

Is There Anything We Might Call Dissent in Israel? (And, If There Is, Why Isn't There?)

Daniel Dor

In April 2005, I was invited by the Central European University in Budapest to give a talk at a workshop convened in memory of the late Edward Said. The workshop was titled "Dissent," and I was asked to talk about "Dissent in Israel." As I tried to figure out for myself what I wanted to talk about, I found myself, quite surprisingly, thinking about an old saying—a rhetorical question—made some twenty years ago by an Israeli writer who died a few months after Said and who in more than one respect could be thought of as the direct antithesis to Said—Efraim Kishon. A self-proclaimed Jewish chauvinist, a European Orientalist of the type that we sometimes think no longer exists, Kishon was nevertheless a comic genius. His books, stories, and films probably provide the most penetrating look at what Israeli society—especially that of the first twenty years after 1948—looked like *from within*. Kishon's rhetorical question can be translated as something like this: "Is there anything we might call an Israeli sense of humor, and, if there is, why isn't there?"

I had my topic, then: Is there anything we might call dissent in Israel, and, if there is, why isn't there? It was, of course, a question that had been on my mind for a very long time, but always in the form of a complaint, a bitter sense of disappointment—not really as a topic of intellectual interest. Everyone who belongs to the very small group of people who try to do radical politics in Israel knows the feeling. At the beginning of the second Palestinian intifada, for example, from October 2000 on, we gathered for

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our little demonstrations in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in groups of fifty, sixty, sometimes one hundred people. Everyone knew everyone else, a regular reunion of a few old friends. This was not a very pleasant experience. Quite miraculously, this very small group of people managed to do a lot in the subsequent four and a half years in terms of direct *resistance* to the occupation—the refuseniks, MachsomWatch, and Ta'ayush are probably the most impressive examples—but this is not the same thing as successful or even efficient *dissent*.¹ For this paper, then, I decided to try and take up the challenge—posed mainly by the huge figure of Edward Said in the background of the workshop—to formulate a more theoretically oriented answer to my version of Kishon's question.

Let me start, then, with what seems to me to lie at the very center of the problem—the distinction between dissent in totalitarian (and other forms of authoritarian) regimes and dissent in Western democracies. Anyone who is engaged in critical studies knows quite well that we should put this very notion of “Western democracy” in quotation marks, and I think that we do indeed have to keep on questioning the concept. But I also think that the problem of dissent in Western societies, at least in Israel and in the U.S., actually begins exactly with the fact that in a certain crucial sense—to be explicated below—we *do* live in democracies, but our model for dissent, our image of what dissent is about, is one we borrowed from dissent in authoritarian regimes.

There are two main differences between dissent in Western societies and dissent in authoritarian regimes—two differences that at the first stage of the argument will seem to imply that the notion of dissent should simply not be used to describe anything that happens (or does not happen) in the context of Western societies. Towards the end, I will try to show that under a certain condition, a very specific one, we may still think of certain deeds

1. The fact that most of the action coming from the radical Left since 2000 concentrated on direct *resistance*—the attempt to make life more difficult for the practitioners of the occupation or, alternatively, to make life slightly more bearable for the Palestinians—testifies, among other things, to the extent to which the *discursive* enterprise of dissent reached a dead end in exactly this period. In this sense, the notion of resistance provides an alternative framework for radical politics, a framework that explicitly gives up the attempt to say things and concentrates on doing. There is a lot to be said for this framework. In this paper, however, I will try to ask whether and under what conditions the enterprise of dissent as a discursive activity might be revived.

DANIEL DOR teaches in the department of communication at Tel Aviv University. His most recent book is *The Suppression of Guilt: The Israeli Media and the Reoccupation of the West Bank* (2005). His email address is daniel@post.tau.ac.il

as dissent in such societies. But, for the moment, let us look at the differences.

The first difference is usually quite widely acknowledged. The personal price one must be willing to pay for dissent—what Gáspár Miklós Tamás called, in the invitation to the CEU workshop, “facing the music”—is quite clearly a very different thing in Western societies and in authoritarian regimes. People sometimes like to boast about a conference they were not invited to because of their views or about their hate mail; in most cases, this is not very serious. Things can sometimes be unpleasant, but the fact of the matter is that there is also some compensation for these tiny inconveniences—an invitation, for example, to give a talk about dissent in a beautiful city like Budapest. With all due respect, this is not exactly Siberia.

