakening the effectiveness of NGOs advocacy, since local structures capacity to make decisions about their own priorities noticeably shrank. (Çuhadar et al., 2010). In Brouwer's opinion, "there is a small group of dominant organizations that is financed over and over again because they provide products in the format that donors want to see. Instead, donors should give preference to existing organizations that are effectively representative of their society and if possible have grassroots membership" (2000, p.35).

A second obstacle to Palestinian civil society autonomy is linked with the PNA's authoritarian style of ruling. According to Brouwer, Palestine under the rule of Arafat was "in certain respects not only more authoritarian than the Palestinian society during the *intifada*, but even more authoritarian than the PLO before 1994" (2000, p.13). Since the PNA was established without creating an independent state, this structural ambiguity enabled Arafat to continue his authoritarian style of ruling: he co-opted the *intifada* leaders and replaced a decentralized power structure by one that gathered all powers in his hands, while pretexting the fight for national unity and independence (Brouwer, 2000).

In addition, Brouwer (2000) argues that Israel and a number of western governments - in first instance the US - not only allowed, but even exhorted Arafat to sanction

internal opposition to the peace process. Nowadays, the PNA under Abbas²⁴ is able to pursue its authoritarian style of governing, as the global political and economic logic of interests have remained the same. In Baumgarten's opinion (2010), Palestine consists today of a "layered system of authoritarian rule": "neo-patrimonialism (*Fatah* under Abbas), technocratic state-building (the prime minister Salam Fayyad), the rule of political Islam (*Hammas*), rents from the West and the East, and a more or less direct Israeli system of occupation"(p.1). On top of that, all those levels are directly overlooked by US security through the mediation of Palestinian security agencies (Baumgarten, 2010).

Furthermore, Çuhadar and Hanafi's contributions (2010) concur with Challand's views (2006) in affirming that foreign donors' visions of civil society contributed to a process of "dedemocratization". Funds and aid programs are indeed supposedly designed to promote democracy through implementing policies of good governance, development of multiparty elections and protection of civil and human rights. Nevertheless, donor community practices in the field seem to often clash with their declared objectives (Challand, 2006; Çuhadar et al., 2010).

Again, this apparent paradox becomes easily puzzled out when one grasps that democratization is in fact not a top priority for foreign actors. The global main concerns are rather the security of Israel, Palestinian support for the peace process, and the economic liberalization of Palestine (Brouwer, 2000, Challand, 2006). Brouwer (2000) illustrates this incompatibility between the promotion of civil society and the safeguard of political stability and economic interests (p. 30):

"USAID's declared main goal in Palestine is to strengthen the commitment to the peace process through a more responsible and accountable government, (...) which should be achieved by increasing citizen participation, expanding institutions of civil society, and increasing the flow and diversity of information to citizens. At the same time, the US - as well as Israel and to a lesser extent the EU - encourage the Palestinian leadership to control internal opposition that disagrees with the Oslo agreements and attacks Israeli objectives. The fact that, in so doing, the Palestinian leadership has engaged in human-rights violations - especially by security forces that are trained by the CIA - has not triggered major reaction from the US or the EU"

²⁴ Mahmoud Abbas took office in 2005, following Arafat's death.

Besides the PNA's continuous authoritarian practices, another threat to the autonomy of Palestinian civil society is the infighting among *Hamas* and *Fatah*. A good illustration of those two mingled obstacles is the conflict between the Palestinian NGOs and the PNA over drafting the NGO law. The PNA under Arafat produced a draft law modelled on the highly restrictive Egyptian NGO law, in the hope of getting a heavier grip over NGOs. Due to strong resistance from the Palestinian civil network combined with pressure from international agencies, the PNA felt obliged to withdraw its NGO draft. A NGO law finally passed in 2000, and was considered for many years as the most liberal and least restrictive law in the Middle East. The impact of Israeli occupation added to the weakening of the Palestinian institutions after the establishment of the PNA led to imbalanced and arbitrary applications of the Palestinian NGO law - and of the rule of law generally - (ICNL, 2013). Since the split between *Fatah* and *Hamas* in 2006, arbitrary sanctions have indeed been reportedly undertaken in the West Bank against *Hamas*-affiliated NGOs, and in the Gaza Strip against *Fatah*-affiliated NGOs²⁵ (ICNL, 2013).

The last category of factors hindering an autonomous Palestinian civil society concerns the limitations imposed by the ongoing Israeli occupation. Those include the Israeli financial embargo and control over citizens' daily life, which prevent free participation and mobility in civil society. Israeli restrictions also take the form of closures and human right violations, especially at checkpoints and prisons. (Çuhadar et al., 2010). As underlined by Çuhadar and Hanafi, "this context makes it harder for civil society actors to perform certain functions like protection, monitoring, service delivery, and advocacy, while their relevance increase" (2010, p.232). The authors also deplore that the restrictions resulting from the occupation discourage small or informal civil society initiatives to assume such tasks. Those practices rather favour the development of large international NGOs, and consequently, a greater decline of grassroots membership in civil society is observed (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the protracted armed conflict has harmful effects on individuals. As Çuhadar and Hanafi relate from a Jewish source, "children on both sides are reported to be psychologically affected by violence, to the extent that some 33 % of Israeli youths and 70 % of Palestinian youths experience symptoms of posttraumatic

²⁵ Although *Hamas* and *Fatah* have agreed upon a reconciliation agreement in June 2011, it is still unclear what impact this agreement will have on the NGO sector. (ICNL, 2013).

stress disorder, plus anxiety, depression, and sadistic and aggressive tendencies” (Jewish News cited in Çuhadar et al., 2010, p.225).

Those individual changes in attitudes and behaviours can jeopardize any normal political socialization emphasising civic values, such as respect for the other and peaceful coexistence. In this vein, polls indicate that the collapse of the Oslo Process - which precipitated the second *intifada* - radicalized positions in both camps, as more Palestinians and Israelis declared having lost faith in peace negotiations in the short term and started to back military solutions. (Çuhadar et al., 2010).

According to Kjellman and Harpviken (2010), a warlike situation is characterized by lawlessness, lack of public services and ineffective security. This hostile background, aggravated by economic decline, is likely to affect civilians with feelings of hopelessness, distrust and fear. Such mindsets incline individuals to retire into themselves, and focus on providing basic needs for their own and their family. Those human introversion reflexes could further destabilize the potential of civic life by exacerbating existing cleavages in society (Kjellman et al., 2010).

More worrisome, the civil society networks likely to emerge from such context often tend to be more uncivil than civil. Besides the emergence of “war economies”, the collapse of a central authority could indeed provide opportunities for criminal organizations of militia groups to arise. Unfortunately, this situation is often nurtured by a vicious circle, as influential actors have a clear interest in preserving a certain climate of insecurity and undermine the operation capacity of society actors. (Kjellman et al., 2010).

All those detrimental developments affecting Palestinian civil society struck me during my two stays in the West Bank, and obviously transpired from the interviews I conducted in the field. Nevertheless, an interesting contradiction stressed by Kjellman and Harpviken also echoed in my experience on the occupied ground: “On one level, while civil society is torn apart by conflict, it also provides citizens with a source of support. Traditional structures become more important as people seek refuge in the familiar when facing upheaval. Civil society is, in this respect, resilient, and new structures will emerge and some existing civil society forms will be reinforced” (2010, p.40). The Palestinian Circus School is, in my opinion, a vital example of Palestinian

civil society capacity of resilience. The focus on this initiative will be introduced by an investigation on how arts more broadly can serve as empowerment means for undermined communities.

1. 2. Performing arts and empowerment

Since the 1970s, the use of the arts is increasingly recognized as meaningful intervention method to engage in personal and collective empowerment. In order to understand how specific artistic approaches such as “theater for development” or “Social Circus” can have an empowerment effect, the concept of empowerment itself first needs to be discussed.

1. 2. 1. A word about empowerment

For Bacqué and Biewener (2013), it is not possible to write a linear history of the concept of empowerment, as it is made of very diverse - and sometimes contradictory - influences. According to them, empowerment - "the power to act" -, first emerged within North American feminist movements in the 1970s²⁶, and was simultaneously adopted by feminists advocating new development practices in the South. Since the 1990s, this concept has been developed in many social and intellectual spheres and various political contexts. Consequently, the term is employed today in radical perspective of emancipation, just as well as serves social-liberal and neoliberal visions (Bacqué and Biewener, 2013). This widening of the concept can be problematical, as “empowerment” has often been overused by movements going against its genuine goal of individual emancipation, therefore leading to its devaluation (Beckett, 2006).

An influential theory on power stems from Foucault (1926-1984). His approach to power conveys a relational and complex view to power, which goes beyond a dichotomous vision of domination:

²⁶ In the United States, the movement of battered women which emerged in the early 1970s seems to have been among the first to use the term “empowerment”. It then referred to a process described as egalitarian, participatory and local, by which women developed a "social conscience" or "political awareness". This emancipation process allowed them to access the power to act at both personal and collective levels, while engaging themselves into a perspective of social change (Bacqué et al., 2013).

“One should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with ‘dominators’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other, but rather a multiple production of relations of domination which are partially susceptible of integration into overall strategies (...) There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised” (Foucault, 1980, p. 142).

Some feminist movements relied on this post-structuralist approach in their attempt to exceed victimizing representations that were often associated with their cause. Therefore, addressing violence against women required interventions that were both individual and collective, and materialized through peer support rather than professional help, which was often linked to negative judgments (Bacqué et al., 2013). Thus, the process of empowerment reconsiders the relationship between the “non-expert/helped” and the “professional/helper”. In the same vein, Beckett (2006) maintains that true empowerment can only take place if one recognizes that all people possess potential. “We must, therefore, begin by rejecting the notion of trusteeship whereby one agency has the legitimacy to act on behalf of another, thus relegating the latter to the passive role of client or beneficiary” (Beckett, 2006, p. 21). Encouraging approaches between peers can thus open new paths and provide solutions that will allow them to master their own lives and give it their own meaning (Bacqué et al., 2013). As Eade puts it, “Women and men become empowered by their own efforts, not by what others do for them” (in Beckett, 2006, p.21).

This dynamic, which relies on the postulate that social change can only be initiated through a “bottom-up” process, also characterizes Freire’s educational theories. His *Pedagogy of the oppressed* is “a pedagogy which must be forged *with, not for*, the oppressed (...) This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation” (Freire, 1968, p. 48). In Freire’s view, popular mobilization implies thus popular education (Beckett, 2006).

In those conditions, it is essential to stimulate people's sense of citizenship and their role of political player, through raising awareness of their rights and responsibilities (Beckett, 2006). Sharpening their civic consciousness can even allow them to participate at higher levels of decision-making, and in doing so, to challenge wider structures of society²⁷.

Therefore, if people are empowered to achieve changes independently in their own lives and those in their community, without depending on external actors, the results are likely to be far more sustainable (Beckett, 2006). Nonetheless, Beckett argues that any project, no matter how successful or self-reliant it may be, will never attain its full potential if it overlooks the role it has to play in the political sphere. For initiating real long-term social changes, local initiatives need to work together in order to weight more pressure against influential social structures, "and to operate 'within' a global context, and not apart from it" (Beckett, 2006, p. 22). This is consistent with Mohan's point of view (2006), who believes the state should not be considered loose from "the local". On the contrary, " 'local' action should simultaneously address the 'non-local' ", given the state relative ability to provide protection and socially-beneficial change (Mohan, 2006, p.19). Creating alternative civil initiatives parallel to the state without involving it in the process bears indeed the risk of further marginalizing the people, as unfair systems would be left unaddressed (Mohan, 2006).

