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## What Happened to Praxis? Toward a Public Sociology Considering the Occupation of the West Bank

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## ***What Happened to Praxis? Toward a Public Sociology considering the Occupation of the West Bank***

### **AMERICAN AS APPLE PIE AND ORIENTALISM**

With Obama and Clinton's January announcement pertaining to the allowance of Israel's settlement building in the West Bank, I come to these reflections. The U.S. had previously demanded that Israel halt settlement construction, but facing pressures from Netanyahu, Obama and Clinton caved to the interests of the settlers. How should sociology respond to this situation? Public Sociology, à la Burawoy, is desperately needed with respect to the Occupation in Israel-Palestine. What are some of the blocs we have as a discipline reacting to this situation? As a sociologist, and a patriotic American, I will approach this problematic through a confessional means because not only is American sociology's relative silence about the Occupation imbued in the assumptions of American culture, but also in the trappings of sociology as an "academic discipline," as Burawoy explains it.

I have memories of my history and social studies classes in high school and growing up in my small town in New York. My schooling at an American public school was tinged with Orientalism, as described by Edward Said:

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression. (Said 1980)

I remember being raised in a household and school where Arabs were considered to be the (Ottoman) barbarians who invaded Europe—the eminent threat to Western civilization. Of course implied in this was the assumption that the Jews deserved a homeland after the Holocaust—the definitive example of genocide—and that Zionism was not colonialism at all. Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery of *Gush Shalom*—probably the most well-known figure in the peace movement within Israel—describes this consciousness quite well, as the “mother of all pretexts”:

[

Zionism] ...aimed at settling in a country inhabited by another people. How to bridge this contradiction between its sublime ideals and the fact that their realization necessitated the expulsion of the people of the land? The easiest way was to repress the problem altogether, ignoring its very existence: the land, we told ourselves, was empty, there was no people living here at all. That was the justification that served as a bridge over the moral abyss. (Avnery 2007)

My Congregational church held religious dialogue (Jewish-Christian) meetings and shared Thanksgiving services with the local Reform synagogue down the street. I knew no Muslims other than the ones from my books—the Ottomans that invaded Eastern Europe and knocked on the gates of Austria, the Moguls who massacred Northern India, the radicals who deposed the shah and took over Iran when I was a year old. The Muslims were the ones who prevented the Jews of Israel from having their peace. My Social Studies classes ignored—like much of the rest of the world—the genocide occurring against Muslims in Bosnia. And as I recall talking to local Catholics from my time in graduate school, their understanding of the conflict was that it was the Muslims who were massacring the “poor Catholics and Orthodox” who were so suppressed under Communist Yugoslavia and simply wanted to express their faith. As Keith Doubt observed, the American Sociological Association relatively ignored the Bosnian conflict—failing to mention or consider it at annual meetings during the time of the crisis (Doubt 2000: 1-2).

When I graduated from my undergraduate program in 2000 I had a sense of the “Clash of Civilizations” having worked with Jewish Studies scholars as an undergraduate—and viewed, at the start of the second Intifada, the Muslims of Israel as radicals who did not want peace. In my American collective conscience, Muslims were aggressive suicide bombers, instigators: terrorists.

### **THE FAILURE OF “OBJECTIVITY AS NEUTRALITY”**

Before I went to Jerusalem for the first time in May 2005 I had educated myself in Peace Studies and had assumed that the conflict in Israel-Palestine consisted of two equal parties and sets of politicians—one radical, “terrorist” (led by Arafat) and one moderate (led at first by the reconciler Rabin, but with leadership of increasing conservatism, Netanyahu, then Sharon).

Even on the eve of setting foot in the Holy Land for the first time to meet and interview members of an organization—Israelis and Palestinians—who dialogue after losing family members, I considered the actors to be equally guilty. I recall an argument with a Muslim cabbie driving me from Heath Row to Stansted Airport in London at 12:30 a.m. I was defiant about the role of Islamic terrorists, as I called them, who continued to suicide bomb Israeli citizens, even while

acknowledging the Occupation (but not knowing its extent). Little did I know of how my own country's media manipulated this truth, and over-emphasized the deaths of Israelis over Palestinians, and how the bulk of deaths on the Israeli side are *not civilians by suicide bombers* (images which saturate the media), but military personnel. The second thing I learned was the ratio of total casualties of minors: more than 10:1, Palestinian-to-Israeli since the beginning of the last Intifada (2000) (B'Tselem 2011). It was reported by the U.N. that Israel also targeted civilians in the Lebanon War.

