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# A Collision Course

Eleanor Roffman

## Teaching "The Psychology of Women" in Wartime Israel

Over the past decade, I have traveled to Netanya, Israel, to teach in two off-campus graduate programs run by Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Netanya is a small seaside-town about twenty kilometers north of Tel Aviv. Netanya is a working class town whose residents are primarily Ashkenazi (of European descent) and Mizrahi (of North African descent) Jews. It is a summer vacation spot for Israelis and French Jews, many of whom are emigrants from North African countries. It happens to be on a path that helicopters and fighter planes take as they either engage in military exercises or are on their way to Lebanon.

The graduate students are either in the Expressive Therapies program or in the Women's Studies program. This article examines the conflicts and challenges I experienced in addressing the connections between gender socialization, militarism, feminism, and Zionism within the Women's Studies program. The lived experience of my students, the siege mentality many of the students have developed by living in a perpetual war zone and the timing of the course heightened my experience.

I have taught the course *The Psychology of Women* for many years, both on-campus at Lesley University and in the University's off-campus program in Israel. I take a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching this course, drawing from sociology, political theory, and the historiography of psychology, literature and other art forms. Every medium and discipline has something to teach us about the conditions and values of any specific social system. My goal is to support students in developing a greater awareness of the development of gender identity and the impact of gender, both personally and culturally, in the context of their lives and within the responsive environment of the classroom. In class, I ask the students about their concerns regarding the course, the material and the approach to exploring the topic. If there is strong concern about any part of the course, I clarify my thinking about my choices to the students, and if their concerns seem viable, the students and I negotiate a restructuring of the material.

I take a feminist approach to teaching. It is an approach that honors everyone present, supports the range of learning styles students bring to the situation, and welcomes feedback from students about my choices of readings, assignments, and class activities. In the past, students have responded positively to my educational philosophy as well as to the process and content of the course's offerings.

Over the years I have researched multiple perspectives on the role of women in psychology. I have introduced my students to various feminist women's perspectives and narratives on the role of women in psychology as practitioners and as clients. My lectures include primary sources—neglected or little-known writings that are always contextualized within the times in which they have taken place. I discuss the ancient goddesses, creation myths that are not punishing of women, analysis of mythology that addresses the roles of women in ancient cultures, the witch hunts in Europe, women during the early development of psychoanalysis, the emergence of feminist psychology in Europe and the United States, and narratives of women from other parts of the world. I am conscious of what I import by attempting not to exclusively draw upon Euro- American literature or references throughout the course of study. It is this approach to teaching that has influenced my inclusion of Israeli and Palestinian women researchers and theorists.

In my efforts to create a course that is relevant to the concerns of women in Israel, I have included in my syllabus the works of Israeli women, Palestinian women, and others who have an international perspective on the issues facing Israeli society. In addition to basic feminist theoretical presentations and readings, I include articles and discussion points that focus on the impact of militarism on the fabric of everyday life, including child rearing, domestic relationships, and violence within communities. Israelis live in a society that is always on military alert. This status affects the resources most central in women's lives, e.g. health care, education, housing, and most importantly, their families. Israel is a small country, one in which every family responds in one way or another to the demands of military conscription. Every Israeli youth is required to do some sort of military service, or if they are excused due to religious beliefs, some sort of alternative service. Israeli men are required to be in the reserves until they reach the age of fifty. Men who reach high status in the army often have civilian lives that parallel that status. The same cannot be said for women. They often hold clerical or low level administrative positions within the military and without further civilian training their positions in civilian life often parallel this status. Additionally, it has been documented that women in the army are vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse (Cockburn, 2003).

Due to the Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza for over the last 40 years, the militarization of Israeli society has had a powerful impact on gender roles and gender identity. The principal role of women in Israel is to support the primarily male military complex and, consequently, the norms and roles within society that support the military and its occupation of Palestinians that do damage to both women and Palestinians. Simona Sharoni (2005) suggests,

*There is a strong connection between violence against women and violence in the Occupied Territories. A soldier who serves in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and learns*

*that it is permissible to use violence against other people is likely to bring that violence back with him upon his return to his community. (p. 231)*

I was presented with a distinct challenge during the summer of 2006. I had prepared my syllabus and sent it ahead so students could prepare for the course, which was scheduled for later that summer, when the Israeli war in Lebanon unexpectedly began. In June, after I sent my syllabus, I received a flow of correspondence via the program administrator. Students felt that my syllabus was political, not psychological. They sent emails to the administration protesting my inclusion of Palestinian writers and the inclusion of works that addressed the current and ongoing conflict and occupation. I remained steadfast in my organization of the course, believing that a feminist perspective is one that addresses both the impact of the ongoing war and its national effects on women, currently and historically. I made a decision to address the students' concerns at the beginning of the course and to discuss my rationale for the inclusion of the material to which they had objected. I wanted to be face-to-face with students to discuss their concerns. I did not want to do so via email.