²⁷ These ideas are part of the "People-centered development" (PCD) approach, which concentrates on personal development through identity and confidence to make people "realize their potential as human beings through the expansion of their capabilities for functioning" (Sen cited in Beckett, 2006).

1. 2. 2. Theater for development

As most participatory development methods, the concept of Theater for Development stems from the works of the two Brazilian authors Paulo Freire (1921-1997) and Augusto Boal (1931-2009).

Inspired by the ideas of Marx and Gramsci, Freire wrote in 1968 his worldwide influential book *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, which is today still considered as one of the pillars of “critical pedagogy”. Relying on his own experience of teaching Brazilian adults to read and write, Freire developed a new paradigm of pedagogy. According to him, the illiterates who are oppressed by the system have internalized their oppression. Therefore, their emancipation can only be reached through an educational work of critical awareness. Freire defends a process of social transformation based on a practice of consciousness, through which “the oppressed” collectively evaluate their situation and become aware of the domination they undergo. This awareness leads them to eventually feel the need to mobilize for changing the structure of society. (Freire, 1968).

In his book entitled *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), Boal applied Freire’s methodology to a theatrical framework. Under the influence of the Marxist poetic of Brecht, the Brazilian playwright developed the popular concept of “Forum Theaters”. In this setting, the spectators are invited to replace the performers on stage and affect the course of the drama by presenting alternative outcomes to the social problems featured in the play. By assuming the protagonist role, they shift from passive spectator to active “spect-actor” (Boal, 1979). The idea behind this “open-ended theatre” is to exhort the audience to question its political presumptions and try to envision change (Leodari, 2011). Thus, in using drama “to change society rather than contenting ourselves with interpreting it”, Boal sought to highlight the political nature of theatrical performance and to empower audience by stimulating their “critical consciousness” (Boal cited in Llewellyn, 2011;Leodari, 2011).

1. 2. 3. Social Circus, a tool for empowerment

Circus is an encounter. Encounter with the heights and the fear, encounter with the partner, encounter with its own absurdity, with its own animal. Encounter with the game. Circus is a circle that helps us to grow up. It's also a circle helping us to become again a child. (Flora, 2008, p.9)

In the same perspective as Theater for Development approaches, Social Circus methods are founded on the crossroads between performing arts and social intervention. Before exploring in more details the developmental practice of Social Circus, we shall succinctly investigate the artistic discipline from which it stems, that is circus.

The origins of circus

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word "circus" finds its origins in the same Latin word, meaning "circle" or "ring" (circus, n.d., para. 4). "Circus Maximus" refers to the giant circular stadium constructed in Ancient Rome, which served as racetrack for chariot racing and bloody gladiatorial combats (Llewellyn, 2011). Although the two practices have little in common, the Roman circus games already carried heralding aspects of the circus we know today, as interludes between two rows of combats featured parades, bands, comedians, acrobats riding horses and tightrope walkers (Bolton, 2004).

This etymologic resemblance is rather misleading, since circus practices were actually found much previously in the Middle and Far East. In China, the circus tradition stems from a performance combining gymnastics, contortionism and martial arts that traces back over 2,000 years, and reached a high level of refinement during the Chinese Western Han Dynasty (256 BC) (Jando, n.d.). According to Humphrey (1986), the very first circus was staged by Ptolemy II Philadelphus, king of Egypt from 285 to 246 BC. Historical evidence even dates the first origins of this transnational art to further times, as wall paintings from 2,500 BC depicting acrobat and balance artists were found in the Nile Valley of Egypt (Hoh and Rough, 1990).

At first glance, this remote historical detour may not seem so pertinent to the object of my thesis. Yet, I found it edifying to explore the deep historical roots of circus, since it allowed me to realize a great paradox: although the very first origins of circus arts

are attributed to Egypt, it is nowadays widely believed that circus tradition is totally alien to the Arabic cultural heritage. The “Antique Circus” seems to have disappeared over time in the Middle East, while circus practices have persisted on the Roman side, even after the fall of the Empire²⁸ (jeux du cirque, n.d.). On the Arabic ground, this gap is today experienced as a major obstacle for the few Social Circus initiatives - such as the Palestinian Circus School - that have taken place in the region, as the pioneer character of those projects is challenged by cultural resistances²⁹.

Definition of circus

According to the Larousse Encyclopaedia, “since the eighteenth century, the word ‘circus’ has referred to a form of show composed of skill and strength performances, numbers featuring clowns, riding, and training animals, and occurs exclusively in a circular, flat or removable enclosure” (jeux du cirque, n.d., my own translation).

This definition actually refers to “Traditional Circus”, also couched in terms of “Modern Circus”. In the middle of the 20th century, suffering from the impact of the economic crisis and a certain decline of popularity, the “Modern Circus” felt the need to evolve and diversify its practices. This renewal of the genre led to the birth of “Contemporary Circus”, or “New Circus”. With the New Circus, the circular track and animal numbers have in most cases disappeared from the show, which is now designed as a single comprehensive story rather than a succession of unrelated numbers. Moreover, the genre opened up to other artistic disciplines that are now fully part of the genre: theatre, dance, street art, puppets... (Bolton, 2004)

A definition of circus that interestingly reflects its evolution, as well as its polyvalent – and sometimes equivocal – character, emanates from Flora (2008):

Considered for a long time as a “minor” art in comparison with the “major” arts (music, theatre, dance), circus has been at last recognized as an art apart. Circus is a multi-

²⁸ Although the fall of the Roman Empire hurled the end of the circus games, circus practices did not completely disappear from Europe thanks to generations of jugglers, athletes, mimes and tightrope walkers who gathered in wandering troops and traveled throughout Europe in the Middle Ages (jeux du cirque, n.d.).

²⁹ According to my research work, only five projects of Social Circus currently exist in the Middle East, including the PCS. I found one initiative in Lebanon, one “Mobile Circus” touring in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, and two initiatives in Israel. In comparison, I counted more than 21 projects existing in Europe, among which eight are in Belgium alone (for more information, see <http://www.vaikuttavasirkus.fi/>). Egypt has its own National Circus since 1966, but it appears to be the only institution of this kind in the Arab World, and it does not feature any Social Circus program.

disciplinary art since its birth: equestrian acrobatics and pantomime for example, were living together in the same circle of the ring. Today, we speak about the five big circus families of activities: acrobatics, aerials, balance, juggling and ‘body expression’ (...) This composite character of circus and its international identity allow a large variety of junctions between the different circus activities or between different arts: circus and dance, circus and theatre, circus and music, circus and fine arts, circus and puppets... (p.8).

It is precisely the great plurality of circus that helps reaching all kinds of target groups - especially children and teenagers – and makes it a particularly suitable tool for social intervention.

Definition of Social Circus

Circus as non-professional practice has been used for more than twenty years as a medium for social mediation among diverse populations throughout the world³⁰. Gravel-Richard’s definition of Social Circus recalls sensibly Freire’s pedagogy:

“Social circus is an art that reflects the meeting between circus, social action and popular education. Social Circus differs from what might be called « circus arts » in the fact that it is carried out *with* young people and the community and not just *for* young people and the community; that it focuses more on the experience of the participants than on the artistic outcome of this experience, and that it builds a relationship with youth and the community that goes beyond the traditional aesthetic and entertaining traditional function of circus” (2008, p.4-5, my own translation).

The universal values and empowering capacities of Social Circus have shown their relevance outside youth at risk population, as Social Circus programs have expanded their scope to various fields among others schools, hospitals, prisons, institutions for disabled people... (Hartung, 2013).

³⁰ Social Circus programs have now developed in more than 35 countries. For more information about those programs, visit: <http://www.sosiaalinsirkus.fi>
Since 1995, an unavoidable reference in this pioneering work is *Cirque du Monde*, the non-profit wing of *Cirque du Soleil*. They currently collaborate with more than 80 local projects all over the world, and have set up an international training program in Social Circus work (Cirque du Soleil, 2013).

Values and objectives

The foundations and values that underpin social action based on circus are numerous. Those are also universal humanistic principles, which makes them applicable in social programs all around the world.

First of all, the training atmosphere of circus practice is centered on three key elements: pleasure, safety, and respect - for oneself and the others - (Cirque du Monde cited in Gagne, 2008). Secondly, circus carries values focusing as much - if not more - on the individual as on the collective dimension. Indeed, in contrast to most sports where competition is an important aspect, circus relies on cooperation and collaboration, which are *sine qua non* conditions for its execution. Most circus techniques cannot be performed alone, for example “acro-portés”³¹ are acts where performers lean and climb on one another, catching trapeze implies per definition that one catches another... This cooperation spirit that characterizes circus is well encapsulated by Bolton: “It’s not one of us versus the other, it’s all of us versus gravity” (in Velutto et al., 2012, p.4). Team spirit, cooperation, equality and mutual trust are therefore paramount values to a successful practice of circus. Besides those collective ethics, the artistic objectives of circus also foster values aiming at individual development such as self-confidence and self-respect, as well as other abilities that can be considered as “life skills”: patience, perseverance, discipline, concentration and creativity (Mc Cutcheon, 2003; Hotier, 2003).

We shall now explore³² in more details how circus practices, combined with this set of values, can translate into concrete personal and collective benefits, at physical, mental and social level.

Benefits at physical level.

Physical artistic practices stimulate every facet of the body. According to Bolton, circus improves inner and outer balance, co-ordination, flexibility, strength, timing, endurance and reflexes (in Mc Cutcheon, 2003). Lowndes maintains movement teaching allows the development of body awareness and improves relationships

³¹ See appendix three for a picture of an acro-porté (picture 8).

³² My literature review about circus benefits relies on a quite limited number of contributors. As those authors have noted before me, there is a dearth of academic work on circus (Bolton, 2004; McCutcheon, 2003).

between oneself and space and oneself and other people (in Mc Cutcheon, 2003).

Boal believed that perception, awareness and control of the body were the first step in overcoming oppression by social and economic forces. Relying on Boal's view, Wright deplores that most pedagogical approaches avoid the body, due to a number of sensitive matters concerning adolescents and 'personal space' (in Mc Cutcheon, 2003). However, Mc Cutcheon (2003) argues that bodily-kinesthetic is an acknowledged form of intelligence and should therefore be promoted in pedagogical approaches. According to Jasmine, "people with this kind of intelligence process information most successfully through the sensations they feel through their bodies" (in Mc Cutcheon, 2003).

Finally, circus serves as a fun and safe environment for young people to be physically active, and opens up their possibilities of expression and personal growth, which stimulates their self-confidence and a sense of personal identity (Cirque du Monde cited in Gagne, 2008). Through this physical and kinesthetic learning, circus is identified by Mc Cutcheon as helping young people to become aware of their physical self, its potential and its limits: "They learn to trust and celebrate their bodies, and the bodies of those around them, developing self-esteem, self-actualization and thus validating the individual" (Mc Cutcheon, 2003, p.29).

Benefits at mental and psychological level

Circus is a perfect compromise between physical and mental activity as it engages participants through their bodies, while its poetic universe stimulates their imagination and creativity.