One has to ask that even with an even-handed account—one giving equal weight to two parties' narratives—is this exactly objectivity? Archbishop of South Africa Desmond Tutu, who has been labeled anti-Semitic for his criticisms of Israeli militarism (Surasky 2007), once reflected on this notion: that neutrality is simply not value-free. When there is an inequality, "neutrality" is biased toward the hegemonic position, Tutu addressed:

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality. (Centre for Restorative Justice 2011)

Thomas Haskell, a historian, also reflects on the issue of the confusion of objectivity with neutrality. He would dismiss the temptation to give equal time or consideration of Israeli and Palestinian casualties:

Authentic objectivity has simply nothing to do with the television newscaster's mechanical gesture of allocating the same number of seconds to both sides of a question, or editorially splitting the difference between them, irrespective of their perceived merits. (Haskell 1990)

Why is it dangerous to call for neutrality? Or even, why is it complicit to be silent in the face of such imbalances? Philip Supina, a graduate student at Boston University in 1968, was drafted for a pre-induction physical into the army. Supina refused to report and in a letter to the draft board quoted the Spanish philosopher, Miguel Unamuno, "Sometimes to be silent is to lie" (Zinn 2005: 486).

Yehouda Shenhav, an Israeli sociologist, remarks on how the ghost of neutrality haunts the sociology (or lack of sociology) on the Occupation. Only six percent of sociologists in the five largest Israeli universities took a moral stand on the Occupation. Only one sociologist (out of 133) teaches a course on the Occupation and only six sociologists research the Occupation (Shenhav 2006). Shenhav calls this grave "moral indifference." Shenhav corrects our assumptions

about the neutrality of Weber—it is not meant for moral indifference, but rather to defend science from politics and defend ethics and politics from the “technocracy of scientists.” Shenhav asks, “Can we defend ethics from the *violent* neutrality of social scientists?” Burawoy (2005) has remarked that the trajectory of an American “scientific discourse” brought with it an important “value-free” compartment; it seems as though some sociologists, relying heavily on statistics and suffering from what Bent Flyvbjerg has dubbed “physics envy” have an existential bloc against political praxis in favor of the clean, sterile “objective” analysis.

The question to ask is how to revive Weber’s important call for value-relevance (*Wertbeziehung*), not value-free research (Manasse 1944). Philosophers of science have dismissed both the possibility for the unity of science, but also positivism’s other “ghost in the machine,” the value-free researcher (Galison 1996). Perhaps Shenhav is calling for this other dimension of Weber to be resurrected—the value-guided research which sees morality as it is embedded in all forms of social problems. John Dewey expressed this best in that, “Anything that obscures the fundamentally moral nature of the social problem is harmful, no matter whether it proceeds from the side of physical or psychological theory” (in Doubt 1999: 15).

### **THE A-WORD**

The effects of the Occupation after the war of 1967 have been described as a form of apartheid, a term used most famously, and controversially, by Jimmy Carter in the title of his 2006 book. *Palestine: Peace, Not Apartheid*. Carter received much criticism for this—even the anti-Semite label. Others receiving the anti-Semite label include Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town and Nobel Prize Laureate Desmond Mpilo Tutu. Tutu was labeled thus by the Jewish community around St. Thomas University, Minneapolis, for his use of the Exodus parallels to inscribe the horrors Palestinians face in the Occupation and the Jewish quest for justice.

The thing that is not widely known in American circles, because of our manipulated press, is that there are Israelis who agree with Tutu. In his book, Carter recounted a conversation he had with a prominent Israeli, in which the former U.S. president said, “I am afraid that we are moving toward a government like that of South Africa, with a dual society of Jewish rulers and Arab subjects with few rights of citizenship.” The Israeli replied, “The West Bank is not worth it” (Carter 2007: 215).

Similarly, there is Michael Ben-Yair, Israel’s attorney general during Yitzhak Rabin’s tenure, who in 2002 stated, “Israel enthusiastically chose [after the Six-Day War in 1967] to become a colonial society, ignoring international

treaties, expropriating lands, transferring settlers from Israel to the Occupied Territories, engaging in theft and finding justification for all these activities” (Lelyveld 2007).

