WEIRD

Political Feeling and the Emergence of Dissent in Israeli Solidarity Activists

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic research on Palestinian solidarity activism in and around Jerusalem, this article argues that *weirdness* is a political feeling. Taking emotion as a form of "wordless knowledge" mediated through the Israeli national narrative, the feeling of weirdness emerges when the expectations of Israelis fail to accord with the practices of military occupation. This is not an intense or overwhelming affect, it does not drive us to fight or flight, or bring us to tears. However, repeated encounters with the failure of their knowledge systems have brought some Israelis to doubt the validity and logic of hegemonic Zionism. Doubt, Hannah Arendt believed, was the outcome of *thinking*, a human faculty that could condition men against evil-doing. In enabling and augmenting the emergence of doubt, weirdness is a political emotion and one that may play a significant role in the emergence of resistance to the vested interests of oppressive structures in societies everywhere.

Keywords: affect, Arendt, Israel-Palestine, phenomenology, social movements

How do we lose faith? Why do we begin to doubt the validity of the institutions that shape us, the veracity of the narratives we were nurtured upon, the sense that we are doing the right thing? The mechanisms of social change have long been a concern of social researchers, radicals, and tyrants. Max Gluckman and the Manchester School were among the first anthropologists to engage with the fact that societies are not simply self-reproducing stable systems. Conflict, schism, cleavage,

Figure 1. A member of Israeli activist group the Clown Army at a demonstration in the West Bank village of Susiya in 2012 (© Brian Callan)

and rebellion became topics and titles central to the understanding of social dynamics in the African ethnographies of the 1950s (Gluckman 1955; Turner 1957). Gramsci devoted a great deal of thought to faith and belief in the naturalness of the social order, a "faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct" (1999: 631). The Gramscian proscription for social change was structural, replacing one faith with another by appropriating cultural institutions and disseminating a socialist revolutionary subjectivity. Loss of faith in this sense would be revolutionary.

In social movement studies, crisis and moral outrage are often seen to provide the political context through which the opportunity for structural change encourages people to engage in contentious politics, and to mobilize, to agitate, and to protest (Castells 2012; Jasper 2008; Nepstad and Smith 2001; Tarrow 1994; Tarrow and Tilly 2009). Currently, crises are manifest in media, political rhetoric, economic strain, and third sector mobilization. Financial collapse, austerity, Brexit, populist demagogues in power, and reactionary identitarianism were in full swing in this "age of anger" (Mishra 2017), even before a novel virus found itself deeply embedded in the global flows of human activity. The renewed mass mobilizations of Black Lives Matter in

the middle of the 2020 medical, social, and economic global crisis of COVID-19 is a testament to the power of outrage.

Crisis and outrage provide answers as to *why* people have lost faith in extant institutions and structures, and various models such as resource mobilization, relative depravation, and political opportunity all attend to processes by which people become active dissenters to established orders. However, my own research will with Israeli "Palestinian solidarity activists" point to the possibility of a more banal, everyday experiential encounter through which people come to gradually doubt the truth and righteousness of their national institutions and narratives over time. Such doubt is not simply the outcome of crisis or outrage, but rather of the slow degradation of the hegemonic narrative, scratching at its patina, flaking of the façade, revealing glimpses of an underlying "truth" by which we begin to lose faith.

In this article, I argue that fleeting inconsistencies, puzzling moments, and everyday odd encounters or "weird" moments can be significant to the emergence of political dissent. In borrowing from affect theory, I suggest that weirdness is initially instantiated as a *feeling*. More specifically, it is a dimension of affect referred to as *reflex emotions*, a form of "wordless knowledge" representing our relationship to the world we encounter (Damasio 2000; Jasper 2011; Prinz 2004). What the feeling of weirdness represents is a failure of our acculturated expectations to accord with the world we encounter. Based on an ethnography of Palestinian solidarity activism, this article shows that repeated encounters with the bizarre reality of military occupation plays an unrecognized yet significant role in radicalizing Jewish Israeli activists by causing them to *doubt* the validity of the national narrative. For Hannah Arendt, doubt was the product of *thinking* and, more importantly, may "be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing" ([1978] 1981: 5). In the pages that follow, I shall argue that fleeting and easy-to-dismiss feelings of weirdness can also produce doubt and lead to a loss of faith in the received narratives of systems of power, preparing us for the moment when we stop and say: "This is wrong." Weirdness is not a concept commonly discussed in the canon of affect theory or in social movement studies, and while experiencing weird moments does not automatically lead to dissent, this article aims to highlight how subtle and nuanced everyday experiences can, over time, play a part in the emergence of political subjectivity. The decades-long struggle for Palestinian rights is a particularly informative field for studying the development of dissent over time, and as one Israeli activist told me: "If you're looking at weird, you've come to the right place".