The course began on the first day of the war. This declared war with Lebanon was different from the Occupation. The organized violence of war affected Israelis in more direct ways than the Occupation of Palestinians. Each day the administrator of the program would post a map of Israel outside his door with push pins penetrating the latest locations of military assaults within Israel. I would examine the map each time I passed the office and wonder what it would have been like if this was taking place in Cambridge, and the assaults against the U.S were within a sixty mile radius of my home. I can assure you I would not be reading this map from the office of my division. I do not know where I would be, but I feel strongly that business as usual would not be my approach. Yet, here I was, amidst the aggression, learning a new Hebrew word for shelter, driving back and forth to class, and spending the day on site. In addition, the reminders of the ongoing war were stereophonically brought to my attention by the frequent phone calls and emails from my family in the States. They wanted me to leave before the course was over and return home. I wanted to finish what I started and felt that if the students could show up every day, so could I. In essence, I had joined the business as usual mentality without even realizing it.

In the States after 9/11, I created space for my Cambridge-based students to address their feelings and/or let the class know what they needed or were dealing with. In Israel, I similarly began the course by encouraging students to discuss how they felt about being in the classroom during this difficult time. No one spoke to the issue. The students' silence was profound. I was not certain where to go with this silence, so I continued by addressing the issues they had raised prior to my arrival. One student spoke up at this point and said that her children were in a shelter near her home and

that she was determined to attend class, especially since her husband's work place was closer to the shelter than the Lesley site. This was at 9:00 am. By 11:00 am she had left the class in tears, saying she could not bear to be there anymore and needed to check on her kids. I empathized with her and encouraged her to leave and if she could not return the next day, we would figure something out. None of the other students felt a need to leave, so we continued the class.

The students were angry with me, suggesting that my political views, which they understood to be that of the American left, were unsympathetic to their situation and they did not trust me as an instructor. I attempted to address this situation by steering the discussion towards feminist thinking about women's issues around conflict and disagreement. We had a conversation that felt somewhat more open than that which had transpired at the beginning of the day. I inquired about what would support their learning and asked how we could create a safe environment for that learning. They did not offer any suggestions and seemed resigned to follow the constructed syllabus. Throughout the course, I found that the students were not open to perspectives that did not support their government's political posture about the *matzav*, the situation. This is how they referred to the ongoing occupation and relationship with the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. The vagueness of *the situation* seemed to echo the defensiveness and avoidance I was picking up in the classroom. In addition to the concerns about my political leanings, the content of the course, and the empty space made by the woman who left, there was a war going on. People were checking their cell phones frequently, running to hear news during the break, and although they, as a group, were willing to invest in the course's time and expectations, they did so with distraction, distrust, and an overwhelming sense of apprehension. So, the actual present military climate coupled with the objections raised prior to the course's beginnings, set a rather uncomfortable stage for the course.

Additionally, they were resistant to an examination of the words of the Palestinian women whose work was included in the syllabus. One article narrated the experience of Palestinian women living in Israel who were suffering from domestic violence. The article suggested that the Israelis monitored their everyday lives kept close surveillance of them, and were ever present, but when they attempted to use the system, the Israelis did not support their needs as victims of domestic violence (Hassan, 2005). As the students were discussing the article one said that she worked with Arab Israelis and never heard any of these women address this issue. I attempted to engage this woman in dialogue, suggesting that perhaps the women she worked with did not or had not articulated that position or feel that they could address their concerns with her. She seemed appalled and angry at the suggestion. Others joined her in disclaiming the content of the article. I worked hard at not seeming defensive about their responses, but did give it much thought later that evening. I wondered

what the resistance was about, how they could dismiss this woman's research as being an anomaly, even with the evidence that she provided in the article.

