

Walking into walls

Academic freedom, the Israeli Left and the occupation within

In March 2006, *Radical Philosophy* published a piece by the Israeli architect and writer Eyal Weizman, now director of the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London. Entitled ‘Walking through Walls: Soldiers as Architects in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict’ (*RP* 136, March/April 2006, pp. 8–22), Weizman’s article was a systematic account of the new forms of theory and practice at work in recent Israeli Defence Force (IDF) urban operations; operations which have transformed the built environment of the occupied territories ‘into a flexible “frontier zone”, temporary, contingent and never complete’. Surveying current thinking around urbanized conflict Weizman records Israeli army strategists’ appropriation of a range of ‘broadly “leftist” theoretical ideas’ – including those of the Situationists, Bernard Tschumi, and Deleuze and Guattari – so as to elaborate the ‘conceptual’ bases of these new military tactics. In such ways, he sought to demonstrate, are forms of radical philosophy being ‘deployed in order to project power, not to subvert it’.

Weizman’s article subsequently became one of the chapters in his book *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation*, published by Verso in early 2007. In the same year it was scheduled to appear, in a revised form translated into Hebrew, in a special issue of the Israeli journal *Theory and Criticism* devoted to the occupation. Edited by Yehouda Shenhav, a well-known left-wing academic and activist (and one of the founders of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition), and originally founded by the radical philosopher and long-term critic of the occupation Adi Ophir, *Theory and Criticism* has become something of a focus for contemporary leftist thought in Israel – and, as such, a popular and frequent object of attack by the Israeli Right (as demonstrated by its coverage in the *Israeli Academia Monitor* and on the notoriously rabid Front Page website). Institutionally, it is published, and economically supported, by the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, which, while it is largely staffed by scholars best described as ‘liberal’ in the context of Israeli politics, has itself been renowned, since the ‘Oslo years’, as a particular home for a small number of important ‘anti-’ or ‘post-’ Zionist intellectuals. Given this history, the sequence of events leading to the withdrawal of Weizman’s piece from issue 31 of the journal is thus especially worth recounting. For although its context is very much an ‘academic’ one, it raises a number of issues that invite reflection both about the situation of the Left and about the possibility of critical thought, and of intellectual opposition, in Israel today.

As Shenhav puts it in his editorial preface to the special issue that has now appeared – a preface which is, it should be said, both a model of clarity and a powerful self-reflexive interrogation of the journal’s own role in the ‘crisis’ that now confronts it – the ultimate non-inclusion of Weizman’s article follows a specific ‘chain of events that generated a complex situation’ for both the author and *Theory and Criticism*.¹ Its roots lie in the character of Weizman’s original article itself. For one of the most remarkable aspects of ‘Walking through Walls’ was the material directly obtained through interviews with senior figures within the IDF itself, specifically with retired Brigadier General Dr Shimon Naveh – director of the IDF’s so-called Operational Theory Research Institute – and with the commander of the Israeli paratrooper brigade Aviv Kohavi, a former student of philosophy at

the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the man in charge of the April 2002 IDF operation in Nablus and the Balata refugee camp; an operation exemplary of the new modes of urban warfare that Weizman sought to analyse. As such, however, the article could not, and did not, shy away from assigning a considerable measure of responsibility to these named individuals for, in Shenhav's careful words, 'the great harm that the use of these new military methods allegedly inflicted on the civilian population'. Weizman's article was anything but a reduction of the structural political dimensions of what is happening in the occupied territories – a complex and multifaceted form of spatial control and systematic production of social, economic and political inequality – to the personal actions of particular individuals. But it was undoubtedly by virtue of its specific 'personal' focus on Kohavi and Naveh that the 'complex situation' to which Shenhav refers arose.

The 'crisis' that Weizman's article provoked, and the difficult issues concerning the nature of contemporary 'academic freedom' that it has exposed, effectively began when the new director of the Van Leer Institute, and thus de facto chairman of *Theory and Criticism's* editorial board, the philosopher Gabriel Motzkin, took up his post in September 2007. At this point Weizman's article had already been 'blind' refereed by two academic reviewers, and both amended and accepted for publication in the journal. Having, however, read the papers scheduled for publication in the occupation special issue, Motzkin made an extraordinary and unprecedented decision. With whatever fears in mind, and with the view that the journal's board was obligated 'to allow the main object of the criticism, Brig. Gen. Kohavi, the right of rebut-

tal', Motzkin came to the remarkable conclusion that Weizman's article should, *prior to its publication*, be passed on for comment to a spokesperson in the Israeli military itself – something that was then done *without either Weizman's knowledge or consent*.² What came back was neither a response from the spokesperson nor are from Kohavi himself, but a letter from the latter's private attorney threatening legal action against the journal and its editor.