The Sense of Not Making Sense

In January 2012, I joined the weekly protest in the West Bank village of al-Maasara for the first time. I was becoming familiar with both the practice of ethnography and the practice of protest. A strong and fruitful researcher–participant relationship was developing between myself and Vered,[1] a dedicated and experienced activist with the Israeli group Anarchists Against the Wall. On this day, she had brought along her normally non-protesting father, Frank. Frank drove us from Jerusalem, south through the tunnel checkpoint near Bethlehem, to the Gush Etzion settlement block. Gush Etzion is a clustering of around 22 settlements and unauthorized "outposts" with roughly 70,000 Israeli citizens and 20,000 Palestinians living in half a dozen villages.[2] The majority of this part of the occupied territories was designated as "Area C" in the Oslo Accords of 1994, and as such the Israeli military controls all civilian and security matters here.

As we approach the entrance of al-Maasara, I see a handful of Israeli soldiers gathered by the side of the road. Even though I am told the entire area is a "closed military zone" for the duration of the protest, the soldiers do not stop our vehicle and we drive a kilometer or so, past small shops, family homes, and a mosque, to the meeting point where about ten other people are gathered. One carload of Israelis has locked their keys in their car, and I strike up a conversation about this dilemma with Edo, the car's owner. I see a man calling Vered's name from a doorway and playfully ducking back inside to hide. It is Fesal, one of the organizers from the local popular committee, who plays this peekaboo game a few more times, before coming out to greet her. Vered seems well loved here, and Fasel is delighted to meet her father.

As we hang around waiting, Frank seems a little nervous. These regular weekend protests have a reputation in Israel for violence, stone-throwing, tear gas, arrests, and even fatalities. This reputation is widely fostered both in mainstream media and by government and security institutions, where the word "terror" is habitually applied and even appended to any and all protest activities: "stone terror," "diplomatic terror," "cultural terror," "intellectual terror" (see Lis 2012; Rosen and Leibovitz 2018; Winer 2018; Yemini 2015). Frank is keen to know what is going to happen, and Vered explains: "We'll march back down the road, and the army will stop us, and we'll shout for a bit."

It is about half an hour of unhindered strolling, with flags and banners, back past the mosque, the houses, and the stores. We are about 20 people, not moving in a block, but in small groups of two to five,

strung-out over 30 meters or so. A few people glance at us as we walk by, but I do not see anyone join the march. Frank is cold in the weak winter sun and loves complaining: "I came here to drill a few holes in the wall!", he jokes, referring to Vered's apartment and not the separation barrier. Frank and I exchange background stories, interests, and anecdotes before we get back to the entrance to the village, where about 25 soldiers and Magav border policemen are waiting for us. The security detail outnumbers the protest group. They are ready and blocking the width of the narrow village road in a line and, with riot shields held in formation, they stop the march from passing the junction. Across the road is a Palestinian quarry works and not much else from what I can see. The local men stand face-to-face with the heavily armed soldiers. "We want to get to our land," shouts Fasel in English, then "*Yallah shebab*!".[3] The handful of Palestinian men push into the line of soldiers, insisting they be let through the line of riot shields. Scuffles ensue as the shields insist on stopping them. The Palestinian men stop pushing and start to chant in Arabic and English, joined by the Israelis and international visitors, who have come to protest in solidarity.

I find myself wondering why we have been stopped here. There is nothing behind the line of soldiers that could be identified as something that must be protected, only the main road that has no traffic on it and a few industrial sheds on the far side. By this stage, several of the Israelis and internationals are standing *behind* the security detail without any trouble or opposition. They photograph, chant, or just observe the proceedings. Somehow, it is perfectly reasonable to pass this "red line" by simply walking around either side rather that pushing through it—so long, perhaps, as you are not recognized as one of the local Palestinians. Time and again, there are these small scuffles, with some breaks for chanting, and occasionally Fesal speaks directly to (or at) the soldiers in English. Leaning in close to their faces, he asks in a voice loud enough so that all can hear: "Are you proud of yourselves, are you proud to say you stop people from getting to their lands?" The soldiers ignore him as best they can, some joking with each other in Hebrew.