According to some educational theories, 'active' forms of learning can be more effective for adolescents than 'passive' forms (Mc Cutcheon, 2003). Circus practices belong to active pedagogy as it teaches through discovery and personal experience. For Geld and Buzan, circus gives back to education its original meaning, as it allows knowledge to be "drawn out" rather than "stuffed in"³³ (in Mc Cutcheon, 2003). In Mc Cutcheon's opinion, "young people learn how to learn through circus; they

³³ Geld and Buzan remind us that the word education comes from 'educare', which means 'to draw out' or 'to lead forth'. They deplore that a lot of education approaches function as though educare meant 'to stuff in' " (in Mc Cutcheon, 2003).

must develop patience, self-discipline, concentration, how to set goals, transform their attitude towards mistakes and failure, recognize and change limiting habitual patterns, overcome challenges, develop coaching skills...”(2003, p.27). Besides teaching methods and skills that can be reproduced in other situations of social life, circus helps to overcome what Gelb and Buzan call the “I can’t phenomenon”. They use this expression to refer to the fear of failure generated by traditional methods of education that only acknowledge “the right answer”. Since circus mentality encourages finding new ways rather than getting the unique answer, it helps to surmount the fear of failure and instead nurtures self-esteem. (Mc Cutcheon, 2003).

Self-esteem is a sensitive issue of adolescence, which is traditionally considered as a difficult period in human development. Physical, mental and emotional changes can indeed be experienced as disturbing transformations. Those are often combined with a range of new social and psychological pressures that materialize when leaving childhood and entering the “adult world”. During this period of uncertainty, many teenagers develop a negative idea of themselves (Hotier, 2003). Circus can help to restore their self-esteem as it reveals some of their talents and competences that they might not even have been aware of.

One of the greatest strengths of circus resides indeed in his multidisciplinary character, which makes it a non-elitist activity, since it allows each one to focus on the discipline that he feels the greatest affinity with (Bonneau, 2008). As suggested by Velluto and Wilson, “perhaps the reason why circus does community outreach so well stems from their culture of accepting the individual performers, rather than trying to fit them into a mould” (2012, p.20).

Furthermore, the show that punctuates learning cycles plays a key role in the construction of self-esteem, as it puts the participants in a position of valorization, and envisions a priceless award: recognition (Hotier, 2003). As Hotier argues, “Being applauded, thus recognized for your ability to achieve the outstanding, has something that helps you to reconsider the negative idea you have of yourself” (2003, p. 48, my own translation). He concludes: “Because it meets the basic needs³⁴ for autonomy and

³⁴ In his “Hierarchy of Human Needs” (1943), Maslow developed the theory that human beings are driven by unsatisfied needs, and these must be fulfilled before they can move on with integrity. At the bottom of his pyramid lie physiological needs. If those are satisfied, one can move upward through

self-realization, the practice of circus is very useful in the process of construction, or reconstruction of the child or adolescent “ (2003, p.49, my own translation).

Benefits at social level

According to Boff’s definition, “Social Circus uses the arts of circus in an educative process, with a view to promoting citizenship and social transformation” (2007, p.194, my own translation).

As previously seen, the collective experience lies at the core of Social Circus, whose philosophy consists in civic values such as solidarity, cooperation, team spirit, and respect. Having learned to function according to those principles inside the circus community, it is likely that young people will also apply those ethics in their daily social relations, which can contribute to social change, at least at the community level. As Gravel Richard puts it: “It is through these simple rituals (...) that young people are encouraged to develop resilience factors, such as self-esteem, respect for others, equipment and places, the feeling of group belonging and a sense of responsibility” (2008, p.65, my own translation). These factors allow the emergence of creative citizenship, as circus principles spread to the lives of young people through their actions and relationships. (Gravel Richard, 2008)

Circus, a « safe » risk activity

“Circus: disturbance, scene of lively action” (Oxford Dictionary cited in Mc Cutcheon, 2003, p.19) As Mc Cutcheon points out (2003), the Oxford colloquial definition of circus reveals an interesting facet of this artistic practice and reflects suitably its perception in contemporary youth culture. This echoes Ward’s point of view, who believes “it is the mysterious, eclectic nature of circus that undoubtedly adds to the appeal of circus for young people; a magical art form with no definite boundaries or rules...” (cited in Mc Cutcheon, 2003, p. 20).

Studies advance numerous reasons for youth engagement in risky behaviors: “Adolescents purposely seek out risks to: 1) take control of their lives; 2) express opposition to adult authority and conventional society; 3) deal with anxiety,

safety needs, love and belonging, then self esteem, to eventually reach the level of «self-actualization ». Ulterior versions conceptualize two higher levels: the desire to know and understand, headed by aesthetic needs.

frustration, inadequacy, and failure; 4) gain admission to peer groups and demonstrate identification with a youth subculture; 5) confirm personal identity; and 6) affirm maturity and mark a developmental transition into young adult hood.” (Jessor and Jessor cited in Gonzalez et al., 1994). For Lupton, engaging in activities that are perceived as dangerous or risky can provide an adrenalin rush that allows one to exceed the boundaries of the rational mind and controlled body. “There is a sense of heightened living, of being closer to nature than culture, of breaking the ‘rules’ that society is seen as imposing upon people” (2003, p.35).

However, while circus does not observe conventions, it takes safety matters very seriously. Circus practice always implies a set of security rules upon which every instructor is intransigent. According to Mc Cutcheon (2003), this makes circus a secure environment where one can take “safe” risks, while still being able to push limits and explore new boundaries. For Lupton and Tulloch (2003), circus should thus be encouraged, since it allows young people to feel they are taking risks, while its safe environment makes it a constructive occupation, as opposed to activities that are truly “at risk” for them. Their statement seems particularly accurate if looking at the situation in Palestine, where the Palestinian Circus School literally exhorts its young participants to trade their stones for juggling balls.

Hotier shares a different meaning about risk taking, which is not completely opposed to the previous arguments: “I believe that the practice of circus teaches young rationality, and this greatly contributes to the construction of their personality. The threat relies on the irrational or the belief; risk management is based on the rational (...) (2003, p.45, my own translation).

Besides, Hotier argues circus workshops foster a set of behaviors that reinforce the ability to go beyond emotional insecurity. From his point of view, circus helps building resilience against a deleterious atmosphere that could emanate from some destabilizing events, an unsettling society or a family in distress. The secure atmosphere of circus provides confidence to youth and children, who can consequently unlock their emotions and affects (Montagner in Hotier, 2003). In the same vein, Pittet (2009) believes that the security sense felt when taking part in some artistic activity allows one to develop a will for freedom and opens therefore the path towards independence.

Non-elitist, ingenious, challenging, malleable, unconventional and therefore universal: these seem to constitute elements of answers to why circus is so successful in empowering vulnerable young generations. Still, the best summary of circus contributions to emancipation purposes emanates from Flora (2008):

“In this effort to combine the social and educational objectives (common rules, respect of the other persons, self-confidence and confidence on the others...) with the artistic objectives (self-development, development of creativity, capacity for pleasure and research...), we look to circus as a specific art, intercultural, composite et fun-based; art of the risk, of effort and surpassing oneself; art of solidarity and collective experience” (p.7).

We shall now investigate whether those qualities can be confirmed through the instrumentalization of circus in the specific context faced by Palestinian youth.

2. Case study: the Palestinian Circus School

2. 1. Description of the organization

2. 1. 1 History

The Palestinian Circus School (PCS) arose from the encounter between Shadi Zmorrod and Jessika Devlieghere. Brought up in East-Jerusalem, Shadi first caught the circus bug in 2000 when taking part in a Norwegian circus workshop that came to Palestine (Palestinian Circus School, n.d.). In 2005, he joined an Arab-Jewish circus school in East-Jerusalem. Disappointed by the refusal of the troop to spread the initiative behind the wall, he developed the ambition to create his own circus project “for Palestinians, by Palestinians”. His idea caught the attention of Jessika, a Flemish social worker who had been organizing circus summer camps in Lebanon and wanted to build a similar project in Palestine. (Stellweg, 2013; Palestinian Circus School, n.d.).

The adventure began in January 2006, when Shadi and Jessika were given the opportunity by the Belgian project ‘Cirkus in Beweging’ to start a first intensive training course for young Palestinians. In July 2006, the Belgian team was meant to come to Palestine for a three-week workshop, but their trip was cancelled due to the outbreak of the Israeli war in Lebanon. The Palestinians had to continue the training sessions with very little support. After an international appeal was launched, circus artists based in the region came to visit the emerging initiative in Ramallah and decided to stay. In August 2006, after three weeks of intensive training, a first performance was presented: "Circus Behind the Wall" was staged in Ramallah in front of more than 250 people, and marked the birth of the PCS (Palestinian Circus School, n.d.).

Over the course of six years, the team continually grew and delivered trainings and performances all over the West Bank, but still lacked a permanent base. Since the beginning of 2012, the Circus School acquired its own accommodation³⁵ in Birzeit, a suburb of Ramallah (Palestinian Circus School, 2012).

³⁵ The accommodation consists of a restored villa that was donated for a period of 15 years free of charge by an eminent doctor of the region, and whose renovation was funded by the Belgian Development Agency (Palestinian Circus School, 2012).

2. 1. 2. Mission and vision

The objectives of the PCS are embodied through its “vision” and “mission”, which are couched as followed on their website:

Our vision: The Palestinian Circus School dreams of a society in which Palestinians engage in a dynamic cultural and artistic life that embraces creativity, freedom of expression and diversity as the main pillars for a just and inclusive society.

Our mission: By training Palestinian children and youth in circus arts, the Palestinian Circus School wants to develop a new art form in Palestine and strengthen the creative and physical potential of the Palestinians, seeking to engage and empower them to become constructive actors in society. By creating and performing circus productions, we want to install hope among the population, promote the freedom of expression and raise local and international awareness about the many challenges of the Palestinian society. (vision and mission, n.d.).

2. 1. 3. Activities performances

Circus clubs

At the end of the 2013 school year, the PCS included seven circus clubs – five introductory groups, one preparatory group and the ‘Jenin girls’ group – located in different cities of the West Bank: Hebron, Jenin, Al Faara Refugee Camp and Birzeit. The number of students registered in 2013 rose to 120 - 59 female students and 61 male students - aged between 10 and 27 (personal communication with Rana, the coordination officer of the PCS, 25 August 2013).

The preparatory groups include both sexes in Ramallah and Hebron, while boys and girls are in separated groups in Jenin and Al Faara refugee camp³⁶. The circus workshops take place once a week in the different cities and last for three hours. During the workshops, the students are introduced to trust games, basic - or intermediate - level of juggling, acro-lifting, acrobatics, aerials, stilts, dance and theatre. At the end of the year, the participants have the opportunity to present what they have learnt in a show in front of their community (Palestinian Circus School, 2012).

³⁶ The matter of mixed groups will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The unique advanced – called preparatory - group consists of fourteen boys and girls. The students gather once a week in the circus headquarter in Birzeit and follow a seven-hour intensive training. The students learn advanced techniques of the various disciplines, and besides presenting a show like the other groups, they get the opportunity to follow a three-week intensive course. This training is organized in collaboration with international circus students and ends with the “Mobile Circus Show” that tours in the main cities of the West Bank. (Palestinian Circus School, 2012).

The “Jenin Girls” group consists of 37 female students from the Social Rehabilitation Center in Jenin, aged between sixteen and twenty. It is a special group because those young girls are particularly vulnerable due to physical, mental or other personal difficulties. The focus on circus as social tool rather than an artistic discipline is particularly salient among this group, as it will be developed further in the next chapter (Palestinian Circus School, 2012).

The PCS also organizes several trainings and exchange programs to continually strengthen the capacities of the staff³⁷. The next ambition of the PCS is to open a professional group based on a three-year full time program (Palestinian Circus School, 2012).

Summer Camps

Since a couple of years, the school has been organizing summer camps intended for the intermediate and advanced groups. I will detail this initiative in the following section since I got the opportunity to be part of the 2013 summer camps edition when conducting my fieldwork.