Ben-Yair observed that this created two Israeli “justice systems”: In Israel, one that is progressive and liberal; in the occupied territories, “... one cruel and injurious. In effect we established an Apartheid regime in the occupied territories immediately following their capture. This oppressive regime exists to this day” (Lelyveld 2007).

Independent news outlets and non-governmental organizations that monitor Israeli checkpoints routinely report horrible abuses. One such NGO, “*Machsomwatch*” consists of Israeli grandmothers who stand at checkpoints to make sure the soldiers (whom the grandmothers see as their symbolic “grandchildren”) stationed there do not abuse Palestinians passing through.

In one email report from Beit Furiq in the Northern West Bank, Palestinians—five trucks and an ambulance—who were mistakenly driving on an Israeli road were captured and held hostage for hours. Why? The soldiers at the checkpoint explained, “They were driving on a Jew-only road.” According to Machsomwatch, the grandmothers on duty (Noa, Tal and Naomi) reported a phone response to their use of the A-word regarding the “Jew Only” road. Brigade deputy Yaron said, “Don’t say apartheid, we speak a Jewish language!” There was no signage indicating this was road forbidden to Palestinians. The Palestinians were driving on the road unaware they were breaking the “law.”

When the soldiers were informed ambulances were permitted on the road, the ambulance was released immediately. Unfortunately, however, emergency care time had been lost already. The soldiers detained the other trucks for another six hours because the soldiers’ supervisor could not grant permission for release since he was busy preparing for and then attending a Holocaust commemoration.

Israeli exceptionalism marginalizes critical perspectives on the conflict, which see South Africa-style apartheid and colonialism rather than a zero-sum game between two “equally valid” perspectives and experiences. Taraki (2006) critiques this presentation of the conflict as between two equal combatants, and the characterization of the situation in ethnic terms or as tribal feuds. Popular examples of this type of “equal ethnic feud” literature include *The Palestine-Israel Conflict*, by Harms and Ferry, Marc Gopin’s *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, and Avner Falk’s popular psychoanalytic text on fratricide as a Biblical metaphor for the conflict, *Fratricide in the Holy Land*.

Hammer (2004; in Taraki 2006) presents an alternative, giving voice to the Palestinian suffering within colonial occupation. Like Hammer’s work, which states the inequality boldly, the Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi has highlighted that the Palestinian narrative works only in one direction: Israelis

always have to be heard when a Palestinian voice is aired, but the reverse is not true (Taraki 2006).

As Contemporary Sociology's recent September 2006 issue alluded to in highlighting the fact that whenever a Palestinian narrative is offered an Israeli account must be included, perhaps the "balanced" view of the conflict's status is not balanced at all (Taraki 2006). Carter's use of the "A-word" of Apartheid ruptures this notion of balance or even-handedness for the parties involved. The label of Apartheid ruptures this need for "equality" of perspectives when it is sociology's task to give voice to the marginalized.

For just a sliver of a more contemporary data on the inequality of casualties, in the 2006 Lebanon war, 43 Israeli civilians were killed and 1,191 Lebanese civilians died (U.N. Human Rights Council 2006). United Nations officials concluded that Israeli forces systematically targeted civilians. Alison Weir, in a 2005 article in *Counterpunch* substantiated that the *New York Times* over-reports Israeli deaths in proportion to Palestinian deaths. In 2004, a year when 8 Israeli children and 176 Palestinian children were killed – a ratio of 1 to 22 – Times headlines and lead paragraphs reported on Israeli children's deaths at a rate almost seven times greater than Palestinian children's deaths. In the first year of the current Palestinian uprising, which began in fall of 2000, *Counterpunch* discovered that the New York Times reported 42 percent of Palestinian deaths, and on 119 percent (including follow-up headline articles) of Israeli deaths (Weir 2005). In other words, the Times reported Israeli deaths at a rate approximately three times greater than Palestinian deaths.

Upon arriving in Israel I was shocked and paralyzed with seeing South African style apartheid. Building on the recent September 2006 issue of *Contemporary Sociology* which challenges the dominant trend in peace research to see the two sides objectively and as equal factions in the conflict, I will argue for the importance not of objectivity and "balance" in understanding this case but that of the bugaboo of power. Power makes us cower; but not speaking to it do we give into the oppressor's will to power? Should not a Public Sociology confront power head-on without blushing?

Acknowledging the role of "power in discourse" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict means acknowledging the gap in the Occupation, the Lebanon Conflict, and the ongoing conflict in Gaza, thus countering the distorted lens of civilian casualty and media imbalance. Confronting this means speaking truth to power, head-on. Totalized discourse and ideology shape every ounce of the tonnage of the conflict and every piece of data.