There is no moving the line. There is neither a charge nor tear gas, and there is no stone-throwing. Suddenly, Fesal calls out in Arabic, and the protest group quickly turns to the right and starts walking briskly toward an alternative exit from the village. I am perplexed at the sight of the soldiers hurriedly stumbling through the ploughed field in parallel to the protest group on the road. They are trying to reach

the alternate exit before the protesters, but the protesters do not run; they are not trying to escape. Indeed, they are not trying to get anywhere that is generally forbidden to them. This is the way in and out of the village, and all these men use this road on a daily basis, often unencumbered. They could have come this way unnoticed two hours before, and they will probably go this way later in the afternoon. But right now, there seems to be a comic walking race with the soldiers determined to get to the finish line first, just so that they can once again block the progress of the protestors. The protestors, for their part, seem happy to let them win.

None of this is what I expected, but as a diligent anthropologist I critically observe the dynamics and quietly ask Vered for insights when I can. Frank, however, is afforded no such professional or epistemological protection from the proceedings. He had kept his distance from the protest: five meters back is sufficiently far to observe in safety. "This is bizarre," he keeps repeating; "this is Kafkaesque." He too is asking his daughter to explain what is going on: "Why can't they cross the road? What will happen if we get to the other side? Where's the wall going to be?" Vered, who is very knowledgeable about the occupation and well experienced in protest dynamics, explains as best she can that most protests are considered illegal and therefore must be stopped, but unsatisfied by her own rationalizations she eventually sighs and says: "I don't know, let's ask them." Turning to the soldiers she asks in Hebrew: "Why we can't cross the road?" She gets no reply.

After about an hour, Fasel calls the protest to an end and we turn and stroll back into the village. Soldiers fire a few gas canisters our way, and some children throw a few stones back toward them. We pass back through the village, past the general stores, the homes, and the mosque.

An Affective Theory of Weirdness

Frank and I were both puzzled by the protest at al-Maasara because it confounded our expectations. In the Israeli hegemonic narrative, such expectations define the nation as a democratic, peace-seeking state locked in "an endless war against an unappeasable foe" (Penslar 2012: 156). This meta-narrative is confounded in structural dissonance by the everyday practices of Israel as an occupying military power and a colonizing "ethnocracy" (Yiftachel 2006). One may agree that Israel, like any state, has the right and duty to protect itself, its citizens,

and its infrastructure from its foes, but at al-Maasara one scans the horizon in vain to find either a viable threat or an endangered asset. The protest does not approach the fences of any of the nearby Jewish settlements, nor are there any sections of the of the normally out-of-bounds separation barrier to be protected. Without counting any personnel unseen in the armored vehicles, the Israeli security services outnumbered the flag-holding protesters 25 to 20 and the non-Palestinian contingent seemed to be free to go where they wanted, so long as they did not obstruct the obstruction of the protest. The well-armed and armored soldiers themselves could not be said to have been put in danger by an inferior number of people carrying a few flags, and the protest was stopped simply because it was a protest as it was the week before and the week before that. Frank's line of questioning illustrates that he could not cognitively access an interpretation of the situation that made sense to him, such that he could only describe it all as bizarre and Kafkaesque.

To call something weird, absurd, bizarre, baffling, or crazy is an attempt to categorize and thus make sense of something that fundamentally does not make sense. Even the term "Kafkaesque," though often associated with labyrinthine, bureaucratic, and oppressive control, contains within it an inherent lack of sense, beyond the logic of control itself. These semantic labels, though they vary in intensity and attribution, all share what Wittgenstein (1953) called a "familyresemblance," and it is this family of feelings that I refer to as "weirdness." They are semantic aspects of affect used to describe the *feeling* that we have experienced, a mismatch between our expectations and our observations. Psychological disciplines have taken particular interest in such anomalous experiences. Freud (2003) wrote on the aesthetics of the uncanny and the circumstances under which the familiar can become "uncanny and frightening." Festinger described the feeling of discomfort aroused by cognitive dissonance produced by "the existence of nonfitting [*sic*] relations among cognitions, [as] a motivating factor in its own right" (1957: 3). How do such internalized experiences relate to or differ from the feeling of weirdness, and more importantly can we say that weirdness is a feeling at all? What is weirdness exactly?

