

Assessment of the PhD Thesis *Mundane Self-Legitimizations of Power: Distribution of the Sensible in the Israeli Settlements in the West Bank*, presented by Jakub Zahora for the defense at Charles University (Prague), Institute of Political Studies by Pavel Barša, Faculty of Arts

The puzzle at the core of the Thesis is the following: how people, who take part in an oppressive regime as its beneficiaries, can live in an ignorance of their position vis-à-vis its immediate victims while, at the same time, being able to empathize with the victims of other, distant injustices and even to be morally indignant at them? The most conventional answer to this puzzle points to the brainwash by the hegemonic ideology which depicts the oppressive regime as just and only possible. In the case of the Israeli settlers in the territories occupied in 1967, this explanation focuses on their national-religious avant-garde and a larger nationalistic camp which has acquired almost hegemonic position within the Israeli politics since the long 1970s. Even if the

nationalistic legitimization of the settlement project is indispensable, it is not, however, sufficient. Save for exceptional situations, it has to be complemented by the legitimation on the sub-political and/or sub-ideological level of everyday life, especially if we take into account that the majority of Israeli settlers are relatively apolitical people, who simply want to have a well-paying job, good apartment and be surrounded by a nice and safe environment.

The fact that those mundane goals can be reached usually more easily and less costly in a settlement than on the other side of the Green Line explains certainly a lot. It is not, however, able to tackle the puzzle formulated above. The author puts aside the psychological explanations (suggested by Stanley Cohen among others) and focuses instead on the process through which “big” questions of power and politics are evacuated and replaced by “small” concerns of everyday life, while the systemic parameters of their addressing are “naturalized” – that is transformed into something given, devoid of any connection with the collective agency and political choice.

To make these processes of depoliticization more specific the author uses Foucauldian concepts of power as something which functions on sub-political and sub-ideological level of daily practices (micro-power), Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible", particularly as applied by Nicholas Mirzoeff to the sphere of visibility, and Chandra Mukerji's approach to the transformations of spatial dimension of social co-existence and their ideological function.

Methodologically, the author relied on the anthropological approaches such as participant observation and interviews. Both the use of those qualitative methods and the author's self-positioning within critical traditions of IR (and social sciences) has led him to put at the center of the Thesis moral questions. He raises them in a very personal manner - sometimes almost in a confessional mode. For instance, he feels compelled to justify why he focuses on complicit bystanders if not perpetrators (Jewish settlers) rather than on victims (Palestinians) whereby he transgresses one of the founding normative principles of

postcolonial studies. This moralism (conform with the British and American academic mainstream but eccentric in the Czech context) might seem at times overdrawn, but, at the end of the day, it helps the author to formulate an unexpectedly fresh and provocative thesis. He claims that we need to “de-exceptionalize” the settlers – to see in their main predicament (as expressed in the puzzle) merely an extreme variant of much more universal phenomenon which pertains to many a middle class person living in Western Europe or the United States. It might even be the case (although the author does not go so far) that the strong empathy of some well off young Westerners for the plight of Palestinians as distant victims (and moral indignation at it), covers their inability to see (and care about) victims who reside much closer. Politically speaking, “de-exceptionalization” of the settlers and, by extension, of Israel goes against the grain of the international solidarity movement with the Palestinians to the extent that its BDS campaign consists precisely in shaming Israel and its policies as “exceptionally” evil, and,

therefore, not worthy of the cooperative relations with Western countries.

Academically speaking, Zahora's Thesis presents a coherent and convincingly elaborated answer to his main research question. He not only enlarges our academic knowledge but also awakens our moral and political consciousness.

In my assessment of the preliminary version of the Thesis, I made three critical comments all of which have been addressed by the author. I criticized the over-extension of the theoretical chapters that went – both with regard to their content and to their length – beyond the bounds of the Thesis as they are set up by the research question. Zahora had accepted this criticism. He has substantively shortened the theoretical part and merged the two conceptual chapters into one. I also expressed doubts about the pertinence of a passage concerning the Arendt's notion of the banality of evil. Here again the author has accepted the objection and left out the passage. Finally, I had admonished him to engage with the Foucauldian distinction between strategy

and tactics in addition to the notion of dispositif. In response, he has made it persuasively clear why the latter notion is indispensable for his analytical purposes and added the passage in which he explains the relation between the two notions. In my opinion, these changes have strengthened the quality of the Thesis. Its second reading has only enhanced my conviction that it is a valuable contribution to the academic research on the subject.

Therefore, I wholeheartedly recommend it for the final defense.

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