Productions and performances

With the intention to spread circus arts as much as possible in Palestinian culture, the PCS has developed numerous local productions: large street shows, student presentations, or acts for festivals and other cultural events. The school has also

³⁷ Two of the trainers have graduated from international professional circus schools: Fadi followed a two-year program for “Professional Training Course for Contemporary Circus artist” in Italy, and Nayef enrolled in a one-year program at Ecole Nationale de Cirque in Canada (Palestinian Circus School, 2012)

engaged in the creation of professional productions³⁸ performed locally and abroad, reaching an audience of about 10,000 people in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Egypt and of more than 50,000 people in Palestine (Palestinian Circus School, n.d.).

2. 1. 4. Staff

The PCS team consists of thirteen permanent workers. Besides the two directors, the staff includes five administrative workers, and six permanent trainers (one female and five males). However, the roles of the team are very fluid in reality, in order to adapt to an environment in perpetual flux. Besides, the team works in a very familial atmosphere, which makes formal hierarchies less distinguishable³⁹.

2. 1. 5. Funding

The PCS functions mainly thanks to international NGO contributions, as these constitute more than 70% of their annual revenue. The school own generated income - mainly amassed through registrations fees - accounts for almost one quarter of its revenue (24%). International governments supply 2% of its external funding, and private contributions represent less than 1%⁴⁰ (Palestinian Circus School, 2012).

Regarding the registration fees, enrollment within the PCS costs 500 shekels (100 euro) per student and per year, including insurance. As I have been told by Sinan, the financial officer, a new scholarship system has taken place this year in order to make circus clubs accessible to all. Depending on the student's family financial situation, the scholarship will cover 25%, 50%, 75% or the full inscription price (personal communication, 15 August 2013).

Before exposing the main outcomes of my research, the methodological approach I used for my fieldwork needs to be discussed.

³⁸ The several professional shows already created by the PCS are: Circus Behind the Wall (2007), La Wein (2010), Dreams for Sale (2010) and Kol Saber (2013). The PCS is currently working on a new production called "B-orders" that will be performed in 2014 in Belgium.

³⁹ As they explain in their website, "it can happen that the director is also the driver and the sound engineer, the artist deals with finances, the accountant helps in assembling parts of the stage. What matters for us is that the show goes on stage for the amusement of our audience and that training to our students is given".

⁴⁰ See appendix 2 for a detailed list of the PCS donors.

2. 2. Methodology

The methodology of this work is grounded on a qualitative approach. The data I generated for my case study stem from participative observations I undertook in the field, as well as semi-directive interviews I conducted in Palestine and in Belgium. Secondary data were shaped through the reading of documents about the PCS, produced by external actors or by the school itself.

2. 2. 1. Investigation field

I conducted my fieldwork during a four-week period in August and September 2013 at the PCS headquarter in Birzeit, a small village situated ten kilometres from Ramallah, in Area A⁴¹. During my stay, I had the opportunity to attend two summer camps. The first camp was intended for a group of 24 intermediate students - 20 boys and four girls - who followed a six-day intensive training. The second camp was organized for a small group of advanced students - three boys and one girl - who worked together with the trainers for one intensive week and performed two shows⁴².

2. 2. 2. Research process

Before my departure, I read a substantial deal of literature regarding the Palestinian socioeconomic context, the origins and practice of circus arts and, more generally, the use of arts in social and development initiatives. I also discovered a surprisingly great amount of documentation about the PCS such as television reports and newspaper articles. I even found an entire book dedicated to the school that had been written by a Belgian journalist⁴³. This quantity of information about the PCS available in Belgium is quite understandable since this project is a Belgian-Palestinian initiative.

One important step in my field trip preparation was the encounter with one Belgian circus trainer who had recently come back from a six-month stay at the PCS. Interviewing her, I got a more realistic feel of the daily functioning of the PCS, and she drew my attention to specific matters I, as a foreigner, would have to keep in mind during my fieldwork. She enlightened me about the suitable behavior to adopt

⁴¹ For reminder, Area A is under full Palestinian control.

⁴² One of the two shows was created in collaboration with a troop of German circus performers who previously trained at the PCS for 4 days.

⁴³ This book is titled “Un cirque en Palestine” and has been written by Aurélia Dejond.

with young participants - taking pictures for example can be problematic in conservative areas -, the sensitive relationship to the body in Arabic culture, and other cultural obstacles to the practice of circus. This interview allowed me to be more psychologically prepared for my experience in the field, since it defined my expectations and made me aware of the societal limits I would probably encounter during my research. It also resulted in redirecting my theoretical research towards new specific concerns, such as the hypothetical absence of circus arts from Arabic traditions.

I arrived at the PCS two days before the first summer camp started, which offered me a little time to acclimatize. Once the training week started, I spent the first two days observing the workshops. I had previously read and tried to keep in mind an observation grid, but I chose not to carry it with me during my observations. I rather let my eyes roam free, which made my mind more available to the general course of events, and I transcribed my observations after having left the training site. My choice not to use any grid or notebook while observing the participants was intended to avoid children the feeling of being 'studied'.

Although the Belgian trainer had warned me that taking pictures could be problematic, the school staff told me the camera was not an issue with this specific group⁴⁴. They even encouraged me to take pictures⁴⁵ of the workshops to post them on their Facebook page as a daily update of the camp. I therefore wandered around with my professional-like camera, which gave me an opportunity to observe the different workshops while having a "good reason" to be there, since pictures needed to be taken. I rapidly noticed that the kids enjoyed being photographed - except for one boy who expressed his objection - and I believe their enthusiasm about my camera helped me to bond with them.

When conducting my interviews with the young participants, I took particular precautions: I always tried to settle in a calm and outdoor place instead of inside the school office in order to avoid a too professional setting, which could be intimidating, especially in contrast with circus playful atmosphere. Besides, I had previously

⁴⁴ The pictures matter is more sensitive in the circus clubs of Hebron and Jenin, which are more conservative regions of Palestine.

⁴⁵ Appendix 3 gathers a few pictures I took during my fieldwork.

written my questions in a notebook so that I would not use my laptop, which could also constitute a barrier between my interlocutor and I. Every interview was recorded with my cellphone in order not to miss any information. Recording also allowed me to focus on the interviewee rather than on my notes, thus helping the exchange go smoother. I asked the participants if they agreed with the recording beforehand and explained to them the reasons for my choice. However, I did not use any formal consent form, since I foresaw this practice was not common in their cultural context and I was mindful it would raise more suspicion among the young interviewees.

I conducted semi-directive interviews in the sense that I asked open-ended questions, leaving as much room as possible for the participants to develop their opinion about the topics I approached. I also sought to install a progression in the questions, starting with common and impersonal interrogations and ending with the most sensitive ones, in order to build a certain trust along our exchanges.

Regarding the language barrier, I could unfortunately not speak Arabic. Nevertheless, a few of the young participants were surprisingly fluent in English considering their age and could express themselves in a basic but very understandable way. These few all agreed to take part in my interviews, and some also helped translate when I questioned their peers who could not speak English. Sometimes, the trainers also assisted me with the translation.

At the end of both summer camps, I felt sufficiently at ease within the groups to ask the trainers to join a few activities, such as juggling trainings, trampoline, trapeze or acrobatic workshops. Much more than I had expected, this physical involvement allowed me to strengthen my relationships with the children, as we built friendly links through playing with each other and engaging in informal discussions. I experienced those interactions as very rich and enjoyable moments. I was no more the “foreigner” who was studying them; rather, I felt considered as a peer to whom they could teach juggling or acrobatic tricks, which provided them with a sense of validation. Through this active participation, I also realized circus was a great communication tool since it allowed us breaking through the language barrier. A lot of our interactions during the workshops occurred indeed through non-verbal communication, or at least necessitated only a few words.

2. 2. 3. Data collection and analysis

During my fieldwork, I got the opportunity to gather the testimonies of fifteen students from the school; ten of which were male students and five female students. I also interviewed five male trainers, who were all former students from the school. In order to have a good understanding of all parameters of the organization, I interviewed every member of the administration team: the executive director Jessika⁴⁶, the technician, the financial officer, the communication and coordination officer, and an international volunteer. I did not get the opportunity to meet with student's parents; nonetheless, I got in contact with the two adult brothers of three summer camp participants. During my stay in Birzeit, I also conducted interviews with two specialists: one international worker at the Institute of Community and Public Health of Birzeit University, and the Culture and Arts director of Al Qattan Foundation, a non profit developmental institution promoting culture and education. In addition, I organized two interviews outside my Palestinian stay: one ahead of my departure, with the Belgian trainer previously mentioned, and one after my fieldwork, with a Belgian volunteer who had been staying at the circus school for several months.

Once I had completed and transcribed my interviews, I processed with the coding of the data. I compared the narratives I had collected with a set of documentation about the PCS - produced by external actors or by the PCS itself - emanating from the Internet, newspapers, or documentaries. After several appraisals, I could establish relationships between similar codes, and a first series of themes emerged from my analysis. I compared those dimensions and classified them until I could eventually define a set of subsuming themes.

⁴⁶ Shadi, the school second co-director, was not available during my stay due to medical reasons.

2. 2. 4. Challenges and limits

This fieldwork was not without its challenges. Firstly, I certainly sensed that my presence as a “foreigner” was affecting the course of the workshops and the content of my interviews. Since the discussions all occurred in English, which was no one’s native language, I believe certain linguistic subtleties have been missed out from both sides, therefore impoverishing some nuances of the meanings expressed. Several times, the children seemed to feel discouraged by the language barrier while trying to converse with me, or simply inhibited by the fact that I was a foreigner. However, I noticed their intimidation was somewhat assuaged when I gave peer interviews a try: this encouraged the young participants to emulate their friends and thereby develop their answers more fully. I also felt the content of the discussions depended on the maturity of my interlocutors, as I systematically noticed deeper and longer exchanges among the preparatory group from the second week. Besides speaking better English due to their more advanced age, they seemed to have had already given more thought to how circus made them feel.

Overall, the greatest challenge I faced was the lack of time for my research in the field. Since each camp only lasted six days and I wanted to gather a consequent number of testimonies - which I could only collect during free times -, I decided to start my interviews from the third day of the summer camp onward. However, I encountered an uncomfortable resistance during my first interviews attempts, as the children seemed annoyed by my request, or simply refused it. I was quietly upset about this as I felt I would have needed much more time to get to know the participants before engaging in interviews. I really did not want to push them into something they did not feel comfortable with. Nevertheless, I had the great surprise to realize that once I had completed a few interviews, the kids I had discussed with showed much more sympathy towards me. This sudden turn of events made me more comfortable and confident, and I felt this had the same effect on the whole group. At the end of the week, some kids even came to ask me for interviews, something completely unconceivable only two days before.

Another reason for the resistance I encountered may have come from the extremely tense political climate prevalent in Palestine. Informants working for Israel and other stories of betrayal seem to have nourished a general suspicion towards foreigners, which could be felt even among the youngest Palestinians.

The lack of time - certainly coupled with a tint of wariness - also made it difficult for me to explore circus collective impact as deep as I would have wanted to. While my interviews with the students and the trainers allowed me to investigate circus effects on individuals, I would have also wanted to interview some parents - or other people of the community - in order to better grasp how circus could initiate social changes. Despite several requests I made to the trainers to put me in contact with some of the parents, those meetings somehow never materialized. Luckily, when I came back to Belgium, I got introduced to two Belgian girls who were in the process of making a documentary about the PCS, and had for this purpose interviewed the family of five circus students. They offered to hand me a summary of their interviews, which I have thankfully used - in combination with their freshly released movie - to compensate the lack of primary data I managed to gather on the topic.