As part of the course assignment I presented the students with a collection of articles from which they could choose one, discuss it among themselves in small groups and present their learning and analysis to the rest of the class. I created this assignment hoping it would be team-building, address the inconsistent level of English comprehension, and provide students with a range of issues to explore. Each day the lunch hour was extended so students could work in groups to explore their article and how best to present it to the class.

I thought deeply about the class and wondered how I would create a bridge to the reality of my students. I identified three sources of resistance. Of course, there was the war. Next, there were all the implied threats, gossip, assumptions and stereotyped ideas about me. And most importantly, there were the theoretical and applied contradictions between Zionism and feminism. I could address the personal ones easily; but, how would I address what I thought to be true about the dissonant relationship between Zionism and feminism?

Many of the women in the class identified as both Zionists and feminists. I also thought about the climate of this experience, the strangeness of the business as usual mentality. However, it was strange only to me. This is how Israelis survive. They accept the ongoing stress and threat as part of daily life. I thought about Zionism, the doctrine that is foundational to the establishment of an exclusionary Jewish state. Zionism is central to Israeli society, and criticism of this political and philosophical ideology is marginalized both within and outside of Israel. Zionism is a way of thinking that is unquestioningly accepted by most Israelis, and the impact of Zionism on the Palestinian people is not part of the discourse. Missing from the discourse is the displacement of Palestinians, the second-class nature of Palestinian citizens within Israel, and Zionism's impact on those whose lives are touched who are neither Jewish nor Israeli. I think this is connected to why the students could not accept the works of the Palestinian women. These voices are not welcome, are unfamiliar and threatening to the dominant cultural paradigm and hegemony.

Those who believe in it, think of Zionism as a solution to Jewish homelessness. It seems that the unwillingness of Israelis to consider the impact of Zionism on others is in part due to the colonial nature of the movement. It is about returning to the "lost fatherland," not a philosophy of Jewish liberation (Said, 1979). Yet, it is not difficult to understand what Zionism has meant to the Jews, especially after the Holocaust. It has come to represent reclamation of a home, a place that is safe for Jews, and the ultimate expression of Jewish pride in having a place to call their own. The combination of Zionism, the Holocaust, and the long struggle to create a Jewish

homeland undergirds a new masculinist ideology in Israel that is determined never to forgive, forget, or fall victim to another Holocaust, regardless of how it may affect the lives of Palestinians. But this mindset requires rejecting the humanity and human rights of Palestinian people. It is a Faustian bargain of survival that elevates one people over another and one in which victim becomes victimizer. The deeper lesson of the Holocaust, to prevent all genocides, is lost in accepting the conditions for the survival of Israel. In this understanding, there is no room to ponder the displacement and subjugation of those whose lives are lived under occupation and removal. Not unlike other patriarchal nineteenth century colonial systems, Zionism represents achievement, accumulation of military might, and the elevation of the occupiers to the occupied. In order to justify this Occupation, Palestinians have become the 'other,' the ones who are lesser than the Israelis. A physical example of this is the construction of settlements all over the West Bank. These settlements often sit on hills above Palestinian villages. Israelis are able to look down on the Palestinians, but there is no clear view for the Palestinians of those who live above them. Israelis do not get to know Palestinians and are socialized to reject them as inferior and/or as the enemy.

In my mind, the impact of Zionism on women was a parallel process to the impact of Zionism on Palestinians. Reverence for the military and the new-found Jewish masculinity that has emerged as a post-Holocaust aspect of Zionism is totally contradictory to feminist principles. Israeli women, like women in other conflict situations, are socialized to put aside their needs, values, and instincts in the interest of a national agenda. I believe this is key to the struggle in the classroom.

It is difficult for Israeli women to begin to question the core of their society during a military conflict, especially when the topic is raised by an 'other,' a critic. However, Israel is always in military conflict. This particular moment only served to emphasize the dissonance between the application of Zionist principles and those of a feminist worldview.