Psychology, since Freud, has always been comfortable approaching and examining the logic of emotions. However, the methodological gaze and therapeutic impetus toward internal and pathological inconsistencies are often seen to dwell within the subjective individual (Madsen 2014). Festinger's basic premise was that the individual strives toward consistency within herself and the mechanisms theorized to

mediate cognitive dissonance and discomfort, such as self-affirmation and self-justification, are on the whole focused on the existence of *internal* contradictions (Stone and Cooper 2001). Certainly, we are capable of being inconsistent, but the weirdness I discuss here neither resides within the individual, nor is a property of the external object or action apprehended. It is rather a perceptual phenomenon that represents the intersubjective relationship between the observer's internalized expectations and the messy reality of the lived environment around us. Weirdness does not, however, evoke dread and fear in the way that Freud's understanding of the uncanny does. It is not an outrage. Rather, it seems to be something much subtler, fleeting, a momentary skip in the normal that we can pass by without giving it too much thought. So why (or *how*) could it be considered a factor in social change, why could it be a *political feeling*? Before we discuss that, we must ask why it could be considered a feeling at all.

Weirdness does not appear on any chart of "primary emotions" (Ekman 1972; Jack et al. 2014; Plutchik 1991). Affect and cognition are the product of complex, interwoven, intentional processes. Anthropology has made significant contributions both toward the acculturated aspects of feeling and to the nuances and ambiguousness of embodied social experience. Robert Levy (1973, 1984) and Jean Briggs (1970) both showed how "cultural schemas" could subvert the subjective experience of the purportedly universal emotions of sadness and anger, a process Levy called "hypocognition." Similarly, cultural schemas can valorize, or hypercognize, certain emotions and proscribe or describe which actions, beliefs, and symbols should be objects of approbation or disapprobation. Thus, theorists observe emotion cultures or *habitus* that shape our affective relationships and performances (Goodwin and Jasper 2006; Gould 2009; Hochschild 1979, 1983; Juris 2008). Theorists such as Lauren Berlant (2004, 2008) and Kathleen Stewart (2007) have also expanded the lexicon and realms of affective states, through accessing the intimacy of public spheres and the affective dimensions of everyday life.

It is within this latter realm of Stewart's fleeting and changeable "ordinary affects" that weirdness emerges from within the complex personal and social dynamics of the political world. The momentary contradiction, in which our embodied and innate expectations encounter something that does not quite accord with hegemonic predictions, impacts upon us as an instant of weirdness. The contradiction is not internal but intrinsically related to the world around us. This is not to say that one might not feel weird when asked to perform an unfamiliar

task or when one finds oneself thrust into an unfamiliar situation in which we hypocognize internal embarrassment or "shame-like" feelings into a sense of weirdness (Simon 2005), but the sense I wish to address here is not *I felt weird* but *that was weird*, a sense directed toward an *external* "nonfitting" relation. It does not cause fear, dread, or outrage. It presents little or no threat and probably needs to compete for salience with so many other issues of ordinary, everyday life. Yet the weird can often linger, a puzzle in the back of our consciousness to be later recalled as a question.

A Feeling for Politics

For Hannah Arendt, doubt was crucial to a form of subjectivity necessary to militate against what she saw as the dangerous "political passivity" of modern society. In modernity, she saw the domination of scientism, nationalism, capitalism, consumerism, and individualism as resulting in the pursuit of "life itself" as the highest goal: an unthinking existence solely concerned with the labor of self-satisfaction. It was these conditions, she believed, that enabled the growth and implementation of the totalitarian horrors in twentieth-century Europe. In the circumstances of such systematic oppression, she wrote, the faculty of *thinking* becomes political, for when "everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. In such emergencies [thinking] is political by implication" (Arendt [1978] 1981: 192).

Arendt drew upon Kant to distinguish between understanding and thinking. While understanding yields positive knowledge and a quest for knowable truths, thinking poses questions that cannot be answered from the standpoint of knowledge. The outstanding characteristics of thinking are "its withdrawal from the common-sense world of appearances, its self-destructive tendency with regard to its own results, its reflexivity, and the awareness of sheer activity that accompanies it" ([1978] 1981: 88). Thinking stops all the fundamental activities of the *vita active*; we literally stop and think. It does not produce knowledge, nor does it come to any judgment on what is right or wrong. Rather, it leads to "a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, in short, on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics" ([1978] 1981: 175). It is thinking's destructive tendency, "which subjects everything it gets

hold of to doubt" ([1978] 1981: 52), that Arendt believed could "be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it" ([1978] 1981: 5).