## **UNDOING ASSUMPTIONS**

In classical philosophy there are many poetic images and metaphors associated with obtaining knowledge and the quest for wisdom. In understanding self-knowledge and examination Augustine uses images of turning around, literally “conversions” toward the illuminating light of Truth. In Book Seven of *The Republic*, Plato has the image of the cave and the divided line. Those who live in the cave see only illusions, shadows of reality, but those who dare to see truth come into the brilliance of light outside of the cave. In the view of classical Heideggerian hermeneutics and connected to the sociological projects of understanding knowledge in phenomenology, learning also involves appreciating horizons and *unlearning* problematic assumptions as an essential part of building knowledge and wisdom. As an American approaching the Middle East I had to unlearn an entire system of ideology to approach the situation in Israel-Palestine from an *insider’s, or emic* perspective. In balancing the contradiction between what my culture has told me and what a visit to the Holy Land informed in me, I had a moment dangling close to Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” My conversion out of American ideology involved just that; a con-verse, a turning-around, an undoing of many cultural assumptions inherent in being an American (as discussed above), a stripping away of the media lies and manipulation about the conflict. Declaring the way that truth is entwined with power in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a dangerous place for “professional academicians.” Those who have posed these questions are denied tenure, and labeled anti-Semitic. I have even upset my past teachers in Jewish Studies in narrating this un-knowing of assumptions. With this process, I have come to these questions. Again echoing the German-British sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, why is Israel not seen as a dangerous attempt at an ethnic utopia construction? The dominant party Kadima’s platform articulates that the Israeli nation must contain Jewish supremacy and majority as a Jewish state and that Jerusalem (East Jerusalem included, with its large Muslim majority) and West Bank settlements (which the UN resolutions about settling and military occupation of conquered territories had declared to be illegal) will be kept under Israeli control. Though the UN Resolution (3379, 1975) equating Zionism with racism was dismissed by a later resolution, the Occupation points to this principle again and calls it to mind. With Kadima’s popularity and strength growing with growing Palestinian resistance in an endless cycle of reactionary rightist politics, why is it that peace research does not compare the Israeli right’s platform to Bosnia or other forms of the resurgence of ethno-nationalism? Or, with the Orthodox settlers’ “tail wagging the dog of Netanyahu” and the extrajudicial killings of Palestinians, which sparked both *intifadas*, why is Israel not seen as a religious utopia-theocracy? Theologian Yeshayahu Leibowitz called the project of the Occupation an idol, which is a significant religious term and projected understanding of the Gnosticism implied in the Modern Israeli right. Voegelin has described the project of certain

destructive and exclusivist movements of modernity as “Gnosticisms” of this sort (Voegelin 1997). Israel plans to be a “secular” nation but what drives the Occupation is a religious narrative and a “messianic” vision realized—the myth of *Eretz Yisrael*. Jewish Israeli authors like Gideon Aran and others have described it as messianic nationalism, not in continuity with traditional Judaism, but coming from European nationalism (Avruch 1998). Those settlers which illegally occupy the West Bank are driven by religious fervor and the Biblical Land of Israel, *Eretz Yisrael*, as a cosmological, religious and military goal. Some Ultra Orthodox, like Yeshayahu Leibowitz, rejected the state of Israel on the grounds that the violence inherent in a state (Weber’s suggestion that the state was the legitimate dispenser of violence) is contrary to Torah. However these important voices were muffled. Leibowitz called the Occupation a “golden calf” and to “give the land back” after the 1967 war (Leibowitz 1992: 222). In a series of essays, Leibowitz predicted that there would be a two-class system with the maintenance of the territories:

Rule over the occupied territories would have social repercussions. After a few years there would be no Jewish workers or Jewish farmers. The Arabs would be the working people and the Jews the administrators, inspectors, officials, and police — mainly secret police. (Leibowitz 1992: 255)

This two-class system predicted a kind of proto-apartheid, later defined by Jimmy Carter and others. *Eretz Yisrael* is a cosmological and religious impulse with economic and political consequences. Yet in terms of the devastating combination of politics and religion, usually Palestinians are blamed for their rendering of political religion, not Israelis. America has a separation of church and state (perhaps “absent” from an Islamic political view), but America, being a culturally religious nation, could find natural allies with Muslim moderates who argue for liberal democracy, but unfortunately our foreign policy has actually encouraged the shift toward more radical Islam that is hostile to the U.S. In a talk at my University, Richard Clarke, former director of Counter-Terrorism in the Clinton and Bush administrations, stated that we have strengthened Al-Qaeda by invading and waging war in Iraq (Clarke 2004). We have strengthened Al-Qaeda and dissuaded the Muslims from their original support: one must note that there were vigils in Tehran following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, in solidarity with America’s great trauma. American and Israeli policies have radicalized Muslim voices, especially evident with the election of Hamas representatives in Palestine.