This seems to be something that everybody understands, but there is a much deeper difference that is not usually acknowledged. In both Western societies and authoritarian regimes, dissent is directed against the source of social coercion; it attempts, in Said’s famous formulation, to “speak the truth to power.” But in authoritarian regimes, exactly because power is coercive in the most concrete, physical, nonsymbolic sense, exactly because you can find yourself in Siberia tomorrow, the other people, the people on the street, the regular nondissenters, actually do agree with what the dissenters say. They do not say it publicly, but they say it in private, they think it, and, most importantly, they experience it directly in their everyday lives. What the dissenters say reflects the experiences of the people. This generalization may have its exceptions (for example, where certain specific forms of libertarian dissent in the former Soviet bloc included a universalistic objection to nationalism, or racism, as such), but, as a first approximation, I think it is viable.²

If, then, we think of dissent as a speech act, if we ask ourselves what type of speech act dissent actually is, it seems that what makes dissent what it is in authoritarian regimes is the very fact that the speech act is performed—the very fact that somebody actually stands up and talks. Slightly abusing Austin’s terms, we may say that dissent in authoritarian regimes is a performative speech act. The content of the speech act in this sense is not what counts. It is not the purpose of the speech act to say *something*, but simply

2. Tamás, for example, a Hungarian dissenter, spoke of the negative reaction of the general public to his version of libertarian dissent against the Communist regime but later on testified to what he himself called his “orgasmic experience” of giving a speech after the collapse of Communism in front of a crowd of 300,000 demonstrators and listening to the crowd applauding after each sentence. This “orgasmic” celebration of freedom, in which the dissenting figure plays such a central role, is possible exactly because the newly acquired freedom is freedom from physical coercion. No one who expresses dissenting views in a Western society can—or should—hope for such a moment of exultation.

to say. It is a performative speech act that is exactly about the fact that free speech is not allowed. We are not allowed to speak; therefore we speak.

This is why the content of dissenting speech acts in authoritarian contexts is so often reduced to truisms, to tautologies: People have the right to be free; you cannot torture people; free speech is a basic human right. Sometimes, it seems, no words are needed at all. I was told a beautiful story about dissent in the Soviet Union that I was never able to confirm. As the story goes, Stalin decided at one point not to allow the great cellist Mstislav Rostropovic to play because of something he said. The pianist Sviatislav Richter and the violinist David Oistrach decided they would not play either. In the end, when the ban was removed and Rostropovic was allowed to play again, the three played Beethoven's triple concerto together. At the end of the concert, the public stood in ovation for more than two hours. Everybody understood the significance of the event. There was no need for explanation; the specific musical circumstances allowed the people to say something—simply by standing up and applauding—and the message was as clear as it could possibly be. I am not sure whether this actually happened, but the point of the story holds even if it is some sort of urban legend from the Stalinist period; the significance of the speech act of dissent in authoritarian contexts is in the act, not in the content.

This is more or less the exact opposite of what happens in Western societies. There, dissent also attempts to stand up against power, but it does not in any way reflect a deep-seated emotion of the people. It is not the case that the Israeli Jewish public somehow sits there and waits for someone who is brave enough to talk against the occupation. What the dissenter says does not echo something that is already there. Instead, it is actually saying something that is exactly directed against what most people think. How do people who define themselves as dissenters in democratic contexts cope with this problem? Well, the fact that most of the thought about dissent in democracies is based on the totalitarian model makes it relatively easy for many spokespersons of dissent—and Noam Chomsky is probably the best example—to adopt a position that at its most extreme version simply says that what regular people say they think, or even what they think they think, is not what they really think deep inside—that if we somehow managed to release them from the symbolic coercion of the system they would all of a sudden discover that they have the innate capacity to think the same thoughts that dissenters have always thought they should. Humbler versions of this view may maintain, for example, that all people have the capacity to think morally—that people have a moral capacity—which means, again, that the role of the dissenter is to try to help them get there, to get out of the cave, to see the light. This deep sense of conviction that consensual

thought is only and always the result of symbolic coercion (that at the bottom of things symbolic coercion is simply a more sophisticated version of physical coercion) seems to me to lie at the heart of the problem of dissent in Western societies. It most clearly lies at the heart of the problem of dissent in Israel.