Paradoxically, I feel that the most interesting things I learnt about how young Palestinians see life happened in discussions off the record. I will never incorporate into my work the informal testimonies I received - mostly resulting from late discussions with the circus trainers - for obvious ethical reasons. Nevertheless, I feel those informal discussions greatly helped me to grasp my fieldwork reality, and I sense it has affected - sometimes unconsciously - my final work. Somehow, I have the puzzling impression that I could have learnt even more from the situation on the ground if I had not experienced my stay as the “investigator”, but simply as a volunteer, carrying no further stakes.

Yet, in my opinion, realizing this irony as such bears the evidence of the great learning progress I have been through during this short fieldwork experience.

2. 3. Results of findings

The amount of information resulting from the narratives and data⁴⁷ I analyzed was quite considerable, and allowed me to confirm the empowerment benefits usually granted to Social Circus. In addition to the acknowledged qualities of circus as social tool, I underlined several elements that make this performing art a particularly successful instrument to empower Palestinian youth, given the specific context of their daily life. Those ideas can be taken up under 5 major themes: a constructive hobby, a restoration of hope and self confidence, a federating project, a cultural resistance against the occupation, and a gradual social change in a traditional society.

2. 3. 1. A constructive hobby

One first element emerging from my research is that circus offers Palestinian youth a safe and constructive environment to play and express their feelings. This outset seems particularly essential in the Palestinian context, which considerably lacks opportunities for children's healthy development.

As already seen in a previous chapter (see 1.1.3), the situation of protracted conflict coupled with the ongoing Israeli occupation hinders the establishment of an actual state and of a well-functioning civil society in Palestine. This partly explains the great weakness of Palestinian social and educational sectors. In Jessika's words,

A normal state that has control over its purposes, that has a structural funding and its own economy, would give priority to these things (...) and give an example to the society and to the youth about taking care of the environment, taking care of the streets, taking care of each other, being careful in traffic... Normally, all these daily things would be taken cared of by a state institute, while here it isn't.

A specific issue related to the absence of sovereignty concerns the great lack of investment in the educational sector, which results in inadequate and considerably poor school structures. Besides, the informal educational sector that could slightly counterbalance this deficiency is also underdeveloped. According to Jessika, the ultimate sphere under which one can invest in youth is thus the artistic sector. This

⁴⁷ See appendix 4 for the detailed list of the interviews I conducted in my fieldwork. Appendix 5 contains the canvas of my interviews questions.

alternative field has started to develop after the second *intifada* and now includes initiatives such as theaters, dance organizations and circus. To Jessica's understanding, "This is the major place where youth are offered a real set of values, are confronted with a vision, with reflection about themselves, about their engagement towards the society".

The street has been the only playground of the five circus trainers themselves. It is therefore easy for them to understand the distress that this situation brings. The trainers argue it is an unhealthy environment where youth tend to develop violent and immoral habits: fighting with each other, leaving garbage on the floor, smoking, meeting bad people... As one of the trainers points out,

If the kids come to the circus after school instead of being in the street, they will start learning something good, like doing sports, to build the trust between you and me, to meet new people, to start to think more... (Mohammed).

While boys usually enjoy more freedom to run around, girls are mostly encouraged to stay home. By providing a safe and supervised place to play, the PCS constitutes a good opportunity for girls to enjoy some recreational activity as well.

Leisure is precisely a necessity for Palestinian children, given the detrimental psychosocial situation most of them have to endure every day. As Jessika explains,

It is a mixture of many things... it is a lack of education among many of the parents, it is the poor economic situation which makes it very hard for them to give attention to their many kids; it is the stress they live all the time, and if they are overstressed and over worked, it all comes back to the kids. So yes, of course, the political situation plays a very big role in this. It creates this trigger down effect: somebody always looks for another victim to ventilate this whole frustration on.

The circus school works thus as a safe "bubble", a place of relief where children can vent their feelings and frustrations in a positive way. Indeed, several students and most of the trainers couched circus as a way to turn their negative energy into positive action:

Circus is a way to free myself. It changed my life from negative to positive (Ahamad, 16, from Hebron).

I think I have changed, because I am more quiet. I give my energy to circus.
(Jereer, 11, from Ramallah).

We need more stuff to do, you know we have lots of energy, lots of skills, many talents, so you just need to put those energies and those talents in the right direction.
(Omar, 18, from Ramallah)

The majority of the children I interviewed mentioned they practiced circus at home when they were bored or felt bad. A few teenager boys also told me they liked to watch circus acrobatic moves on YouTube and try them on with their friends during their free time.

Nayef, one of the trainers originating from the Al Faara refugee camp, where he now teaches circus, explains circus positive influence on the kids as follows:

I teach them how to make juggling balls, and I tell them ‘take it home, and play with it when you have time. And when you see an Israeli jeep, don’t go to the street to throw stones, stay home and play with your juggling balls. Or play with your diabolo, or do handstands’. And they do it. Because I’m teaching in my refugee camp and they listen to me. When the Israeli jeep enters, they go home. Before, when there was no circus, they used to be in the streets throwing stones. And I ask them ‘why do you have to throw stones? You are catching a little stone and throwing it at an iron jeep! It has no use! I know you have a lot of energy but try to use this energy to something useful! Because you deserve to live!’.

Circus seems therefore to be an effective way to break the vicious circle of violence that often characterizes the social climate Palestinian children experience everyday. An undeniable factor of this successful dynamic relies in the trainers’ role. The five coaches are just a few years older than the students they teach, share the same background, and only started circus five years earlier. Thus, they often serve as mentors for the young participants, who can easily identify with them. From the interviews I conducted with the trainers, it clearly transpired that they had a positive influence on their students. This impact was even more noticeable when interviewing the students, who expressed many times their will to become “as good” as their trainers.

Furthermore, as previously seen, circus is a constructive way to fulfill youth search

for dangerous activities, as it provides them a form of supervised risk. I noticed this particular thrill pursuit among teenagers during the summer camp. The teenage boys from the Al Faara refugee camp were indeed especially involved in acrobatics workshops, which are the more risky and challenging circus disciplines offered in the summer camp.

Besides functioning as an outlet for young people, it seems that circus also brings values that serve as life skills; a circus asset I also underlined in the theoretical part of my work. For example, the brothers of three circus students noticed positive changes in the way their younger siblings behaved at home and at school since they had engaged in circus:

They started two years ago and it has really affected their school, you know, like academically, because when you work hard, you work hard on everything (...) It can teach the children something that will affect their whole lifestyle. (Darin and Mohammad's first brother, 23, from Ramallah)

Before doing circus, my younger brother was spending all his time watching TV, or on the computer, and since he started circus he doesn't want to watch TV anymore because he says that it's not good if you are doing sports. Now he also tells me 'eat this, don't eat this...'. (Darin and Mohammad's second brother, 20, from Ramallah)

When asking the students what were the main things they had learnt through circus, answers frequently included other life skills notions such as:

- Perseverance: "working hard", "never giving up";
- Respect: "respect for your body", "respect for the trainers and the other students", "being on time", "listening to the others";
- Solidarity: "working as a group", "helping the other", "not being selfish".

2. 3. 2. Restore hope and self-confidence

When Jessika decided to launch a circus project in the West Bank, she saw in Social Circus a way to counterbalance a certain “victimization culture” that had been anchored in Palestine idealized past. As she asserts in an interview with National Geographic, “The energy that lies in the nurturing of the past must be directed to the future. But you cannot believe in the future without self-confidence” (Stellweg, 2013, my own translation).

Through circus, children engage in a project in which they can put their time and energy in a constructive way. In addition, it allows them to forget for a while their daily life under the occupation, what Jessika describes as “a very big grey cloud hanging over your entire life and your entire future”.

According to statements from the trainers and many circus students, taking part in a project like circus allows them to draw a better satisfaction from their current life, and more hope for the future. Besides many participants’ declarations that circus makes them happy, I retained two particular testimonies:

Circus also changed my way of thinking. It opened my mind. I used to think more narrowly, like restaurant-home, home-restaurant. I made money and I sent it to my family. But since I work with circus it has changed. I think for the three coming years, what we have to do (...) Circus changed me a lot and I started to have hope. (Nayef, one of the trainers).

Circus is my life. Because I know what circus is, I can’t quit it anymore. (...) Circus made me more self-confident. It also made me love the life more than before. (Alaa, 20, from Jenine).

Furthermore, the fast and noticeable improvements the practice of circus allows, coupled with the recognition feeling provided when performing a show in front of others, seem to have a remarkably positive impact on the participants’ self-esteem. One young girl’s testimony illustrates this feeling of self-fulfillment:

When I am up in the air, it's like I am flying. When I do a move and someone takes a picture of me, and when I see that it is me who is doing that, it's a beautiful feeling! (Darin, 13, from Ramallah).

The opinion of Noor, one of the trainers, translates the dynamic of building ones self-esteem through the eyes of others:

When you're working on something to show it to people and you see that people, they like this thing, really, it gives you more self-confidence and it encourages you to do more and more. So it's like two parts: I give and then they give me.

As we can perceive from those statements, circus exhorts youth to challenge themselves and to go beyond what they think they are capable of. This (re)gain of self-confidence is an element that makes circus a successful social tool in any part of the world; but to my understanding, this need for personal and collective recognition is particularly essential within the Palestinian context. The negation of their own country, of their own rights, and the daily humiliation they have to cope with under the occupation results in a very tenuous sense of who they are and what they can. In Jessika's words, "dignity is absolutely absent in their world and circus is where they can gain it".

2. 3. 3. A federating project

Two particular opinions helped me to better understand the dislocated state of the Palestinian community, and how initiatives such as circus can help restore a sense of solidarity and unity inside this society.

According to Jessika, community life has always been the root of the Palestinian society: "it's the thing that gives you your identity, your belonging, your security". However, under the Israeli occupation, that set of communal values is being increasingly jeopardized. The interviews I conducted in the field confirm the damage stressed in my theoretical research work: when it is not the imprisonment or the loss of the loved ones, families get undermined by the wall that tears them apart, by parents who lose their jobs, by scenes of violence and humiliation perpetrated by soldiers in front of children... In those times of hardship, the temptation is often to turn inwards. As Jessika argues, "it has become a fight for survival, everybody thinks

about his own family”. This social climate of intense distress results inexorably in the whole destruction of Palestinian social fabric.

Another instructive point of view about this issue came from Corey Balsam, a community health specialist from Birzeit University. According to him, the Palestinian society has also been undermined by the new social dynamic resulting from the Oslo Accords. As he explains, before the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), people had to organize themselves and take it upon themselves to support each other. However, since the PNA came into force, people became more dependent on funding emanating from NGOs and from this new Palestinian interim government. In Balsam’s opinion, this has resulted in destroying a great part of the organic community support that once existed. This view goes hand in hand with what was previously argued (in 1.1.3.) about the decline of Palestinian civil initiatives grassroots character.

In those conditions, circus pedagogical dimension can serve to restore a sense of community. Circus practice carries indeed communal values such as solidarity, complementarity - cooperation is fostered instead of competition -, communal trust, respect and team spirit. As one student underlines, “Circus is not just for training and making shows, the big part is to make relationships with other people” (Alaa, 20, Jenine).

