



Reconsidering the laboratory thesis: Palestine/Israel and the geopolitics of representation

Rhys Machold

Department of Politics, York University, Ross Building, Room S 672, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Security assemblages
Human testing
Settler colonialism
Actor-network theory
War economy
Zionism

ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in the notion of Palestine/Israel as a ‘laboratory’ for the production and export of advanced weapons, security knowhow and technology. Critics of Israeli wars and the ongoing colonization of Palestine use the laboratory metaphor to make sense of Israeli state policies and practices used in controlling Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and fighting wars but also to address how Israeli instruments of violence come to travel elsewhere. This article brings these discussions into sharper focus by examining how the concept of the laboratory is employed in making sense of Israel’s perceived centrality in global patterns of violence and militarism, here termed the *laboratory thesis*. The article argues that although the thesis develops powerful insights, it has analytical limitations. It further calls into question the thesis’ polemical force, suggesting that critical references to Palestine/Israel as a laboratory reinforce misleading ideological tropes at the core of Israel’s settler colonial project. The article takes these concerns as an opportunity to re-assemble the policing/security laboratory as a critical concept, in relation to Palestine/Israel, the global war on terror and beyond.

Introduction

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in the notion of Palestine/Israel as a ‘laboratory’ for the production and export of advanced weapons, security knowhow and technology. Critics of Israeli wars and the ongoing colonization of Palestine use the laboratory metaphor to make sense of Israeli state policies and practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) but also to address how Israeli instruments of violence come to travel elsewhere. They suggest that Israeli security forces’ ability to ‘experiment’ on surplus Palestinian lives has facilitated Israel’s rise as a major global exporter of conventional weapons, security knowhow and technologies (Denes, 2011; Gordon, 2009). Yotam Feldman articulates these arguments in his 2013 documentary *The Lab*. As Feldman (2014) writes of the film’s central claim: “The product they [Israelis] are selling is unique. Rather than rifles, rockets or bombs, the Israeli companies sell their experience. The long-running conflict with the Palestinians has created a unique and unrivalled laboratory for testing technologies and ideas relating to “asymmetric warfare” [...] In this manner the Israeli conflict with the Palestinians may be seen as a national asset—rather than a burden”. As a result, Israel relies on the confinement and repression of Palestinians in sustaining its export-led economy, thereby sustaining the Occupation and increasing the likelihood and intensity of future wars. This is what I term the *laboratory thesis*.

While Feldman advances it most vividly, critical scholars (Graham,

2011; Li, 2006; Weizman, 2007), journalists (Cook, 2008, 2013; Klein, 2007; Silver, 2012) and activists (Who Profits, 2014) put forward similar claims. References to the term ‘laboratory’ are also put to work in more affirmative ways. Advocates of Israeli policies invoke the concept in validating the country’s alleged success in ‘surviving’ in the face of existential threats (Byman, 2011, p. 9; Jonathan-Zamir, Weisburd, & Hasisi, 2014, pp. 9, 11). Despite important differences between these affirmative and critical references to the laboratory, there is agreement that Israel has cultivated its position as a leading security purveyor due, in part, to the status of either the State of Israel, the OPT (or both) as laboratory-like experimental spaces. Across these accounts the term ‘laboratory’ plays three key roles. First, it acts as an *empirical representation* of particular spaces, places and zones of policy experimentation. Second, it serves as an *explanatory concept* for addressing how Israel has emerged a major exporter of weapons, security technology and expertise. Third, we can detect that ‘laboratory’ has a *normative valence* attached to its usage: the term plays a role both in critiquing and celebrating Israeli security approaches and their global reach. The fact that the term laboratory is increasingly referenced in relation to Palestine/Israel appears to indicate something important. Yet its usage for diametrically opposed political agendas raises questions about how the concept actually works analytically and politically. Moreover, despite disagreement about *whether* the status of Palestine/Israel as a laboratory is deserving of praise or condemnation, there is little debate about the concept of the laboratory itself – in other words,

E-mail address: rmachold@yorku.ca.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.04.002>

Received 26 January 2017; Received in revised form 2 April 2018; Accepted 4 April 2018
0962-6298/ © 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

what the laboratory is. The term has been taken for granted as self-evident and unproblematic by mainstream commentators and critics alike.

This article examines how the concept of the laboratory is employed in making sense of Israel's perceived centrality in global patterns of violence and militarism. It takes the form of a review and intervention into the laboratory thesis, a critical body of literature with important analytical and political contributions. I consider epistemological issues about how truth claims are constructed through references to the laboratory but also address ontological questions about the veracity of these claims. In calling it a *thesis* I do not mean to homogenize all references to the laboratory as singular argument. The concept's usage varies and these differences bear recognition. Nevertheless, these uses converge in important ways. I argue that although the thesis develops powerful insights, it has analytical limitations. I further call into question its polemical force, suggesting that critical references to Palestine/Israel as a laboratory reinforce evolutionary Zionist tropes. As a result the thesis falls short of its potential as a provocation about settler colonial violence and its complex relationships to Israel's position as a global security leader. My broad concern here is “the historiographical presumption of *progressive history* that supports the idea of Zionism as the unfolding realization of an ideal” (Butler, 2012, p. 100, emphasis added) but also more specific claims including the notion that self-sufficient innovation in science and technology has allowed Israel to triumph against the odds, the false sense of symmetrical ‘sides’ in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and representations of Israeli statecraft as an omnipotent form of domination that is at once exceptional *and* universal. I take my concerns about the thesis as an opportunity to re-assemble the concept of the policing/security laboratory, situating this project as part of a broader refutation of teleological ideologies at the core of settler colonial formations.