For Arendt, there was no room for affect in the faculties of the mind and she held emotions, or 'the passions' as she often called them, in very low esteem. She harshly delineated between body, mind and soul, leading to a compartmentalized understanding of the form and processes of consciousness, affect, cognition and thought. In this view thinking occurs in a somehow disembodied mind and it is in the soul where our feelings and emotions arise, "a more or less chaotic welter of happenings which we do not enact but suffer . . . and which in cases of great intensity may overwhelm us as pain or pleasure does" ([1978] 1981: 72). Though passions like love, joy or rage can certainly overwhelm our capacity to think clearly, the affective turn in research over the last twenty years or so has revealed that our affective lives are far more nuanced, complex and ambiguous than was realized at Arendt's time. The reflexive or perceptual dimension of the affective process are a kind of 'wordless knowledge' which represent the relationships between the embodied self, acculturated knowledge and the world we move through (Damasio 2000; Ingold 2010).

When we encounter an object, act, or utterance that does not quite fit into our well-ordered and supposedly certain expectations, we *feel* its weirdness before we apply any reasoning or cognitive appraisal as to what exactly is out of place. It is not a cause for panic or anger, it is merely a slight jolt in the otherwise ordinary course of the day. The feeling of weirdness is a subtle perceptual affective phenomenon that informs the unceasing aggregation of meaning-making without overwhelming the intentional experience or impeding clarity of thought. However, if this embodied realization (that our received expectations have failed to describe "reality") persists or if it is repeatedly encountered in difference social spaces and discourses, it can cause us to *doubt* the validity of those expectations. Doubt, the effect required by Arendt for a politically engaged *polis*, opens up a space in which we may begin to lose faith in the veracity of the story we tell of ourselves and our society. Weirdness, in the right conditions, can be a political feeling.

Repeated Encounters with Ignorance
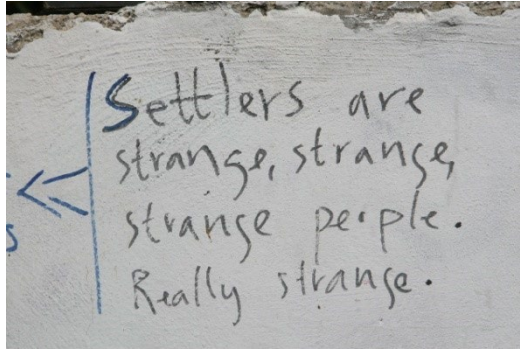
Figure 2. Graffiti in Sheik Jarrah, East Jerusalem, in 2015, where local Palestinians hold solidarity protests every Friday over a series of ongoing evictions that are part of a wider Jewish settlement impetus into Palestinian neighborhoods (© Brian Callan).

The purpose of all knowledge systems is, in part, to protect us from the chaos of free interpretation. Only the infant—or the insane—"stands alone directly confronting a world of solid fact" (Wright Mills 1967: 405). However, the production of hegemonic knowledge also produces a particular form of ignorance, one which we encounter when the world fails to conform to our received interpretations. The feeling of weirdness represents the limitations of the carefully crafted, and necessarily simplified, hegemonic understanding of "us" and "them" and all the attendant structures, symbols, and practices. When we encounter the weird, we touch upon the fringes of acculturated ignorance that deliberately obscures the realities of others. One of the greatest opportunities for the Jewish Israeli activists I worked with, to sense that the world was not as they had been led to believe, occurred during military service, when they left childhood and became willing and armed conscripts for the state.

As young adults coming of age, many of my participants had once been in one of the "elite" combat units. Throughout their lives, in nurseries, primary and secondary schools, public markings of loss, and celebration, powerful state-coordinated narratives of Zionism and Israel have structured and shaped their understandings of themselves and the world around them (Handelman 2004). Some participants were raised in secular, "right-wing Zionist" families, who traditionally supported the Likud Party, which came out of Zeev Jabotinsky's pre-state

Revisionist Zionist movement. Jabotinsky's thoughts and writings are credited as the source of narratives on the territorial maximalism of "Greater Israel" and the "Iron Wall" of Jewish militarism against an intransigent native "Arab" population (Jabotinsky 1923). Other participants came from decidedly left-wing families, like Oz, whose mother is one of the original Women in Black[4], yet he too enlisted in a combat unit when his time came. The national narrative is pervasive, strong, and seductive.

