



The path of least resistance: Constructions of space in the discourse of Israeli military refuseniks



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ABSTRACT

In this article I examine the ways in which Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories use spatial representations and metaphors in discourse explaining their decision to refuse. Using Lefebvre's (1995) framework regarding spaces of representation as sites of political struggle, I analyze how selective refuseniks construct the Territories as a space of pollution, irrationality, disorder and death, expressing fear that these qualities might contaminate Israeli space, and thus implicitly promoting a separatist logic of exclusion. Refuseniks employ metaphors of movement to portray the transition from 'here' to 'there' as a shift into an alternate universe, and attempt to appropriate hegemonic discursive conceptualizations associated with three culturally loaded spaces: the prison, the Jewish settlements, and Nazi Germany. The ambivalent dialectics of dominant and resistant ideologies in refuseniks' discourse and their cultural implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the impact of both the 'discursive turn' (e.g., Billig, 1999) and the 'spatial turn' (e.g., Warf and Arias, 2009) in the social sciences has been widely acknowledged. A variety of studies in different disciplines have addressed issues related to discourse and space simultaneously, examining the heterogeneous ways in which they interact. While earlier philosophical approaches to language and space had considered them to be relatively neutral or a priori 'containers' of social information and knowledge, more critical and poststructuralist approaches have recognized both their constructed and their constitutive nature; that is, the ways in which discourses and spaces both reflect relations of power, ideologies, and social identities, and at the same time help construct (i.e., shape, constrain, and transform) these same entities.

Studies attempting to link discourses and spaces and examine their mutual interactions take different forms. Some focus on space itself as a form of discourse, considering the physical layout of space as a feature to be analyzed (e.g., Foucault, 1977). Others examine the increasingly complex ways in which spaces and discourses are intertwined in the terrains of geographical landscapes, everyday life, mobility, or performance (e.g., Falkheimer and Jansson, 2006; Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010). Still others

examine the spatial features of language itself, such as the use of spatial metaphors (e.g., Shands, 1999). Finally, some studies explore the ways in which spaces are constructed in discourse, focusing on the ways in which discourses such as planning materials, geographical or urban planning documents, travel guides, or media texts frame and represent spaces of varying scales and the cognitive, material, and symbolic practices they are associated with (e.g., Richardson and Jensen, 2003; Searle, 2004).

The present study is aligned with the latter two of these approaches, critically examining both spatial representations and spatial metaphors in one specific context—their use in discourse by Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories (henceforth 'refuseniks').¹ While much research has examined constructions of space in discourse, a vast majority of studies have focused on these constructions as tools in the service of power; that is, on how institutional discourses enforce logics and rationalities of space associated with maintaining the unequal relations of power associated with neoliberalism, globalization, patriarchy, and so forth (e.g., Petersen and Warburton, 2012; Searle, 2004). Far fewer studies have examined discursive constructions of space by social movements, groups, and individuals challenging these

¹ There is some variation among scholars with regard to the preferred English translation for *sarvanim*—the commonplace Hebrew term for those who refuse to serve. While some (e.g., Helman, 1999; Linn, 1996) have used 'conscientious objectors,' I have chosen the more popular term generally used by the 'refusers' themselves. This also appears to be the favored term in most scholarly and popular discourse on the topic (e.g., Dooly, 2005; Kidron, 2004a).

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dominant constructions and attempting to resist or subvert hegemony (for some examples, see Mohanram, 1999; Shands, 1999). In addition, this study's focus on both discursive representations of physical space and the use of spatial metaphors in discourse is meant to highlight the complementary functions of these two discursive apparatuses. As Elden (2004: 186) notes, "Much spatial language deals with contestation, struggle and productivity. This is precisely because it mirrors the actual uses and experiences of space."

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Discourses about space

In his seminal work *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1995) identifies space as the primary site of political and ideological struggle. Lefebvre sees space as socially produced by social forces, with its meanings constantly negotiated materially, through spatial practices, and mentally, through discourse, perceptions, and interpretations. Lefebvre develops a conceptual triad encompassing physical, mental, and social space; it consists of *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *spaces of representation* (Lefebvre, 1995:33–39).² As elucidated by Elden (2004: 190):

The first of these takes space as physical form, *real* space, space that is generated and used. The second is the space of *savoir* (knowledge) and logic, of maps, mathematics, of space as the instrumental space of social engineers and social planners. (...) Space as a mental construct, *imagined* space. The third sees space as produced and modified over time and through its use, spaces invested with symbolism and meaning, the space of *connaissance* (less formal or more local forms of knowledge), space as *real-and-imagined*. [Emphases in original].