The federating aspect of circus also clearly transpired throughout many participants’ testimonies. For example, a significant number of students designated circus as their family or their home:

I really like the people and the atmosphere there, it gives me a feeling that I’m home.
(Azaar, 15, from Ramallah)

When I go the circus school I feel I’m going to my house, to my family.
(Ahamad, 16, from Hebron)

To the question if they rather perceived circus as an individual or a collective practice, all participants answered that circus focuses on both dimensions. Circus empowers

thus young Palestinians by providing them a sense of purpose and self-confidence, and an outlet to express their feelings and ideas, while its communal values encourage a collective work. As Noor, one of the trainers, stresses, “If I am doing circus alone, I don’t feel that I am complete”.

In the same vein, a journalist recalls Jessika’s answer when she was questioned about her choice to develop a circus school in Palestine, whereas a theater project would be practically much easier to set up:

In Palestine, the greatest problem is that you don’t trust anybody anymore. You don’t trust the other who is your enemy, you don’t trust yourself; you don’t know if your neighbor will not betray you, or will try to take what you have... But with circus, you have no choice than to trust each other, because if the guy on the trapeze asks himself ‘he going to catch me or not?’, then he has already crashed on the ground! (Media Res, 2013, my own translation)

From my point of view, this illustration encapsulates better than any other example the relevance of Social Circus within the Palestinian context.

Another circus successful feature previously highlighted in my literature analysis, and which also emerged from my interviews, concerns circus great diversity. This peculiarity reinforces its federating character, as it results in including everyone. Besides fostering creativity, circus multidisciplinary character allows indeed each participant to find himself in a certain discipline, and to gain self-confidence as he feels he is recognized for his specificity. One young girl illustrates this feeling:

Circus means you can be yourself. If you are funny you can be a clown, but if you are not especially funny you can choose to do something else, you have many choice. (Darin, 13, Ramallah).

An additional aspect that makes the PCS a particularly inclusive project lies in its grassroots character. Circus popular nature added to the recruitment of local staff renders the school also accessible to the society groups that are usually not taken care of, such as people from refugee camps. As seen in a previous example, the fact that

one trainer comes from a refugee camp brings more credibility to their project among this population; it also allows the PCS to better grasp the local needs and to adapt the circus trainings accordingly. Besides, circus demands little intellectual efforts as opposed to other artistic activities such as theater; it is consequently more appealing to those youth groups, usually in search for physical sensations rather than cerebral ones.

While observing the summer camps activities, I also noticed a clear unifying ambition through the various trust games featured in the program, which foster socialization between children from different cities, ages and sex. As I could notice at the end of the summer camps, the participants had built new friendships with children from other towns, and the initial group distinctions were less apparent than at the beginning of the week.

Besides the summer camps bringing together children from different cities and backgrounds, the weekly circus clubs taking place all year long in specific cities can also serve as a web of supportive relationships. Those regular encounters offer indeed opportunities for new friendships and alliances inside the same community, but among children from different religions, backgrounds and political affiliations.

Internal political issues exert a very dividing effect on Palestinian society. In order to counter those separating forces, the PCS uses circus as a federating project that bridges those differences. According to Jessika, the school complete political independence is what makes their initiative so successful in comparison to other local projects. As she argues,

We do not want to get infected by this whole political, clan mentality. We concentrate on the core, on the youth needs. We try to bring them together for activities, to constantly re-put the emphasis on ‘We, all youth from Palestine, together for something positive’.

Just as political matters, religion is not allowed to upset the essence of their circus project. As one of the trainers states,

We are people and we are not Christians or Muslims, we don't want that the kids define themselves according to their religion. It's a rule of respect. (Ahmad)

2.3.4. Cultural resistance against the occupation

While the circus team will never allow internal political tensions to interfere with their project, the national political struggle is undeniably on their agenda. A striking idea that emerged from my discussions with the school staff relates indeed to how they use circus as a peaceful means of resistance against Israeli occupation. For the young Palestinians I interviewed, performing circus is a way of showing the world they exist despite the daily lockdown imposed on them by the occupation; to fight for their rights by sharing their unfair condition with the world; and to rehabilitate a positive image⁴⁸ of Palestine within and beyond the wall. Jessika explains why she believes their way of doing circus is a constructive form of political resistance against the Israeli occupation:

They (Israel) want people to get fed up, leave the country, or become totally manipulable and get involved in criminal acts, so they have a good control upon them. But if you make people strong, powerful, then you are investing into something they don't like. So you are contributing to some kind of resistance by passing the message abroad of what we are doing, performing and showing Palestinians as we want to show them, giving a lot of interviews in the media, attracting a lot of attention while we are touring, bringing a lot of foreigners from abroad to Palestine to work with us, and expose them to our reality.

Numerous other testimonies reflect the idea of peaceful political resistance through circus:

We want to show that even if there is a wall, we can still do circus, have fun, and we don't care about what they (Israel) do (Alaa, 20, from Jenine).

Through circus, we can send the Palestinian message, but in a quiet and non-violent way (Ahamad, 16, from Hebron).

⁴⁸ The image of Palestine abroad was strongly tarnished after a series of Palestinian suicide attacks during the second *intifada*.

The PCS also uses its website and its Facebook page to advocate for Palestinian rights, as they regularly relay and write articles denouncing injustices perpetrated against Palestinians.

When asked if they considered their circus had a political dimension, every staff member answered it could not be another way, since politics transpired in every aspect of their life. A particularly illustrative opinion comes from one of the trainers:

Look: if I am training in this room, I am on the rope and I look through the window, I see the settlements; there is nothing else. I look on the other side: I see a checkpoint. It's something we live with everyday. We cannot get away from this. It's not political, it's our reality (...) If we follow our feelings we cannot do anything else than giving a political message. We didn't choose it. It's coming alone (Abushara).

Another trainer echoes Abushara's story with a hint of humour:

In that checkpoint, they often want to check our bags, check our papers, so we always wake up one hour before, just to make sure not to be late for the students. So it is political you know, they make me wake up earlier: this is political! (Noor)

For Noor, culture represents the ultimate form of resistance against the occupation:

The water, we don't control; the borders, we don't control. Even the political situation is controlled by Israel. All the economy is also controlled; they control the people who come to Palestine, they control us when we travel... The only thing I see that is still not 100% controlled by Israel, it's the cultural things here. So this is the last thing that I still have hope in. But if we lose this, I will quit it.

Nevertheless, the staff also stresses the importance of no excessive focus on national political issues. Above all, their goal is to provide children with a safe and recreational space where they can think about something else than the daily distress the occupation means to them. Sinan, the school financial officer, underlines: "We are trying to give the children another life, with happiness, joy, fun, creativity, away from the politics". Circus poetic universe is particularly suitable for allowing youth to indulge themselves and escape the harsh reality they daily endure. This fantasy world

entails also benefits for the larger community, as the shows provide entertainment and relief to their many spectators throughout the West Bank.

This emphasizing on trying to make life as normal as possible, despite the hardship imposed by the occupation, refers to the capacity of resilience previously mentioned in my argumentation. Jessika links this concept to the circus school philosophy of “normalization” as follows: “What we do is creating normality in the lives of people to feed them and to make them strong in the society, and not weak people. So that’s our way of resistance”.

However, Jessika stresses the great distinction between two radically different meanings of normalization. On the one hand, the circus school encourages the normalization of life for Palestinians. On the other hand, it participates in the cultural movement against the normalization of relationships with Israel. The logic sustained by this advocacy movement relies on the fact that the state of occupation is not a normal situation; hence the refusal to engage in normal relations with Israeli institutions, be it schools, theaters, or other cultural organizations. For Jessika, the circus school can only cooperate with an Israeli project if the latter clearly condemns the occupation.

In fact, the PCS existence relies precisely on this refusal of political neutrality that normalization implies. Shadi, the school co-director, explains in an interview for National Geographic: “I could make a small fortune with the subsidies I would receive by mounting a reconciliation project, but that would be a lie. Exchanges have no sense as long as we are not on the same footing” (Stellweg, 2013, my translation).

In my understanding, these two paradoxical meanings of normalization interwoven in the PCS philosophy are meant to complete each other. As previously seen, trying to make life as normal as possible through routine activities - such as circus - contributes to providing a sense of relief and well being among the community. It fosters thus resiliency, a crucial ability to avoid a complete surrender to despair and resignation. However, by focusing on tackling the negative psychological symptoms from the occupation, life normalization could be compared as a painkiller: the sore is relieved, but the cause of the pain remains untreated. The root of the problem is thereby tackled by the second normalization concept, which refuses normal relationships with Israel

and stresses the necessity to change this abnormal and unfair situation. In the critical awareness stimulated by the second sense of normalization resonates Freire and Boal's *pedagogy of the oppressed*.

2.3.5. Gradual change in a traditional society

For Jessika, the patriarchal and hierarchical values that characterize Palestinian society constitute an obstacle for children's development of critical sense. In my understanding, this lack of stimulation undermines in turn the construction of an autonomous and steadfast Palestinian society.

According to Jessika, the weight of those traditional values gives little occasion for young boys and girls to mingle, to discover new ways of thinking, and to build their own opinion. In those conditions, the PCS believes it is important to provide alternative atmospheres for Palestinian children where they have the chance to develop themselves. This is what the school tries to offer its young participants by stimulating their critical sense, teaching them to respect each other and their environment, and encouraging interactions between genders; all of this through circus practice.

A particularly good example of those stimulating accomplishments consists in a system of a "miniature democracy", through which the students can write their ideas or remarks on a piece of paper and hand it to the trainers at the end of the class. This way of communicating allows the young participants to express themselves without having to confront the whole group. According to the trainers, the students are not used to be asked their opinion outside the circus school, so they would be too shy to say it out loud.

Besides stimulating the young participants' opinion, the trainers also try to raise their awareness regarding the environment; an issue that is largely ignored in the Palestinian society.

Promoting interactions between boys and girls through circus is a particularly challenging matter given the conservative Palestinian context; topped by the fact that circus involves many physical contacts. Besides, it seems that conservatism in Palestine has strengthened in the last decennia. According to Balsam, the community

health specialist I interviewed, this toughening could be partly attributable to the Israeli occupation⁴⁹. As my interlocutor explains, Palestine in the 1960s and 1970s used to be relatively liberal, compared to many other countries in the Arab world. However, the situation of stress people experience under the occupation leads to a reinforcement of ideologies and religions, used as a means of self-defense and to keep hope despite hardship. In my Balsam's opinion, the situation in Gaza is a paramount example of this phenomenon.

Compared to Gaza and other Palestinian cities, Ramallah is without any doubt a more progressive city. To my understanding, this open-mindedness is due to its cosmopolitan character of administrative and economic capital⁵⁰. During my two stays in Palestine, I also noticed life in Ramallah and its suburbs suffer less from the military occupation than many other Palestinian cities, since this region enjoys the status of Area A (under full Palestinian control). The PCS experiences therefore a more open-minded climate when giving lessons and performing within this region.

Throughout the interviews I conducted during the summer camps, I observed that the idea of mixing boys and girls was not perceived as a disturbing matter by most of the participants. Only three students on fifteen affirmed they would feel more comfortable if they could engage in non-mixed activities. However, what needs to be taken into consideration is that the students who were allowed to attend the summer camp were certainly the ones coming from the most supportive families of the circus project. Besides, I noticed that the only four girls who took part in the camp were all native from Ramallah, as they could go home every night instead of sleeping over like the male participants. The girls coming from further cities were not allowed by their family to attend the summer camp, as it would be required for them to sleep on the spot.