The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) itself is a core institution and site of validation in Israeli society. The IDF promotes and prides itself on being the "most moral army" in the world, with its own code of ethics developed by professor of philosophy Asa Kasher of the Tel Aviv University. All conscripts receive mandatory training in this doctrine, known as The IDF Spirit, and mantras such as "Purity of Arms" and "Black Flag Orders" are familiar to all Israelis regardless of combat experience. Avner, an activist with Breaking the Silence (BTS) described his army experience to me: "We receive weeks of combat training, which is designed to prepare us for conventional warfare, basically with Syria. After that, we get one week on dealing with a civilian population and then we're sent to the West Bank to protect settlers from 'terrorists'."

BTS is an organization of IDF veteran combatants who provide testimonies of their experiences in the occupied territories in order to "expose the public to the reality of everyday life in the occupied territories" (BTS n.d.). Many of the 700 or more testimonies collected by Avner and his colleagues record cases of outright abuse, beatings, or "unnecessary killings," where the sense that a moral boundary has been crossed is overt. Many others, however, attend to the daily banality of occupation—everyday experiences that afford soldiers the opportunity to regularly encounter situations that are difficult to make sense of through the security paradigm. Avner explained:

> We'd go into these villages, basically poor encampments in the hills, even though we knew there were no weapons or anything there. Sometimes we go in out of boredom, sometimes on orders to "put in an appearance—let them know who the sheriff is." We'd walk in, throw a few stun grenades about, turn over the tents, confiscate stuff.

For some soldiers, such practices felt dissonant with the notion of a moral army versus immoral terrorists, the version of reality instilled in them from childhood through to basic training. Oz, another ex-combat soldier turned solidarity activist, agreed:

> I hate all the stories about masochistic [sadistic] soldiers; it's not about that at all. Do you know what's weird in Israel? Our whole concept of violence. We're so used to shooting guns that it's not considered violent, so when we boarded the Mavi Marmara[5] and killed nine people, all that your heard on the radio was "Our boys were being attacked."

Here, Oz cuts straight to the heart of the paradox in the narrative for the only democracy in the Middle East: in order to maintain a military occupation over generations, violence must be normalized over generations.

While it can be argued that military service generally involves activities foreign to most peoples' experience, the combination of military conscription in Israel and the heavily promoted purity of the state's intentions and actions paradoxically opens a space through which Israelis can encounter the dissonance between the received narrative and the daily administration of the military control of a civilian population. Israeli activists often spoke to me of their fellow citizens willfully ignoring the situation in the occupied territories, of not wanting to know, of being "brainwashed." With the exception of a few of journalists, notably Amira Hass and Gideon Levy of the newspaper *Haaretz*, there is almost no media coverage of the weekly "nonviolent" protests across the West Bank, unless, that is, an Israeli or international activist is injured in "violent clashes" with security forces. Every weekend, I joined protests like the one at al-Maasara. At first, I too felt very nervous heading into Palestinian East Jerusalem or villages like al-Wallaja and Beit Ummar in the southern half of the West Bank. Imagery of masked youths, burning tires, and violent confrontation pervaded my own expectations.

What I encountered instead were small gatherings of local Palestinians joined by Israeli and international visitors who, week after week, walked together toward some non-descript location, a field, a well, a road. Week after week, in a well-choreographed exchange, the march would be stopped by the security forces. I learned that when violence breaks out it comes in the form of stun grenades and tear gas canisters, because at some point the officer in charge presumably decides to let us know "who the sheriff is"—particularly when a new unit takes over rotation in the area. From the Israeli perspective, such actions are not considered violent, but when confronted with the reality of policing the military occupation of a civilian population—demolishing the sheep pens of impoverished farmers, arresting children in the middle of the night, or breaking-up small protests week after week—some soldiers

experienced a dissonance they often described as weird, crazy, or surreal. Most, unfortunately, are protected from such absurdities by their faith in the purity and purpose of the state and its citizen-soldiers. But clearly, some of them have begun to doubt.