In this study I use Lefebvre's schema to examine Israeli military refuseniks' constructions of space in discourse. These discursive constructions take into account refuseniks' *lived* experiences of the space of the Occupied Territories (spatial practice), as well as the perceptions and the symbolic meanings attached to this space (spaces of representation). At the same time, these constructions are also influenced by the more institutional and technical discourses concerning the Territories and their relation to Israel (representations of space).

2.1.1. Discourses of space in Israel and the Occupied Territories

The conflict over space lies at the heart of the conflict between Israel and its neighbors, and between Zionism – as the master narrative through which most Jewish Israelis make sense of their collective identity – and the Palestinian national movement (Ben-Ari and Bilu, 1997: 3–4). From its inception in the late 19th century, the Zionist movement has considered the quest for space to be its ideological backbone, its central goal being the establishment of a territorial homeland for the Jewish people after 2000 years of exile (Rosen-Zvi, 2004: 10). The 1947 United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, which resolved to divide the territory between Jews and Arabs, followed by Israel's War of Independence and its establishment as an independent state in 1948, appeared to have solved this problem. However, certain issues related to space remained problematic, in particular the fact that Israel constructs itself as both a territorially defined political state and an ethnically defined tribal state belonging to all the Jews in the world (Rosen-Zvi, 2004). The 1967 Six Day War rendered this ambiguity much more

acute. In this war, Israel seized territories in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem. The status of the Occupied Territories, and in particular the West Bank, has been at the center of debate within Israeli society since then, with some Israelis viewing the Territories as an asset for use during negotiations for peace, and others citing their religious and historical significance as the biblical cradle of Jewish civilization and culture, signifying and realizing the dream of the 'Greater Israel' (Feige, 2002). Further complicating the issue is the fact that the West Bank is sizable (approximately 5665 square kilometers, compared with Israel's 20,770 square kilometers)³ and geographically contiguous with Israel; it does not occupy a 'separate space' but rather extends directly eastwards from Israel's officially recognized borders, forming what might be viewed as the 'belly' of Israel.

The question of sovereignty over the space of the Occupied Territories has become even more problematic due to the fact that almost since their seizure, and more determinedly after the rise of the right-wing Likud government in 1977, Israel began to settle them with Jewish residents. Today approximately 370,000 Jews reside in the West Bank (not including East Jerusalem),⁴ maintaining their rights as Jewish citizens and under the jurisdiction of Israeli (civil) law. At the same time, the approximately 2.7 million Palestinian residents of the West Bank live under military occupation, are under the jurisdiction of the military legal system, and their individual and collective rights are severely limited. And while Israel unilaterally evacuated its (scarcer) settlements in the Gaza Strip in 2005 and ceded control to the Palestinian Authority, the 1.7 million Palestinians residing in Gaza also remain under tight political and military regulation.⁵

Lustick (1993) has suggested that Israeli discourse concerning the status of the Territories be viewed from a Gramscian perspective, as an ongoing struggle over their understanding, with different groups attempting to impose their ideological definitions of spatial reality and to render them neutral and commonsensical (see also Feige, 1999). In the present study I take this Gramscian approach as a starting point, and examine military refuseniks as one group that has taken upon itself the mission of attempting to impress upon Israeli society its worldview with regard to the Territories, through a combination of both spatial practice (refusing to physically occupy the space seen as illegitimate) and spatial discourse.

2.2. Civil militarism in Israel and the refusal movement

The integral link between nationality and military conflict in Israel has rendered the entire Jewish population, in essence, a "nation in uniform" (Ben-Eliezer, 2003). While some cracks have certainly appeared in the formerly taken for granted centrality of the military (e.g., Cohen, 2008; Livio, 2012), it still occupies an extremely central social role. With some exceptions, all Jewish Israeli citizens must serve a compulsory term in the military, with many continuing to serve in the military reserves. This has made military service an essential component of individual consciousness and personal identity, and the military is widely considered

³ See, for example, the Carter Center maps for Israel and the Occupied Territories. Available at: http://www.cartercenter.org/countries/israel_and_the_palestinian_territories.html.

⁴ This number is based upon the Israeli civil registry. The number of Jews living in East Jerusalem is more difficult to ascertain, as Israel does not distinguish between East and West Jerusalem in official publications. Current estimates put the number at around 200,000 (Dayan, 2013).

⁵ The figure for West Bank residents includes Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem. The size of the Palestinian population has been a topic of much political controversy, with different sides advancing divergent estimates aligned with their political objectives. The figures stated here reflect the estimates made by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (see Miller, 2015)

² The English translation uses "representational spaces" rather than "spaces of representation," but I have followed the more accurate form. See Elden (2004: 190).

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