The terms of my intervention are informed by two key claims within the field of critical geopolitics. First, is the understanding that “geopolitics is not a singularity but a plurality” based on competing “representational practices” across different contexts (ÓTuathail & Dalby, 1998, p. 4). Second, is the insistence that studying geopolitics cannot be neutral (Dalby, 1991). More specifically, critical geopolitics is guided by an underlying counter-hegemonic imperative to “problematize [...] the ‘is’ of ‘geography’ and ‘geopolitics,’ their status as self-evident, natural, foundational, and eminently knowable realities” (ÓTuathail, 1996, p. 52). In mounting a challenge to “commonsense understandings incorporated in widely prevalent geographs”, critical geopolitics calls on scholars to “investigate the politics of the geographical specification of politics”, in other words “to practice critical geopolitics” (Dalby, 1991, p. 274). Yet feminist critiques of this literature are equally instructive. They have shown that critical geopolitics scholarship reproduces geopolitics as a disembodied, exclusionary and masculinist practice, unwittingly reinforcing the authority of dominant voices whilst perpetuating the silence of others (Sharp, 2000; Sparke, 2000). Building on this work, I interrogate the laboratory as an increasingly common and taken-for-granted geograph within discussions about violence and militarism. The article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews literature invoking the term ‘laboratory’, exploring its key claims, aims and contributions. The second section develops a preliminary critique of the laboratory thesis. The third section proposes strategies for re-invigorating the thesis.

The laboratory thesis

While references to Palestine/Israel as a laboratory have certain distinctive features, they are part of a wider literature on the production and global mobility of policing/security knowledge. The volume by Hönke and Müller (2016) on the “global making of policing” uses the concept of the laboratory as a core theme that connects chapters on Palestine/Israel with a range of other empirical sites (also see Clarno, 2017). ‘Laboratory’ is broadly employed to address how certain places

become zones of “experimentation and control” in which “ideas [...] can be tried out” (Slater, 1997, p. 637) and to understand the production and mobility of policing/security ‘models’, in relation to ‘global’ cities (Amar, 2013; Coaffee, 2004) and in the context of imperialism (McCoy, 2009). Colonial spaces have long been represented as “laboratories of modernity” (Stoler & Cooper, 1997, p. 5) in making sense of the constitutive *trans*-local linkages between core and periphery. More recent literature on “war: police assemblages” also invokes the term laboratory in addressing how policies are “tested” by militaries (Bachmann, 2015, p. 43) and how conflicts or interventions become sites for “learning lessons” (Khalili, 2015, p. 100). I return to these wider discussions in the final section. Yet my references to the *laboratory thesis* pertain strictly to the term's usage in relation to Palestine/Israel.

One of the core arguments advanced by the thesis is that given the country's small population and physical size, Israel seems to have a disproportionate degree of influence in shaping contemporary discourses and practices of security, especially in “niche” areas of asymmetric warfare and global pacification (Halper, 2015). For instance, Israel is a leading global exporter of drones and an innovator in radical urban warfare and control strategies (Graham, 2010a), emerging as a “homeland security capital” (Gordon, 2011). This status builds directly on the country's longstanding role as an exporter of conventional weapons and (para)-military training (Beit-Hallahmi, 1987).

In making sense of Israel's global influence on matters of security, ‘laboratory’ is put to work in a few distinct ways. It is utilized to conceptualize the technological development and production of Israeli security products and services at the forefront of changes in contemporary warfare and spatial control. As Denes (2011, p. 179) notes, the “prosecution of permanent war [in the OPT] provides the much-vaunted “battlefield laboratory” in which to develop, beta-test, and demonstrate [Israeli] innovations in the crafts of war and surveillance” (also see Gordon, 2009, pp. 47–8). Weizman (2012, p. 96) suggests that Gaza can be seen as laboratory in the sense that it “is a hermetically sealed zone, with all access controlled by Israel” (with the partial exception of the Egyptian border). Li (2006, pp. 38–9) represents the Gaza Strip as a space of experimentation in which Israel aspires to create the “optimal balance between *maximum control* over the territory and *minimum responsibility* for its non-Jewish population” (emphasis in original). Hence, the concept of the laboratory draws attention to how Israeli security solutions are refined within territorially-bounded colonial spaces.

Evidence for these claims can be found in marketing materials of Israeli security firms where real-life testing is a persistent theme with firms using stamps of approval like “Combat Proven”, “Tested in Gaza” and “Approved by the IDF” (Halper, 2015, p. 143; also see Graham, 2010a, 2011; Gordon, 2009, 2011). Israeli security purveyors also frequently reference origin narratives about their products—i.e. stories in marketing materials and business magazines about how their innovations developed to suit the needs of Israel. These promotional strategies present the rise of Israel's security industry as a natural ‘response’ to regional threats and frame its emergence as a ‘domestic’ process. According to Gordon (2009, p. 25): “There is no dispute that many of Israel's homegrown technological skills were honed inside secret military labs and that military research has given Israel a clear lead in vital aspects of telecommunications and software technology”. He supports this with a quote from an Israeli trade-promotion body: “what grew out of a direct military need with a high-tech edge has [...] placed Israel at the forefront of the global security and homeland security industry”.

While emphasizing real-life testing and physical enclosure, the laboratory concept is also used to understand the mobility of Israeli weapons, security technology and expertise, both within Palestine/Israel and transnationally. A volume on the politics of Israeli architecture notes: “Within and outside of the West Bank, Israel can be seen as an example, an accelerator or even as a territorial laboratory playing alternative scenarios in fast-forward” (Segal & Weizman, 2003, p. 25).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7492537>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7492537>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)