An Architectural Laboratory of the Extreme?

Reflections on Weizman's Hollow Land

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Eyal Weizman's *Hollow Land* is the first systematic study of Israel's regime of spatial control, combining the insights of political geography, architecture, semiotics, theories of counterinsurgency, and an appreciation for the shifting ideological tenants of Zionism and the history of settler regimes. It combines a majestic sweep of broad conceptual paradigms about population control, with a meticulous examination of the detailed mechanisms of such control and the thinking among military strategists who plan it, as well as their willing and unwilling accomplices among them. Those are the social scientists, contractors, and service providers who cater to their vision, and who often provide humanitarian services to mitigate the dire human costs and the disastrous results of these strategies.

One of the most rewarding features of this study is the manner in which it posits architectural knowledge and affiliated disciplines in social science, engineering and politics as partners, willing or sometimes unconscious, in the process of colonial conquest. The study provokes a number of issues that are only partly examined, and in need of elaboration. Here are some of them, listed briefly as questions:

Laboratory of the Extreme. Except for the historical discussion of planning Jerusalem, both during the late Mandate and early Israeli period of annexation, there is a striking absence of a historical perspective: it would have enriched the discussion on landscaping if a periodization of Zionist colonization of the land was addressed during the Yishuv and post-state eras. Weizman suggests that we are witnessing an accelerated form of land appropriation, segregation, and frontier architecture in the last three decades. One gets the impression

from the author that this is a qualitatively new phenomenon-what you might call a laboratory of the extreme. Is the author saying that the frontier theory of conquest applies to the West Bank but not to the Galilee, and not to earlier period of Israeli settlement in the Negev?

The Process of "Distanciation." One of the most significant achievements of the Oslo Agreement from an Israeli governmental perspective (as pointed out in *The Hollow Land*) is the creation of a spatial geography of fragmentation in which the de-linking of the Palestinian and Israeli population has enhanced the legitimacy of occupation. This happened through withdrawal to the periphery of urban areas and handing over the administrative control and welfare of 80 % of the Palestinians, in areas A and B, to the Palestinian Authority. In effect it created conditions for population control from a distance, either through surveillance and checkpoints, or through administrative autonomy by a non-sovereign Palestinian regime.

But the process is not complete. Rural areas in region C, the settlements, and the greater Jerusalem area (outside the municipal borders), remained zones of direct military control. Arab Jerusalem also continued to be ruled directly, but was separated both from other Palestinian communities and from Palestinian leadership. To a large extent the process removed the *physicality* of the confrontation and therefore *made the tactics of civil insurrection and strategy of disobedience (which defined the first uprising) virtually impossible*. No alternative resistance strategy since then evolved partly due to the absence of physical encounters, but also due to the absence of a leadership.

One area where I differ with Weizman is over the issue of the illusion of sovereignty, which he illustrated through the semiotics of the one-way mirror: the example from the pre-intifada period was the presence and power of Israeli officials at the King Hussein/Allenby bridge who used a one-way mirror to monitor (and approve or disapprove) Palestinian passage. I do not believe that there was an "illusion of sovereignty" here, and it did not need the conditions of dusk to unravel the real power behind the mirror. What existed rather is rather a consensual delusion in which Palestinians (as in *La Vita è Bella*) shared in the self-deception in order to make life more tolerable knowing that they could not resolve the issue of sovereignty, given the existing power relationship between them and the Israelis.

Normalization of Occupation? One consequence of removing the physical military presence in the major urban areas has been to create a sense of normalcy. Weizman refers to the normalization of the "absurd" system of population control through filtering checkpoints. The system creates a mechanism of routinization of arbitrary military control that is internalized by the subject population, leading to protocols of acceptance through negotiating its loopholes (permits, exceptions, smuggling). But this system of normalization of oppression has built-in weaknesses that undermine its own sense of normalcy.

Two features of this system are its unpredictability and irrationalism. It is supposed to create mechanisms of control in order to prevent penetration, circumvention and deceit. But in *overdoing* its objective of population control it leads to immense resentment and conditions of rebellion. A relevant question here is why does the system resort to extreme humiliation of the population when such humiliation defeats its function of security control?

The question of agency in Weizman's analysis is also problematic. The system of control chartered by the author produces an occupation regime that is all pervasive. Does the cunning adaptation of the subject Palestinian population to this regime through subversion of building regulation and getting around the blockade, constitute resistance to the regime, or a normalization of oppression?

The System is over-designed. Weizman skillfully draws an architectural system of control that is omnipotent and omnipresent. The regime of population control through the technology of monitoring and surveillance; of countless filtering systems; of segmented road systems; of counter-insurgency through predicting every possible contingency of the enemy and pre-empting it, is ultimately overdesigned. It ostensibly operates through open and closed spaces, underground and in the air, and through the bureaucratic regime of permits and civil administration. By investing so much conceptual capital in detailing its omnipotence Weizman produces a paradigm that is hermetically sealed and has the force of nature. There seems to be no escape from it.

Even on the intellectual plane, in this paradigm the military commanders have captured the terrain, utilizing critical theory, Foucault, Deleuze (and Marx, in the case of the Village Leagues) to (successfully) engineer a counter-revolutionary reality. The weakness of this paradigm is that it overdetermines the omnipotence of the hegemonic power by attributing to it exaggerated capacities of control both at logistic and intellectual levels. It leaves unexamined its own contradictions; its misadventures; its control by politicians who have myopic ideological visions, whose thirst for land grabbing will make them choke on excessive expansion of limited economic capacities; and who seem to behave as if they are independent from the world around them. But after all, as Weizman points out in "Demographic Architecture," it is indeed remarkable that Israel's planning policies in Jerusalem have not succeeded in transferring the requisite number of Palestinians outside of the city; even the most powerful do not operate in a laboratory where they control all the elements.

Salim Tamari is editor of The Jerusalem Quarterly. *He made these comments on* Hollow Land *in the context of a public discussion with Eyal Weizman held in the Department of Urban Planning at MIT on February 19th, 2009.*