When teaching feminist theory in the U.S., I engage in a discussion of the dominant ideologies that shape American life and their impact on women. My efforts to draw this parallel in Israel failed miserably. The students were interested in traditional, masculinist or essentialist theories. They wanted to discuss women's issues from the perspective of the individual, not from a perspective that integrated political, cultural, and social phenomena into an understanding of the psychological and social status of women. They especially did not want to hear any critique of their government or their binding allegiance to this system. I needed to figure out how to maintain my intellectual integrity and address their concerns. So, I created forums for them to discuss the literature by engaging in discussions with one another. I took on the role of facilitator. I do not think they ever fully trusted me, but I did get greater insight into

what they were feeling and thinking. One morning prior to the beginning of class, a student approached me and asked how my evening was. I said that I had trouble sleeping due to the noise of the Apache helicopters carrying bombs flying close to my hotel. She said, "You see and hear bombs; I think about the soldiers. They are brothers, sons, other people's children." This caused me to pause. I did respond that one's perspective did indeed shape one's interpretation. I thanked her for bringing that so clearly to light for me. I will not forget that conversation. Indeed, although I stood strong in my belief that the attacks on Lebanon were unjust. I was privileged to have a distance from the situation to think about things other than the personal. I was not thinking about the losses of the Israelis, I was thinking about the aggression, the military strength, and what seemed like a constructed fear of the Hezbollah in Lebanon, not unlike what I observed about the U.S. war in Iraq.

I returned to the classroom, shared my thoughts about the conversation, and my newfound empathic awareness of their situation. I wanted to build bridges, not scale walls. Although I think the students saw me less as an enemy of their state, they were unable to respond in ways that demonstrated a feeling of empathy for the victims of war who were not their own. I tried to address the role of empathy through a discussion of relational-cultural theory, a theory in which empathy is core to building relationships. However, the distance between Palestinians and Israelis cancelled any empathy available within their frame, which is totally focused on their immediate sense of survival.

While I never felt that the students could extend themselves beyond their situation, I came to better understand why that was so. As I reflect on that experience, I understand more clearly the everyday lives of Israelis: they are people who see themselves as victims and, like other victims, are unable to extend themselves to their oppressors while the oppression is taking place. Unfortunately, many others do not see the Israelis as victims, especially those within the Arab world, but as colonizers and oppressors. I left Israel feeling saddened and disheartened. Critiques of Zionism are still equated in Israel with anti-Semitism and lack of concern for Jewish-Israeli existence. I also left feeling a deeper appreciation for those Israelis who speak up against the Occupation and the treatment of Palestinians, and with a newly crafted sense of compassion for those who do not know the impact of their behavior on others and the generations yet to come.

As Yael Feldman (2005) points out, Israeli culture has prevented the expression of female subjectivity. Israeli feminism, not unlike feminism in other places, has many strands. Progressive Israeli feminism is on a collision course with the larger political agenda, which steadfastly holds the attention of the society. It is the dominant rationalization for security that justifies the Occupation and places pressure on women to deny themselves by not scrutinizing the relationship between the siege



mentality of the Israelis that denies women their opportunities and the siege mentality that maintains the occupation of the Palestinian people. I have come to understand that the anger that was directed towards me is in part the anger that Ella Shohat (2005) suggests is born from the anger towards uncontrollable violence and stark power imbalances. Israelis do not accept their role of subjugators without resistance, whether the resistance is conscious or not. It is the anger about the role they see themselves in and do not see any way out of, that is part of this disgruntlement that gets surfaced when it is pointed out.

During the abolitionist movement in the U.S., white radical abolitionist women recognized that their condition was like that of blacks enslaved in the South. After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment that allowed black men to vote, many women often felt they needed to choose between the rights of women and the goals of black civil rights. Only the visionaries continued to see the connections between race and gender in the United States. In the U.S., we talk about our history of slavery and its centrality to the creation of racism, yet many Americans still do not examine their daily lives and the ways that the privileges of white people are gained at the expense of those who do not hold skin color privilege; to do so would require that good, moral people would have to do something about this inequality. Unfortunately, too few people are interested in this hard work, one that recognizes the humanity of all people, not just the privileged or powerful.

In order to understand the role of privilege and power, one needs to admit that it exists and be willing to change it. In Israel, examining oppression will not happen until the government and those who support it are willing to bring to light the experience of the 'other' and recognize that the liberation of women, and Israelis in general, is inextricably bound to the liberation of the Palestinians as well.

In the United States, we experience a similar struggle. There are those who suggest that by supporting the troops, one is supporting the Iraq war. Others suggest supporting the troops would mean bringing them home. The difference is the battlefield and one's orientation to war as a solution. For many Israelis there does not seem to be an alternative to war and occupation. For Israeli feminists the entrenchment of this cultural norm provides a steep challenge to their struggle to create a better Israel. I admire their creativity, thoughtfulness, and commitment to their struggle.

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