Regarding the same issue, I heard several stories from students training in Hebron or Jenin, who felt they had to hide it from their father, as the latter would not accept this hobby. In other cases involving female students, the father was aware of their occupation, but the daughters did not mention their trainers were males. An additional

⁴⁹ In Balsam's view, the Iranian revolution of 1979 has also played a role in reinforcing conservative mentalities in Palestine

⁵⁰ Ramallah serves as substitute capital for Palestine since Israel annexed Jerusalem and made it its own capital, although it constitutes a violation of international law (La question de Jérusalem, n.d.)

problem relates to many young girls who would be allowed to get involved in circus during childhood; however, they would have to step out when entering puberty, since they are then no more supposed to mingle with other males than their relatives.

Circus is indeed often considered a dubious activity for many conservative Palestinian families. Besides the issue of mixing genders that is contested due to religious values, circus is suspiciously perceived as a western import, thereby meaning a possible threat for the Arabic culture. Others also regard circus as a too futile activity given the period of repeated catastrophes and mourning that occupation means for Palestine (Saleh, 2008).

The female club from Jenin Rehabilitation Center embodies one of the compromises found by the PCS to develop the project while considering cultural requirements. The Jenin circus group is composed of young women in difficulties due to physical, mental or other personal issues, who are generally not involved in the normal educational system anymore. The PCS believes the social purpose of circus should primordially be used to empower this type of vulnerable group. However, those girls are not used to interact with the other sex, and come from environments that respect religious rules such as the wearing of the veil. This is why the circus school organizes two sets of workshops under a different supervision. The first set of activities includes trust games and basic circus skills and is taught by male trainers. The second set of workshops implies physical contacts and takes place in a closed room, in the only presence of a female trainer. This allows the young women to feel more comfortable and to train without their veil.

According to the trainers, this arrangement is a successful way to let those girls benefit from circus emancipating effects, while not pushing the societal limits too far. As one of the trainers explains, once they begin with new students, they deal with frightened, shy and confused girls, who do not feel very comfortable talking to the opposite sex. Nonetheless, from what he observed in the last years, he believes circus gave the girls a push forward on the level of their personalities and relations with others. (Palestinian Circus School, 2012).

Concessions also have to be made regarding the circus shows. As the team explains, one move that would be totally accepted in Ramallah could shock in more

conservative cities like Hebron or Jenin. Hence the need to adjust performances to the cultural sensitivities of each region. As one of the trainer asserts:

You can always express yourself but you have to adapt your ways to the public. So it's not completely accepted in our society but it's much better than before: we reach more places with our shows, circus clubs... (Noor).

Rana, the administration officer, is also enthusiastic about their progress:

We begin with little by little, and now it's normal for them to see boys and girls together on the stage, so we see the change.

However, the societal resistances encountered in the most conservative areas have brought the circus school to the decision of opening a separate group for girls in Hebron, because the few young girls who were attending the mixed group had all abandoned the course. As Rana explains,

We don't want to loose our girls, so we tried to find a compromise. It's a bit against our values but sometimes you have to go with the society because change doesn't happen so fast, it needs time.

On the other side, the school has decided to try integrating girls in the male group of Jenin from next year. As Jessika stresses,

It's a permanent negotiation with yourself, like where do you stay true to your values, and to your goal, and when do you also understand from a strategic point of view that you cannot just go out and claim "revolution, freedom and gender interaction!" as you would want to, because you know that society is not ready for it?

From what I clearly noticed through my interviews with the staff, every one is extremely aware that change needs to be implemented step by step, and to come from inside the community, rather than imposed upon it. The school believes indeed people must see circus benefits for themselves, in order to be progressively more open to the changes it brings along.

In my point of view, the PCS approach is rather successful, as I noticed circus popularity among the trainers' entourage. I realized indeed that the five male trainers' brothers, sisters, cousins and neighbors were also part of the school, making the latter a big family also in the literal sense. One of the trainers' story perfectly illustrates

how circus positive reputation slowly spreads and convince, through winning progressive trust from the community:

My family didn't like the fact that I was doing circus: they were asking all the time 'Why are you doing circus?' But now it has totally changed, my cousin has accepted to let his son doing circus and now he calls me everyday and asks me: 'Teach him something!' (Abushara).

This bottom-up philosophy concurs with the empowerment dynamic previously described, and particularly recalls Freire's theory that envisions pedagogy *with, not for*, the oppressed.

In my opinion, Jessika's view indicates the PCS is on the right path for initiating social change: "We are able to change something inside society based on the respect that we give them".

3. Discussion of results

A few points from my research outcomes need to be discussed.

First of all, it seems obvious that circus is not the only factor affecting the psychosocial development of the young participants I have interrogated. Other parameters are indeed likely to influence this dynamic: family history, religious and political affiliations, economic situation, type of schooling, geographic location - living conditions vary drastically in Area A, B and C, and whether the separating wall is adjacent or not -... Therefore, I think it would be interesting to broaden this research perspective by exploring the psychosocial state of young Palestinians who are not involved in circus, and to establish a comparison with the circus participants. I believe indeed this comparative research would contribute to refine the scope of circus empowering ability within the Palestinian context; however, I think this project rather fits a doctorate research than a master thesis.

A second remark concerns the fact that the actors I interrogated in my field research were all involved in the circus project - except for the public health specialist from Birzeit University -, which makes their enthusiasm about circus potential rather comprehensible. It is nonetheless important to stay realistic about the extent of circus influence. In my understanding, while circus practice exerts personal and collective empowerment effects on the people it involves, its scope remains restricted to the circus school and its small community, as opposed to having a broader society impact. The PCS staff is also realistic about the limited extent of their influence. As Jessika acknowledges, “We know that we are working at a small level, we are not the government of the country! We don’t know who in this society has this large scale impact, except for the entire education system and the government, who else?”

Regarding this matter, I stressed in a previous chapter (1.1.3) the importance of developing civil society initiatives while taking governmental institutions into account, rather than operating parallel to them. However, we have also seen that the Palestinian context is quite singular given its absence of actual state under occupation situation. This lack of sovereignty results therefore in impotent public structures and makes an inclusive approach difficult for civil society projects such as the PCS. Those civil

initiatives endorse therefore more a role of substitute for state functions, rather than challenging and cooperating with the latter. However, while the PCS operates separately from official Palestinians structures, the school still believes in the importance of challenging the actual political forces affecting their region. This ambition is clearly reflected by their engagement in cultural resistance against the Israeli occupation.

The PCS also believes in the power of joint forces in implementing social change on a larger scale. In this perspective, they belong to the “Artists Performing Network”, which consists of twelve Palestinian cultural organizations in the same vein as the circus school. As Jessika asserts, “We don’t represent 150 students anymore, we represent 3,000 students, with 3,000 families and their surroundings”. According to her, if all the network organizations share a common vision and implement global policies and values, this will spread the legitimacy of their common project throughout the society, and eventually result in a broader societal impact.

Besides, while Jessika does not deny the role of governmental institutions in the framing of social conditions, she is convinced that change finds its roots at individual level, rather than through a top-down process. As she stresses, “a government can have big plans, but how much does it really affect the individual change in a person, and have an effect on how this person grows up, how this person affects his surrounding, and how this person will grow up kids in the future?”

This bottom-up approach embraced by the circus school encounters nonetheless a few obstacles due to the moderated grassroots character of their initiative. While their team is mostly composed of Palestinians, the communal perception of their project is mitigated by the novelty of their idea; topped by the fact the school staff does not stem from the traditional society clans. The team consists indeed of a mixture of people from different regions of Palestine and is co-headed by a foreign director (Jessika). In addition, the PCS frequently establishes international partnerships with other circus schools.

Besides, as I already mentioned, contemporary circus techniques consist in a western import, which also lessens their grassroots character to the eyes of the community. However, I have also demonstrated that circus is a very malleable discipline, allowing

therefore the Palestinian performers to adapt their artistic performances to their cultural preferences. As the team asserts, they have developed their own way of doing circus through the interpretation of foreign techniques into their Palestinian narratives. Moreover, children and Palestinian teenagers are already much in contact with various occidental cultural forms brought by the Internet. In this globalized world, the hybrid character of circus offers therefore a compromise for the prolongation of a dynamic Palestinian culture throughout its following generations.

Nonetheless, an obstacle to the circus project sustainability relies in its financial dependence on foreign contributors. The impact of donors' policies was also previously tackled in my argumentation, and this problem echoed clearly in the consideration of the PCS staff. The school deplors indeed that the long-term vision of their project is undermined by the continuous changing priorities of the donors, which are not always compatible with the school investing preferences. According to Jessika, their project also faces a lack of understanding from the donor community that would like them to be more self-sufficient: an institution like theirs can never be financially autonomous, unless they become a profit organization, which is in obvious contradiction with their social objectives. In order to enjoy more financial autonomy⁵¹ and to guarantee the sustainability of their initiative, the PCS is in the process of mounting a non-profit organization in Belgium that would be exclusively responsible for the fundraising of their project.

A last issue I would like to tackle concerns the concept of cultural resistance. I had an instructive discussion about this issue with Mahmoud Hashash, the Culture and Arts director of Al Qattan Foundation in Ramallah. For him, it is essential that Palestinians go beyond the obvious political message when using arts as means of resistance. As he maintains, "We should not do art just to convey a political message or to remind people that we are living under occupation". In his opinion, the best manner for Palestinians to engage in cultural resistance is therefore to show the world they are capable to produce valuable artwork. Hashash believes indeed that the quality of Palestinian art is a fundamental condition for Palestine successful political resistance, as it can change the idea that the people all over the world have about them as Palestinians. Hashash's point of view is consistent with the PCS project.

⁵¹ According to Jessika, the PCS is intransigent regarding its independence of political opinion, as it will never apply any kind of self-censorship due to funders' requirements.

When touring abroad, the circus school combines indeed advocacy objectives with the determination of rehabilitating the image of Palestine internationally. The PCS team seems quite mindful to maintain this important harmony between quality and politics: the school intention to open a professional branch in the following years reflects their ambition to reach the excellence level acquired by other countries endowed with century-long circus tradition.

Conclusion

In the light of my theoretical research and field exploration, I can conclude that circus constitutes an effective means of social intervention, as it finds its benefits at the physical, psychological and social levels. While my fieldwork allowed me to validate those circus assets within the Palestinian reality, it also highlighted the particular suitability of circus as a social tool to answer Palestinian youth needs for personal and collective empowerment.

Against the background of the social, economic and political difficulties characterizing the Palestinian situation under military occupation, I believe the PCS constitutes a successful commitment to exploiting circus as a vehicle for youth empowerment. Among its main accomplishments, the circus school offers indeed Palestinian young boys and girls the opportunity to play and interact in a secure, youth-centered and participatory atmosphere. In addition, circus practice helps rebuilding young Palestinians' trust in themselves, their peers, and their future. Performing circus also represents a constructive way for young Palestinians to channel their negative energy in a positive and civic project: circus teaches life skills, encourages more collaboration and equality between genders, as well as collective values, which participate to the reweaving of the Palestinian social fabric. This instrumentalization of arts towards personal and collective empowerment goals favors thus Palestinian youth integration into their society.

My research shows that the force of the circus, as implemented by the PCS, has a twofold empowering influence. On the one hand, circus relief effects allow the young Palestinians to build resiliency by boosting their sense of wellness and independence. On the other hand, the PCS applies Boal and Freire's emancipatory pedagogy to circus for stimulating youth's critical consciousness and inciting them to peacefully challenge the social and political forces at work in Palestine.

The soft, bottom-up, and comprehensive approach adopted through circus by the PCS constitutes a demonstration of a sensible method towards effective social change at the Palestinian community level. However, in order to further spread its social impact, the demonstrated youth empowering potential of the PCS initiative should be made part of a larger strategy.