This, I think, is the point that we simply need to accept: people do not think the way they do in Western societies because they were coerced to think that way, and they definitely do not think the way they do because the truth has somehow been hidden from them. People do not think the way they do *despite themselves*. They think the way they do because there is a deep logic, a whole structure of reasoning that they share as a society, and this inner structure of reasoning fundamentally coheres with the way life in democracies is experienced on a day-to-day basis. Symbolic coercion, of course, does exist and it plays an enormously important role in all this, but it can only do what it does because what it says—what the media says, for example—interacts with something that is already there, something that is experienced at a deeper level. In authoritarian regimes, the deep logic of social thinking is based, at least in part, on the accumulation of the experiences of physical coercion; of the concrete, day-to-day experience of not being able to speak out; of being afraid; of being humiliated by power. The words that the dissenters are brave enough to express publicly in this context thus reflect something that most of the others feel. (Some of the others may also resent the dissenters for saying what they say because they feel that they themselves will eventually pay the price for the act of dissent, but this simply demonstrates the extent to which they actually *agree* with the dissenters.) All this is not the case in Western societies, and, in this sense, Western societies are indeed experienced by the majority of their citizens as democracies. Most of the people who share the consensual views of their society—most of the people who *vote*—also share the type of experiences that, for them, seem to imply that they live in a *free* society—that they are free to think their own thoughts and, even more importantly, that they are free to express those thoughts whenever they wish to do so.

Whatever most consensual thinkers (and nonthinkers) in democracies think about those issues that trouble dissenters—human rights, justice, or equality—they all share a deep belief in the idea of freedom of speech. In this sense, the type of liberal dissent that played such a crucial role in the construction of Western democracies—the type of dissent centered around the right to speak, to participate in the political discourse—actually resulted in an almost universal belief in just that: the right to speak. Regular people in democracies experience their freedom of speech in the most direct fashion. They may decide not to use their right to speak (the liberal utopia never

included an obligation to do so) and they may decide not to listen to what other people have to say (again, not a requirement of the liberal agenda); but they nevertheless have the feeling that they do have the right, that if they decided to speak—if, for example, they decided to go into politics—they would be able to do that. The very fact that dissenting views are heard, that dissenters do appear on television, and so on, is ample proof of exactly that. If dissenters are the only ones who speak the truth, then quite obviously they are underrepresented in the media; but if dissenters simply voice opinions that are *different*—and this is how most people see dissenting views—then the fact that you can see someone voicing such views on television *from time to time* actually demonstrates that the society is indeed founded on the principle of free speech. As a matter of fact, those people who subscribe to radical views in Israel—those who regularly participate in those demonstrations we started out with—actually appear on Israeli television much more frequently than their percentage in the society would predict. There is no other group of a mere few hundred in number that has this kind of exposure. There isn't a real problem with *saying* those things that dissenters are interested in saying.

All of this means that we have reached a point in history in which the principle of freedom of speech actually plays on the side of the consensus in Western societies, against dissent.³ More precisely, and this is exactly what I am trying to get at, the principle of freedom of speech plays on the side of the consensus insofar as dissent insists on defining itself as a performative speech act. The fact that dissenters in Western societies still think about themselves as engaging in the performative speech act of speaking the truth to power thus plays a detrimental role in the enterprise of dissent; it helps people strengthen their conviction that things are generally fine, that freedom of speech is there for whoever wants to make use of it.⁴

3. This is most persuasively demonstrated in the history of the mass media in Western democracies, as told, for example, in James Curran's seminal book *Power without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting, and New Media in Britain* (New York, 2003), which deals specifically with the British newspaper of the nineteenth century. As long as the authorities tried to use direct, physical coercion against newspapers—confiscating printing machines, arresting journalists, raising the tax on paper, and so on—the journalists and especially the newspaper editors saw themselves simply and squarely as fighting for social justice, truth, and transparency. There is nothing like physical coercion to drive people to dissenting views. The moment the British government decided to change its course of action, by letting the people in the media feel that they were free to write whatever they liked, real dissent more or less disappeared as a guiding principle. It remained, to a certain extent, in the opinion columns, where the very fact that it does get published helps demonstrate for the readers that there is nothing to complain about; the fact that dissenting views do get published proves that we live in a real democracy.