Placed in an evidently difficult position, and with advice from the Van Leer Institute's own lawyer that the journal might be at risk

in any libel suit, Shenhav was thus faced with two options: either to push for publication of the article in its existing form, and thereby risk a date in court, or to ask Weizman to revise the article in light of legal consultation. Weizman himself was confident that he could back up all the claims made in the original article and was thus keen to pursue the first course, taking the view that forcing Kohavi to testify in court – if, as may well have been unlikely, he actually resolved to take it that far – would also provide an opportunity to question him about actions in Gaza and elsewhere that Kohavi and the military would rather did not come to light. For obvious (not least economic) reasons, Motzkin and the Van Leer Institute did not take this view.



Seeking to respond to the crisis at the journal now unfolding, the editorial board met in late 2007 and agreed that in future no article would be sent for response prior to publication – a decision that, in Shenhav’s words, ‘retrospectively recognizes the mistake inherent in the recourse to prepublication response’ – but, as proposed by Motzkin, *also* resolved that, in ‘exceptional’ cases, articles might instead be ‘submitted to an additional internal review, in order to ensure that factual allegations would be supported by adequate documentation’. This is now the journal’s policy. Yet it is one that raises many questions, and not only for *Theory and Criticism*. For, as Shenhav acknowledges in his editorial, the ‘decision to be very cautious with regard to articles containing personal references may ... contain an unfortunate ideological–political bias’, in so far as it must necessarily confront the question of what exactly *counts* as ‘adequate documentation’ in a situation of occupation where rule is ‘decentralized and incomplete’. As much to the point, in singling out, as ‘exceptional’, precisely those articles that ‘include personal allegations’, *Theory and Criticism* now risks, as well as retroactively rationalizing the original wrong done to Weizman, implicitly encouraging a kind of depersonalization of what may go on in the name of the occupation regime itself. Tellingly, the original letter from Kohavi’s lawyer indicates ‘that not mentioning my client in the article will certainly not detract from the ideas in it’. As Shenhav himself notes: ‘In effect, this attorney is proposing that the “personal” be removed from political discussion’, reducing the latter to an entirely abstract realm of ‘ideas’. It is far from clear that *Theory and Criticism*’s present position does not threaten to assist in such a process. Given the important role that it has played in providing a much needed forum for critical and non-Zionist left-wing thought in Israel, this is a matter that should clearly be of concern far beyond the relative confines of a national academic politics. As Weizman himself notes, one of

the most important outcomes of the conflicts and exchanges around this case has been the realization of the need to bring out the ‘personal’ in the context of any theoretical/political struggle, including the necessity of developing new writing habits and different academic/publication technologies to encourage and defend this type of work. The problem is that, so far, critiques of ‘Israel’, ‘Zionism’, ‘the occupation’, and so on, like the legal struggle against the ‘state’ in the high court of justice, have produced little effect, because [as depersonalized] they were easily ignored.³

Although there is general agreement among the involved parties that the proposed changes suggested to Weizman’s article would, in the end, have been relatively ‘minor’ in academic terms, ultimately he felt obliged to withdraw his piece, as did another contributor, Neve Gordon, a politics lecturer at Ben-Gurion University best known for his own 2006 libel action against Haifa University economist Steven Plaut for articles accusing him of anti-Semitism and support for Holocaust deniers. As Shenhav observes, ‘it seems that both Eyal Weizman and Neve Gordon have fundamental differences [with the editorial board] concerning both the act of documentation and the reciprocal relations between *Theory and Criticism* and its political and legal environment.’ Beyond the ethics of Motzkin’s initial action – which are, one would think, self-evidently questionable – such differences go to the heart of the difficulties surrounding the clash between what Judith Butler has described as ‘different versions of academic freedom’ in Israel today (*Radical Philosophy* 135, January/February 2006). Both Weizman and Gordon justifiably take the view that the position arrived at by *Theory and Criticism* in its relations to the occupation regime now surreptitiously compromises academic freedom, in a way that both threatens the journal’s own editorial autonomy and transparency, and institutionalizes a form of self-censorship which contains, in Shenhav own words, ‘an inherent potential to curtail [the] ability to criticise the occupation’. As much to the point, it is hard not to conclude that, as with the so-called US Academic Bill of Rights, promoted by American conservatives who have sought to rectify a supposedly left-wing and specifically anti-Zionist bias in the US university classroom, there is, at the heart of all this, a deeply problematic conception of political ‘balance’ at work,

