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For Occupation Studies, To Cultivate Hope

Hilla Dayan

“We cultivate hope”
“الأمك تُربّي”
“גידל את התקווה”

—Mahmoud Darwish¹

Can a settler society play any role in an anticolonial struggle? What is the role of knowledge produced in academia, and what is its relevance to the place where it is articulated? These questions were raised separately, yet both had to do with the Israeli left and more concretely the left in academia. In the company of different audiences and on two very different occasions doubts were cast as to its very existence and viability. The first question was raised at a conference organized by the Palestine Society at the London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in October 2015, which brought Israeli and Palestinian scholars to reflect on Israeli society from within the settler-colonial studies framework. The second question was grappled with at a seminar titled “Knowledge in This Place,” organized by the Minerva center at Tel Aviv University (TAU), in January 2015. Remarkable in its deep sense of pessimism, the address at SOAS by the renowned scholar Ilan Pappé tapped into the audience’s common sense, underlining the harsh reality of the lack of significant opposition within settler society. His implicit answer to the question was that Israeli society is anyhow irrelevant to the anticolonial struggle. His advice for the handful few who are aligned with this struggle was to take their cue from the leadership of the resistance, in itself disappointingly lacking a vision for this settler society’s future. At the more intimate seminar at TAU, which was a unique and important event squarely addressing issues not commonly thought of

1. Mahmoud Darwish, “State of Siege,” trans. Marjolijn de Jager, Palestine Advocacy Project, www.palestineadvocacyproject.org/poetry-campaign/under-siege/

in Israeli academia, the tone was equally somber. Many lamented the marginality, irrelevance, and futility of critical knowledge in the absence of any meaningful hope for change. Of particular concern was the drift of academia further in the direction of subservience to the state in its ultra-Zionist, technocratic, neoliberal vision for society. At London and Tel Aviv respectively the very source of despair seemed to be not so much the strength of the colonial state, the weakness of the Israeli left, or the irrelevance of critical knowledge, but Israeli society itself—a hard-edged object, immovable and frozen in time.

My point of departure, on the contrary, is to exploit this opportunity to argue *for* society and *for* what can be only awkwardly called Israeli occupation studies as acutely relevant for settler society itself, for the anticolonial struggle and the political project of democratizing Israel/Palestine. I do not wish to lament the well-known, severe epistemological limits and marginality of Israeli critical knowledge. I rather draw inspiration from Mahmoud Darwish's epigraph to suggest that it is an expression of the imperative to cultivate hope. The constitution of a particular niche discipline is not really what is at stake. Instead, it is what Michel Foucault called a common sensibility, the constitution of interest that precedes knowledge.² Knowledge itself cannot and should not be unified, and awkward, inappropriate labels fail to do justice to various studies of the Israeli occupation. However, I would like to entertain the thought that in guarding and protecting as a scholarly community our ability to become educated and to educate others about the Israeli occupation we take responsibility for and express faith in the society that made us the academics that we are. By faith in society, in its radical indeterminacy, I mean the belief that like any other society the Israeli Jewish society is capable of collapsing the edifice of its social significations, to use Cornelius Castoriadis's beautiful formulation.³ The ethos of hope, then, is anchored in the proven social capacity for hegemonic transformation even of the worst perpetrator societies known to humankind. Through

2. See Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1994).

3. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis (Stanford, Calif., 1997).

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cultivating sensibility and interest in our colonial regime or condition of separation, through the will to knowledge, seeking to explain and understand without excusing or legitimizing, we subscribe to the capacity to become otherwise, in Ben Anderson's helpful formulation.⁴ This is of paramount importance because proclaiming it means to decidedly disavow despair in favor of a desire for hegemony. It expresses, in other words, a refusal to give up speaking to and seeking to captivate the imagination of Israeli society.

So what is this knowledge-specific contribution to the politics of hope—who and what is it good for? I propose to think of its possible contributions and effects, bearing in mind the neoliberal condition in education, which produces citizens that states and market forces are able to make more docile and easier to manipulate and control. We should also consider the crisis in academia more generally speaking, as academia is becoming increasingly untenable and obsolete—untenable as a vocation and obsolete as a domain where rival contestations over society take place. The more neoliberalized academia is, the more pressing is the question of its relevance. In the Israeli context specifically, we can speak of Israel's university education also as the end point of segregation, exclusion, and denial of education. As much as academia reflects the racial order, it also inevitably perpetuates the ordering. Seen in this context, occupation studies can be thought of as having the effect of antiknowledge. This is knowledge that the average person in Israel will not consider at all, not even primarily because of Zionist indoctrination, but because it is doubly removed from conventional paths of education in the neoliberal epoch—education for self-entrepreneurialization.

But this confirms, ultimately, the radical potential of *becoming educated* about the occupation, in Hannah Arendt's sense, which can only be understood in light of the incredible challenge of maintaining the viability of our interests and our role as educators under such conditions. For Arendt, learning (the past, our ancestors) is distinct from leading ourselves out (the etymological origin of *education*) to take responsibility for our world by making new beginnings.⁵ Taken out of context, two of Arendt's ideas on education are nevertheless appealing: the idea that education ought to lead us in an antiauthoritarian direction into politics, and the notion of education as an expression of the love of the world. In a hopefully not too vulgar appro-

4. See Ben Anderson, "Transcending without Transcendence: Utopianism and an Ethos of Hope," *Antipode* 38 (Sept. 2006): 699.

5. See Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, 2006), pp. 170–93. This essay is infamously controversial and regarded as a reactionary if not an outright racist plea against military enforcement of integration in the US South at the early days of the civil rights movement.

priation, we can say that antiauthoritarianism is antinihilistic in the most intimate sense, invoked by what we associate with the word *love*; namely, it prescribes a deep and affect-laden engagement with the social.

By way of a conclusion, a disruption, and an anomaly, this knowledge refutes the deniability of the condition of colonial occupation/separation. It exposes its omnipresence in our society. It keeps the flickering flame of counterhegemony alive. Israeli occupation studies are multidisciplinary or even antidisiplinary, yet there is a shared if unspoken toolkit that we have inherited from the generations of scholars that preceded us. I am a product of an epistemological revolution, which was brought about by an entire generation of scholars dubbed post-Zionist in the 1990s, and of the intellectual milieu of the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow, which, at that time, unraveled all I knew about myself and my society. One is not born but becomes non-Zionist. The academic environment under which new generations are coming into being is very different and much more punishing than that of my generation because it is under the rule of the settler neoliberal elites that are out to shape academia (and all other social domains) in their own image. To choose to abandon this domain and retreat to a state of indignant withdrawal constitutes a betrayal of future generations. It confirms the worst prejudices against critical scholarship as turning its back to society. The late Ernesto Laclau warned that we must do more than just defend our own autonomy from hegemony. Laclau bequeathed us the nudge to advance in the direction of autonomy *and* hegemony in the struggle for a democratic future. To cultivate hope is to stick to that stubborn, absurd belief in democratizing Israel/Palestine, which necessarily implies a counterhegemonic redefinition of a perpetrator society. Once it is won and our hegemony is consolidated, the Israel/Palestine society of the future will be served by what is laid bare in our current studies.⁶

6. See Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2014), p. 21.