4. It might make sense at this point to say something of a more general nature about the overall structure of my argument. The notion that the principle of free speech has come to serve the interests of power in Western societies, along with a whole set of other observations, might seem to imply that Western societies simply do not deserve to be called democracies—which means

It seems, then, that we need to find a way to rethink the entire structure of the speech act of dissent for it to become a meaningful act in the context of Western societies. We need to find a way to disentangle it from the idea of free speech. The act of standing up and speaking is simply not the point. This is exactly what democracies are all about, speaking. Everybody speaks. There is nothing more unusual or interesting in the dissenter's speech act than in anyone else's. We have to find a way to redirect dissenting energies into a different type of speech act, one that does not center around the very fact that it is there, but around its content, its communicative value, and its dialogical relationship with whatever takes place within the consensual discourse. Western societies do not sit there waiting for dissenters to create a political dialogue. The political dialogue is already there. What we call consensus—what seems to be a unified set of beliefs when looked at from very far away—is actually a complex cluster of conflicting views in constant heated debate. Rethinking dissent in terms of communicative value means trying to find ways to join the existing debate in the society, to become relevant. Is the range of views which the consensual discourse accepts too narrow? Well, simply stating this fact will not do. We must find ways to broaden that range, and in order to be able to do that we need to improve our understanding of what is taking place within this narrower range. We need to develop the ability to *listen*.

We have started out with the idea that dissent is indeed dissent only if the dissenter is willing to face the music. In Western societies, then, facing the music means exactly this: understanding that dissent can only be effective, significant, successful to the extent that the dissenter is willing to accept the depth and complexity of the opposite view—if we get into a real dialogue *with it*. Not to try to convince people that they were somehow brainwashed

that, at the end of the day, there is no real difference between them and the authoritarian regimes that gave us the model for dissent in the first place. It might seem, then, that my argument somehow undermines its own presupposition. This line of reasoning, however, seems to me to lead to a dead end exactly because it is so clear-cut. To be sure, Western societies leave much to be desired in terms of their resemblance to the ideal of democracy. And Israel, with its insistence on the idea of a "Jewish-Democratic state"—and, of course, the occupation—is a much worse example than many others. But the very fact that Western societies have come to accept the idea of free speech to such an extent and the fact that the majorities of their citizens sincerely feel that they are free to make up their own minds—that they are, first and foremost, free of physical coercion—should be enough for us to accept that Western societies are democratic enough to justify some serious rethinking of the one notion that hinges on exactly that—the notion of dissent. Defective democracies are democratic exactly to the extent that they are: no more, but no less. It is not an all-or-nothing proposition. The fact that dissent concentrates on what is defective does not mean that it can afford to ignore those properties of society that emerged as a result of the Enlightenment project, distorted though they may be. Not only is this conceptually important, it is crucial for any attempt to devise a reasonable strategy of dissent.

(everyone was brainwashed apart from the dissenter), and not to try to persuade them that everything about their lives is one big lie (no one would be willing to accept *that*, and it is wrong in any case), but to make the effort of understanding why people think the way they do and agree to abandon the notion that Truth is somehow on our side. Facing the music means that we can no longer settle for deconstructing the opposite view—which is something that we need to go on doing, of course—but that we have to start seriously deconstructing our own. We have to learn to be skeptical about our own claims and understand that they are as relative, as shaky, and as tentative as any other.