Cracks in the Patina: The Social Impact of Weirdness

One need not be a frontline "combatant" to encounter weird scenarios. The occasional high-profile aberration, reported in the media or heard in casual conversation between friends, and the inevitable exposure to alternative interpretations also afford encounters with weirdness for civilians. As Ronit, one of Israel's Anarchists Against the Wall, pointed out to me when I asked her how she became an activist:

> All my life, there'd been holes in the story. I came from a [right-wing] Likud family, and then I met a guy who was left-wing. He showed me what the holes were. When we broke up, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to see them anymore. But I could.

Ronit was born and bred in Israel, a product of her familial guidance, her schooling, and festivals, religious and national, all of which in Oz's words "are appropriated by the Zionist narrative." Rita, a retired anthropologist herself and a founding member of Women in Black, also evoked the depth and weight of such "schooling" of the national narrative when she spoke of how "brainwashed" Israelis are subject to the Zionist narrative throughout their lives. "I've never been to *kitah aleph*"—first grade in the Israeli education system—she admitted, having emigrated from the United States as a young woman in the 1960s. I myself *had* been part of the state's schooling system, having attended Ulpan, the famous network of language classes across the country that has been teaching Hebrew to countless *olim* (new immigrants) since 1949. At my very first class, back in 2003 during the Second Intifada, the teacher passed round pictures of world leaders and asked us to write something about them. Once completed, the teacher collected our work and held up two pictures, asking *"Me ze?"* ("Who is this?"). *"Ze George Bush ve Ariel Sharon"* ("That's George Bush and Ariel Sharon"). She continued: *"George Bush ve Ariel Sharom rotzim shalom"* ("George Bush and Ariel Sharon want peace"). Though I had my doubts, I repeated the phrase alongside my classmates. The teacher then held up a third picture of Yasser Arafat. *"Booooooo!"*, our

teacher cried out, and the entire class booed the Palestinian leader in reply.

All nations promote a particular narrative of state, self, and others. In Israel, the narrative is performed annually on the national scale through the close association of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day), a time of sadness and tragedy, and, a few days later, Yom HaAtzmaut (Independence Day), the collective elation and rebirth of the nation. Such acts of "collective effervescence" (Durkheim [1912] 1995) are augmented at the everyday level through schools and theaters, museums and media, bureaucracy and legislation, in a "cultural apparatus" where "art, science, and learning, entertainment, malarkey, and information are produced and distributed" (Wright Mills 1967: 406). Hegemonic narratives are both grandly promoted and flagged in the daily repetitious banality of nationalism (Billig 1995). Such is the pervasive system of meaning that Ronit was raised in to feel the pride and purity of the exceptional Zionist endeavor to rebuild and maintain the nation-state for the Jewish people.

However, Ronit's testimony also reveals the limitations of any hegemonic endeavor; there are always "holes in the story." The stories we are told by others about ourselves, through national curricula, the media, the military, and other state institutions, are not designed to reveal the truth. They are abstractions imposed upon reality in order to produce collectivity, ethnicity, nationhood, religiosity, and so forth. Though they purport to represent authoritative truth, clean and simple, such definitive knowledge will regularly impinge upon the contradictions and ambiguities of social life. The hegemonic national narrative, by necessity, obscures and excludes the realties that do not fit cleanly into its structures. In creating a particular topology of knowledge, the hegemonic narrative creates a particular kind of ignorance, the holes in the stories where the lives of others play out. When we encounter these lives, contrary to yet performed within the midst of *our* world, they appear to *us* as out of place. They confounds *our* expectations; the situation is a little weird.

When I told my Israeli participants that I had begun to look at weirdness, practically everyone would simply smile and nod in recognition of its pervasiveness from the vantage point of their already altered subjectivity as activists. "That's what you should focus on," Pater, a quiet mathematician, told me at the Sheik Jarrah protest (Fig. 2), while Ari just laughed and said: "You've come to the right place." These Israeli activists were long past moments of doubt and were now cognitively aware that the situation was entirely weird and indeed, at times, they

would join Palestinian actions that leveraged the contradictions between the state's narrative and its practices in their political actions: football matches played at the "Tunnel Checkpoint" near Bethlehem (PSP 2012). The "Clown Army" (Fig. 1) regularly plays the "Motley Fools" at demonstrations in the West Bank "to highlight the absurdity of all forms of repression," as the IDF tries to disperse or arrest them (Ben-Abba 2012). In another action, a group of Israeli women walked down Shuhada Street. This historical thoroughfare in Hebron's city center is closed to local Palestinian residents of the city. In the logic of the occupation, Jewish Israeli citizens are permitted to walk along this street so, in a cleverly conceived action, these women borrowed some of their traditional Palestinian dresses and hijabs[6] from local activists and proceeded to walk down the thoroughfare. Were they truly arrested for being dressed as Palestinian women?