As demonstrated by this research, the self-respect and cohesion instilled into the youth by this limited circus experience has the potential - and deserves - to become a major ingredient of broader youth motivation in Palestine today; in preparation of the place youth will take in society under a more acceptable regime, hopefully in the future. While the development of the artistic network appears an effective way for optimizing their influence, these civil society initiatives - as well as those emanating from the government - will stay hampered as long as the state of occupation continues.

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Appendix one

The West Bank (Administrative Divisions as of 2000)

AREA A: full Palestinian control. (17,2% of the land)

AREA B: full Palestinian civil control; joint Israeli-Palestinian security control. (23,8 % of the land).

AREA C: full Israeli control. (59% of the land).



Source : ProCon.org Map. Created using information from B'tselem and Foundation for Middle East Peace

Appendix two

List of the PCS donors

In 2011-2012, The PCS has benefitted from the support of the following donors:

- The Belgian Government
- DROSOS Foundation
- SIDA as part of the PAN Program
- Broederlijk Delen
- A.M. Al Qattan Foundation
- SDC- Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation
- Kinderpostzegels
- Institut Français
- General Consulate of France in Jerusalem
- The Municipality of Toulouse
- Klaprozen voor vrede
- All contributors through the online Indiegogo Campaign
- All individual PCS friends and supporters.

(source: PCS Annual Report 2011-2012).

Appendix three : Pictures of the summer camps and the circus shows



Pictures 1 to 3: somersault exercises (1); team games (2); and limbering-up exercises (3) (intermediate group summer camp).



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Pictures 4 to 6: juggling workshop (4); presentation of acts in front of the whole group at the end of the summer camp (5 and 6) (intermediate group summercamp).



Pictures 7 to 10: trampoline workshop (7); acro-porté workshop (8); juggling act (9) and theater act combined with a trapeze performance (10), both performed in front of the whole group at the end of the summer camp. (intermediate group summercamp).



Pictures 11 to 13: rehearsal of the trampoline act before performing in Ramallah (11); show performed by the trainers and the preparatory group in Ramallah (12); children watching the circus show in Ramallah (13).

Appendix four

List of interviews conducted during the fieldwork

Date	Name and status of interviewee	Location
15/08	Rana (PCS communication officer)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
15/08	Sinan (PCS financial officer)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
16/08	Ahmad (trainer, 22, from Jenin)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
16/08	Hammad (male student, 18, from Nablus)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
16/08	Hammada (male student, 18, from Ramallah)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
17/08	Abushara (trainer, 22, from Jenin)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
17/08	Ahmad (male student 16, from Hebron)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
17/08	Darin (female student, 13, from Ramallah) and Mohammad (male student, 10, Darin's younger brother) (Peer interview)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
17/08	Manwa (13) and Myassar (15), female students, from Ramallah (Peer interview)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
18/08	Mohammed (male student, 15, from Hebron) and Mahmoud (male student, 14, from Ramallah) (Peer interview)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
18/08	Ahmad (trainer, 22, from Jenin)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
18/08	Abushara (trainer, 22, from Jenin)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
19/08	Mohammad (male student, 16, from Nablus)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
19/08	Jereer (male student, 11, from Ramallah)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
19/08	Two of Darin's brothers (names not recorded, 23 and 20, from Ramallah) (Peer interview)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
23/08	Alaa (male student, 20, from Jenin)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
24/08	Noor (trainer, 22, from Jenin)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
26/08	Stephanie (German volunteer at the PCS)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
27/08	Alaa (PCS technician)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
27/08	Omar (male student, 18, from Ramallah)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
27/08	Mohammed (22, trainer, from Birzeit)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
28/08	Corey Balsam (Searcher at the Community Health Institute of Birzeit University)	Birzeit University.
30/08	Azaar (female student, 15, from Ramallah)	Ramallah

01/09	Sereen (female student, 20, from Ramallah)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
02/09	Mahmoud Hashash (Culture and Arts director of Al Qattan Foundation)	Al Qattan Foundation in Ramallah.
03/09	Nayef (head trainer, 28, from Al Faara refugee camp)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit
03/09	Jessika (PCS co-director)	PCS headquarter in Birzeit

Appendix five

Canvas of questions used for the interviews

Questions for the students

What's your name?

How old are you?

Where are you from?

How did you discover the circus school?

Since how long are you in the circus school?

What is your favorite technique of circus? Do you show your circus performances to your friends? And to your family? Do they like it?

How many times a week do you do circus? Do you also practice at home?

Did you make new friends thanks to the circus school? Do you see them outside the circus school?

What does circus mean to you? Can you describe it in one word?

What do you think is the goal of circus?

How do you feel when you do come to the circus school?

Does circus help you develop your individual skills? (*Explain what is 'skill': what has circus taught you?*)

What about the teamwork and the collective skills?

Do you think circus focuses more on the individual or on the collectivity?

Do you think you have changed since you've started to perform circus? How?

If you think you've changed, did you notice this change also outside the circus? At home?

What is the most important thing that you learnt at the circus school?

What do you think of the mixed groups? Do you feel comfortable being with boys and girls altogether?

Does your family like that you do circus? Do they come to see you at the shows?

What do you want to become later?

Do you have a dream in life?

Do you want to add anything?

- **Extra questions for older students:**

What are the needs for youth in Palestine?

What are the strengths of the circus school?

Do you also see some room for improvement in the circus school?

Do you think that circus has a role to play in the Palestinian society? Do you think circus can bring social change?

Questions for the trainers

- **Personal questions**

How did you get involved in circus? How long have you been a circus trainer?

What does circus mean to you?

What do you see as the purpose of circus? What can/does it do?

Did circus help you develop your individual skills? (confidence, self esteem, identity)?

What about the teamwork and the collective skills?

Are your pedagogical values more centered on the individual skills or on the collective skills?

Do you think you have changed since you've started to perform Circus?

If you think you've changed, did you notice this change also outside the circus? At home?

In what kinds of ways are things like travel restrictions or security alerts dealt with?

Are there ever situations of censorship (either externally- or self imposed) in terms of what is put on stage?

Would you say that there is a political dimension in the circus school?

What are the strengths of the circus school?

Do you also see some room for improvement?

What do you think are the needs for youth in Palestine?

Do you think that circus has a role to play in the Palestinian society? Do you think circus can bring social change?

- **Questions about the children**

I) Individual skills and self-development

Is it difficult for the kids to concentrate during the exercises? Did you notice any improvement in their concentration skills?

Did you notice that the kids improved their motor skills? Are they more able to coordinate their movement? Do they have a better balance?

Did you notice any change about their self esteem? Do they talk about their skills? Do they notice their improvements?

Do you think they are proud of themselves?

Do the kids get to speak in front of the whole group to express their ideas? Do they do it more easily than in the beginning?

Do the kids have lots of perseverance in doing exercises, or do they easily give up when they can't do it? Did you see any improvement, so do they seem like they feel less discouraged than in the beginning?

Did you notice that the children have developed their sense of creativity?

II) Social skills

Did you notice that children made new friends during the circus activities? Do you know if they see each other outside the circus school?

Do boys and girls sometimes do mixed activities or do they always stay apart? If yes did you notice any change in the relations between boys and girls?

Did you notice that the kids behave differently in comparison to the beginning they were here?

Did you notice improvements relative to respect, solidarity, empathy?

Are they more outgoing, less shy?

Do they pay more attention to others than in the beginning?

III) Tradition, religion, and family

Do the girls come to the circus school with their veil on?

How do you deal with religious matters inside the school? Is there a room to pray during the summer camp?

How do the parents feel about their children doing circus? Are they supportive about this hobby?

Are there any problems with the parents' acceptance about mixed groups?

Questions for the PCS staff members

How did you get involved in the circus school in the first place?

What is your task in the team?

What does circus mean to you?

What do you see as the purpose of circus? What can/does it do?

Do you think circus focuses more on the individuals or on the group?

In what kinds of ways are things like travel restrictions or security alerts dealt with?

Are there ever situations of censorship (either externally- or self imposed) in terms of what is put on stage?

Would you say that there is a political dimension in the circus school?

What are the strengths of the circus school?

Do you also see some room for improvement?

What do you think are the needs for youth in Palestine?

Do you think that circus has a role to play in the Palestinian society? Do you think circus can bring social change?

Is there anything you want to add?

Questions for Jessika (PCS co-director)

- **General context**

What do you think are the needs of youth in Palestine?

What are the main problems you see among the kids?

Are there other things you consider as big problems in Palestine?

What is done to give an answer to those problems?

- **About the Circus School**

Do you think circus can give an answer to those problems? How?

What are the main characteristics of the circus you do? What is its main purpose?

I read you want to obtain a structural fund for creating a system of scholarship. Where would this money come from?

You are member of the Performing art Network. Can you explain what is the purpose of this initiative?

Could you explain me what is your understanding of the “normalization” concept? the

What about opening a school in Gaza ?

- **Individual and social change**

Are your pedagogical values more centered on the individual skills or on the collective skills?

When you look at the trainers, who are from your first group of students, do you notice that they have changed since they began to be involved with circus? Did you also notice change with the other students in general? Where do you see the main improvements?

Do you believe that circus can be an actor of change in the community?

Do you encounter some resistance from the community, for example some people or parents that might be suspicious about circus, because it mixes boys and girls? Or about that fact that circus doesn't belong to the Arabic cultural tradition?

How do you deal with religious beliefs in the school?

- **Political dimension**

Do you encounter problems coming from Israel? Do they see you as a threat?

How do you deal with travel restrictions?

Would you say there is a political dimension in your circus school?

In order to get funding, a lot of organization say they have to shut up about the political stuff. What about you? So would you say you sometimes encounter situations of censorship in terms of what is put on stage?

What are your strengths/room for improvement?

Can you tell me more about your intention to open a professional Circus school?

Is there anything you want to add?

Questions for Corey Balsam (researcher at the Community Health Institute of Birzeit University)

Can you explain me what you are doing at the Community Health Institute?

In your opinion, what are the major needs of the youth in Palestine?

What are the main behavioral problems encountered when dealing with Palestinian youth?

What are the other things you consider as problematical in Palestine?

What is done to answer those problems? And what else should be done?

Do you know the Palestinian Circus School?

Do you think that artistic pedagogical activities like the PCS can provide an answer to Palestinian needs?

Do you believe this kind of initiatives can initiate social change inside Palestinian communities?

Do you think people in general are supportive for the kind of activities the PCS does?

Do you think that people might be suspicious about the PCS and see it as a western import, since it does not belong to the traditional Arabic culture?

What is your opinion about the concept of normalization?

What is your perspective about the future of Palestinian society?

Is there anything you would like to add?

Questions for Mahmoud Hashash (Culture and Arts director of Al Qattan Foundation)

Can you explain me what does the Al Qattan Foundation?

In your opinion, what are the major needs of the Palestinian youth?

What are the other matters you consider as problematical in Palestine?

What is done to answer those problems? And what else should be done?

What is the nature of your collaboration with the PCS?

Could you explain me what is the Artistic Cultural Network?

In what sense do you think initiatives like the PCS can provide an answer to the Palestinian needs?

Do you believe this kind of initiatives can initiate social change at the level of Palestinian communities?

Do you believe in broader social change through cultural activities?

Do you think people in general are supportive for cultural activities like the ones PCS organizes?

Do you think that people consider the PCS and see as western import, since it does not belong to the traditional Arabic culture? Does this create suspicion towards the PCS?

What is your opinion about the concept of normalization?

Do you see a political dimension in what you are doing?

Do you encounter problems with Israel? Do they consider your cultural activities as a threat?

Do you think there is a problem of censorship related to the international donors' policies?

Is there anything you would like to add?