**END TIME?**

In December 2005, Yossi Beilin, of *Meretz* theorized that Israel's increasing grip on the Territories would produce a radicalized Palestinian reaction. The following excerpt is from *Meretz's* website:

Hamas' growing strength is the bitter fruit yielded by the policies of the Sharon government, which took pains to destroy the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority over the past five years. Beilin called on the government to begin to work together with the Palestinian Authority immediately in order to bolster the moderate forces instead of wringing its hands in the face of Hamas' growing strength. He said that no empty U.S. Congress resolution will help but rather action on the part of Israel. The resumption of contacts with Abu-Mazen, cooperation in the security sphere, the release of prisoners, removal of unnecessary checkpoints, and the evacuation of illegal outposts – these are the things that will strengthen the pragmatic Palestinian camp. (Meretz Party 2006)

Ariel Sharon and company, however, pushed the opposite approach: increased checkpoints, imprisonment and outposts. The Palestinians, suffering these constraints, responded radically. Were Israeli actions nihilistic? Possibly. At the very least, they undermined the moderates within the Palestinian Authority.

“Why does the US continue to support the Israeli lobby?” one Palestinian asked me. A good question. There are now more Muslims than Jews in the U.S. I explained to the Palestinian that even though there are a small number of Jews in America, they are very influential, as intellectuals and elites. I then had to acknowledge the phenomenon of Christian Zionism.

I explained to this Palestinian that some Christians who support Israel feel that the end is coming (“The Rapture”), and that Jews will become Christian — they do not like Jews, mind you, but they want to convert them. “That’s crazy,” he responded. “It is American culture,” I tell him. Richard Clarke and other authors like anthropologist Hugh Gusterson warn of apocalyptic visions mixing with nuclear capabilities. As far back as my visit to Israel in November 2006, I examined headlines of Israeli newspapers—*Ha'aretz* and others—and I was shocked by headlines proclaiming not “whether or not” Iran would be attacked, but *when* attacks on Iran would begin, Israel making the first strike. Since that time, that debate has become a mainstream political consideration by both the Bush and Obama administrations. The clash of civilizations seems inevitable, but this comes in the also testy time where China and Russia have declared alliances with Iran for its oil supply.

I can only end this essay with a series of important reflexive questions: these are questions of shock, mainly. Questioning Israel's harsh policies has been attached to the label of “anti-Semite” for Norman Finkelstein, Jimmy Carter, and even the *Nobel Peace Prize Laureate*, Desmond Tutu. Weighing the importance

of publishing in widely circulated publications versus academic journals, and facing negative editorial decisions based on my use of the word Apartheid at a mainstream Sociological outlet, I ask as a concern for public sociology: what is the place of public sociology? Socialized (as a sociologist in graduate school) in an academic department where doing “applied” or “public” work was severely discouraged, and disadvantaged certain graduate students, I ask what is the use of “pure sociology”? Is not part of our vocation to be “applied” to give voice to the marginalized? Shouldn’t all sociology be “public and applied”? Or at least should there not be a healthy conversation between “pure” and “applied” perspectives? Is this not the call of *praxis* in the greats like Marx, Luxemburg? Are we changing minds or getting tenure? As Burawoy has observed, sociology has recently done more to preserve careerism than to create a spark of inspiration; lost is that “original passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environment, political freedom, or a better world;” it has been channeled into the pursuit of academic credentials (Burawoy 2005: 5). Keith Doubt proclaimed that sociology failed Bosnia (Doubt 2000: 1-7). Taraki in *Contemporary Sociology*, and Alison Weir and others in alternative media have warned us of the Israeli bias of American media and other publications. I do hope sociology does not fail the current context concerning the Occupation. Sociological analysis needs to revert back to praxis, rather than hide behind the claims of a neutral science. Too much is at stake.

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