which needs itself to be subject to critical scrutiny by the intellectual Left. (As Weizman points out, the military – hardly short of platforms for its views – is not in the habit of inviting ‘responses’ to its own publications.) After all, the curtailing of critical opposition and accountability rarely appears as such in modern ‘democratic’ societies, but precisely in the name of ‘balance’ and ‘fairness’ and of an equivalence of ‘views’.

What, then, do these ‘chain of events’ and the ‘complex situation’ they have generated tell us about the possible nature of an academic freedom and of critical thought in Israeli today, as well as about the nature of the occupation regime more generally? It should be noted that Yehouda Shenhav has himself long been a radical critic of the complacency of much of what he calls the liberal ‘New Israeli Left’ that emerged in the wake of 1967. In doing so he has consistently challenged, with considerable courage, the very discourse of the ‘occupation’ dominant within that Left, pointing to the ways in which, as he put it in a May 2006 article for the journal *News from Within*, it has served to falsely ‘separate the “here” from the “there” ... the “external” (outside the 1967 borders) from the “internal” (within the 1967 borders)’:

The fetishism of the Green Line has a dialectical dynamics. It purifies the occupation, reorganizes and elevates it to channels that deny the intensity and injustices of the Israeli occupation machinery. This fetishism allows the artificial separation between the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’; it creates a moral indifference and hides the fact that the Israeli colonial occupation is found everywhere, not only over the Green Line.⁴

In this way, the occupation regime is ‘woven into the internal fabric of society in Israel, at all levels, and is created within it’. Such an argument is reiterated in the first part of the editorial preface to the special issue on the occupation that eventually appeared. As Shenhav puts it there: ‘the paradigm of occupation was and still is anchored in the internal mechanisms of nearly all versions of Zionism ... it is turned not only outward but also inward, within the state, where there is no military violence but rather another kind of violence, exerted administratively or by law.’

Shenhav’s own work is worth mentioning here, because there is a more than minor irony, as he is clearly aware – the section of his editorial introduction on Weizman’s and Gordon’s withdrawal is entitled ‘The Occupation within Us’ – in the fact that he should find himself embroiled in a sequence of events that so markedly confirm his central thesis. As he writes: ‘Like Israel within the Green Line, like all Israeli citizens who pay taxes that feed the occupation, [*Theory and Criticism*] does not exist outside that regime. It exists within the occupation’s matrices of power and the military logic that shapes those matrices.’ Whatever one’s position on the now stalled proposals in the UK for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions, the capacity of the Israeli Left to confront critically the ‘occupation within’ *from within* is clearly crucial to any ongoing resistance to the occupation regime more generally. Both the Van Leer Institute and *Theory and Criticism* have been central to this. If nothing else, their current ‘crisis’ emphasizes the immense difficulties and complexities of such resistance within the social and legal reality in which they find themselves today.

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Notes

1. Yehouda Shenhav, ‘Why Not “The Occupation”’, *Theory and Criticism* 31, Winter 2007, pp. 322–32; p. 325. Although dated Winter 2007, the issue did not actually appear until April 2008.
2. The narrative of events is somewhat complicated at this point by the fact that, first, it’s not entirely clear that Kohavi is, in actuality, singled out for *exceptional* criticism in the article, and, second, by the fact that Kohavi’s sister is herself a fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute itself.
3. Eyal Weizman, email to author, 2 May 2008.
4. See Yehouda Shenhav, ‘The Occupation Doesn’t Stop at the Checkpoint’, *News from Within*, vol. 22, no. 5, May 2006, www.alternativenews.org/aic-publications/news-from-within/news-from-within-vol-xxii-no.5-may-2006-20060606.html#Shenhav.