This does not mean that we have to somehow dilute our worldview or turn our convictions into marketable commodities. We have to internalize the fact that our worldview is extreme, utopian, strange to most people—and, while fully keeping our views as radical as they need to be, still look for ways to connect them to what is happening within the consensus, to help consensual people become interested in them or, at least, become interested in trying to figure them out. This will not happen if we do not go through the same process ourselves: becoming interested in the opposite view, interested in figuring it out—not explaining it away (people are too frightened to think, the entire society is traumatized to the extent that it cannot think rationally), but explaining it to ourselves, getting to the point where we really understand what it takes to hold the opposite view.

In the Israeli context, this means first and foremost that we need to get away from the discourse of *blame* against Israel, the type of discourse that centers around abstract justice and historical justification, and find a way to develop an alternative discourse of *responsibility* that centers around the simple fact that at the moment, in the here and now, the Palestinians are under Israeli occupation and not the other way around—which means that finding a just and viable solution to this problem is our responsibility, not theirs. As opposed to what is sometimes assumed, Israeli society is not indifferent to the global critical discourse that traces the roots of the conflict in the region to the very idea of Zionism. As a matter of fact, it is obsessed with this discourse to the point of paralysis (much more, by the way, than it is interested in Zionism itself or its history). Israeli society understands this discourse, quite simply, as destined to undermine the very existence of Israel itself (and, in some cases, this is the truth). Expecting Israeli society to engage this type of argument—to apologize for the Naqba, for example, or to accept that the notion of a Jewish democratic state is a contradiction in terms—*before* the arrival of some type of less-than-perfect solution and before the level of violence is reduced seems to me to be a total nonstarter.

As I show elsewhere,⁵ the rather complex patterns of bias in the coverage of the news by the mainstream media in Israel, for example, are best explained as an attempt to defend Israeli society against exactly this type of discourse. The Israeli media, in other words, is locked in a vicious cycle of guilt and counterblaming with world opinion and especially with the world media and thus prevents Israeli society from asking itself the difficult questions about what it should be doing in the present and near future to put an end to the other cycle, that of violence. The type of critical discourse that concentrates on the allocation of blame feeds the cycle of guilt and does not allow a more solution-oriented discourse to evolve.

The radical discourse, of course, is solution-oriented in its own way; its logical conclusion is the one-state solution. Is this a *possible* solution? Well, the regular answer to this question is that the impossible is sometimes easier than the difficult. Listening to the consensus, however, involves, among other things, the understanding that regular people, nonintellectuals (and certain intellectuals, too), find such an assertion both naïve and irresponsible; the impossible is not easier. It is impossible. Accordingly, they interpret the idea of the one-state solution as either illusive and utopian or as a sophisticatedly formulated call for the elimination of the state of Israel. We must find a way to incorporate some pragmatic constraints into our worldview.

Ideas, moreover, do not always arrange themselves in the way we might expect. A political argument that has become quite popular in certain quarters in Israel in the last four years has it that we are indeed to blame for the whole conflict—that the Naqba, for example, is indeed an “original sin”—which means that we have no choice but to take the most aggressive steps to defend ourselves against the Palestinians. They hate us so much, so the argument goes, and for such a good reason, that we shall never be able to reach any peaceful solution with them. In a real sense, this argument actually captures something of importance about the discourse of blame; guilt leads to punishment, not to resolution.

A discourse of responsibility, a responsible discourse, should thus find a way to stress the simple fact that a solution, a just solution, is possible—and that it depends on us more than anyone else. The Israeli society of the second intifada was not war-happy. It was, more than anything else, deeply depressed. The notion that former Prime Minister Ehud Barak managed to prove that the Palestinians were and are not interested in a peaceful solution to the conflict—by making the “generous offer” that Arafat declined to ac-

5. See Daniel Dor, *The Suppression of Guilt: The Israeli Media and the Reoccupation of the West Bank* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2005).

cept at Camp David—left the Israeli public with the conviction that its destiny is actually in the hands of the Palestinians. A discourse of responsibility in this sense is an empowering discourse. What it says is actually quite simple: We are the occupiers; therefore we are the ones capable of putting an end to the conflict. Is this idea of “empowering dissent” a contradiction in terms? I do not think so. It is just more difficult. But, then again, the difficult is easier than the impossible.