These activists have closely examined the patina of the hegemonic narrative and found it to be cracked and flaking, such that its inconsistencies can no longer be glossed over. They have come to experience reality in a radically new way, in part because of the doubts produced by almost insignificant but repeated failures of their old expectations to describe the reality of their experiences. The accumulation of doubt over time makes it more likely that a given act, law, argument, or social policy will be seen as part of a systemic wrong, rather than being excused as a singular aberration or a case of unfortunate but necessary exceptionalism. Repeated encounters with imperfections and particular "ignorances" have atrophied the hegemonic corpus to a point where these activists have understood that the world they live in *is* weird. Weirdness becomes a form of knowing and understanding, one that is knowingly leveraged in the practice of dissent.

Conclusion

Examining the weird forces us to critique what is claimed to be the normal, and indeed I regularly encountered arguments that Israel is beleaguered and "the only democracy in the Middle East." At the macro-level, Israeli hegemonic self-understanding as a Jewish democracy with violent enemies is not an entire fabrication. There are regular multi-party elections for executive and legislative branches, an independent judiciary and the rule of law, a free-market economic system, freedom of religious practice, and competitive press institutions, and instrumental violence has been periodically directed at its citizens. The various

state institutions and civil bodies are relatively free and capable of contesting with each other over the production of authoritative interpretations of the "national character" of Israel. This master narrative emphasizes the nation's internationally acceptable character, allowing Israelis to feel their society is normal in the Western sense. However, like all hegemonic understandings, it also attempts to obscure unacceptable and aberrant realities. Israel is not a liberal democracy in terms of a state's formal blindness to ethnicity. This is a significant distinction that many Israelis seem unaware of, so it is not weird for them that the legislative body contains laws based on ethnicity or that the executive branches distribute national resources on this basis. "It's the Jewish state after all," is an argument I have often heard. However, if we also admit that for over 40 years the state has exercised *de facto* authority and military control over an entire population in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), who are denied voting rights, the notion of democracy itself becomes questionable. Indeed, with four million "native-born" noncitizens in the OPT and two million non-Jewish citizens in Israel, the notion that the state is predominantly Jewish does not accord with demographic reality. The narrative that "Arabs" are enemies of the state allows them to be excluded from such calculations, and so weirdness is not perceived at this macro-level. At the micro-level, the daily harassment of farmers and laborers, the arbitrary dispossession of lands, and the ongoing production of state and wildcat of settlements in Area C of the West Bank points more toward a policy of systematic colonization than an honestly defensive positioning. With open discussion of annexation from leading political players in Israel, this defensive discourse may have had its day.

The extent to which weirdness plays a significant role in the loss of faith in the national narrative for Israelis is difficult to capture and hard to gauge. My own experience of becoming an activist in the field was certainly full of strange encounters, but I knew this to be par for the course in ethnography. It was not until I began to see the confusion of Frank and hear from Ronit her own story and those of others that I began to realize that the situation itself was often bizarre and that faith in the national narrative may not always be sufficient to protect us from its absurdities. Though ambiguous by nature and lacking the mobilizing force of moral outrage, weirdness has a power that may lie in the fact that it expresses a nuanced, emotional critique of deeply acculturated notions of normality. As an affective state, it elides rational discourses that attempt to patch-up inconsistencies, injustices, and oppression. By paying more attention to the moments when things do

not make sense, we may begin to see the cracks and flakes in other deep-seated oppressive narratives of normality, such as the standards of Whiteness or trickle-down economic structures. It seems plausible that people everywhere may find their own world a little weird now and then, and so asking when and why this happens (or does not happen!) may provide valuable avenues of exploration into how we may come to doubt the veracity of the narratives that have excused injustices for generations.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. All individuals in this article have been given pseudonyms. Place names have been retained.
2. This is not the same as the Gush Etzion Regional Council, which is larger and includes the major Palestinian conurbations of Bethlehem and Beit Jala.
3. *Yallah shebab*! (Arabic: "Come on, guys!").
4. https://womeninblack.org/
5. The Turkish registered ship, part of a Gaza flotilla, which was boarded in international waters by Israeli naval commandos in May 2010.
6. The hijab (Arabic) is the headscarf worn by some Muslim women.

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