

INTERVIEW

Journal of Resistance Studies'

Interview with Elik Elhanan

by **Stellan Vinthagen**, Editor of JRS, *University of Massachusetts, Amherst*,
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Elazar (Elik) Elhanan was born in Jerusalem in 1977. A military refuser, Elhanan served in an IDF combat unit from 1995-98. In 1997 his sister, Smadar, was killed in a Palestinian suicide bombing in Jerusalem. Elhanan has been an activist against the Israeli occupation for over two decades. He is a member of the Israeli-Palestinian The Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF) since 1998 and is a founding member of Combatants for Peace, created in 2005. He served as the movement's Israeli coordinator from June 2006 until June 2007. In October 2012 Elhanan sailed on board the SV *Estelle* that attempted to break the siege on Gaza, as part of the Freedom Flotilla.

Elhanan received his PhD in Comparative Literature and Middle East studies from Columbia University in 2014. Currently he is an assistant professor of Hebrew and Yiddish literature in City College New York and his work is concerned with the relations between language, identity and nation-building.

I met Elhanan the first time in 2012, on board the same ship, SV *Estelle*, sailing towards Gaza. We both experienced the military assault and kidnapping by IDF on international waters, hindering us from delivering humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza. And we were in jail together, until I got deported (for 'trying to illegally enter Israel' ...). Elhanan, on the other hand, was threatened with harsh punishments (for 'trying to illegally enter Gaza' ...). Since then we have kept in touch.

Professor Elhanan embodies the 'activist scholar', someone that sees the value in letting academic knowledge feed into how to act for social change in the world, and — simultaneously — in bringing hard-earned knowledge from activist struggles into academic knowledge generation. So, of course, we at the Journal of Resistance Studies wanted to interview him, to learn more about his perspectives on and experiences of activism and resistance

studies.

SV: *Tell me about how this interest of yours emerged. How did you initially become interested in resistance and nonviolence?*

EE: What drew me to resistance were the circumstances of my life and the reality around me; I was attracted to non-violent activism because of the possibility it offered for community building, a thing that I perceive to be as important as any particular goal.

I grew up in a very political household with a strong contrarian personal position. Standing up to the system that produced us was in a sense the only position respected in my family, as it was a position always closely tied with nonviolence. My grandfather, Matti Peled, was a military man turned peace activist who served as an MK [Member of Knesset] for the Jewish Palestinian Progressive List for Peace and was reviled for that; my mother used to take me to anti-war protests as a child. Protests to which my father, a graphic designer, provided posters and slogans. This contrarian position was complemented, however, with a strong commitment to participate in that very system that we opposed, as a way to earn the privilege of protesting. In Israel that meant taking part in a great deal of violence. Thus, my grandfather's authority still stemmed from his past as a general; my father fought in the wars we were protesting against and I, believing that in order to be heard I first had to serve, volunteered after high-school for a special unit in the IDF [Israel Defense Forces.]

I met nonviolence as a political practice when I was a student in Paris. Before Paris, I had adopted a strong position of non-participation, which was personal and to a large degree, very nihilistic. I had finished my military service two years prior, in 1998. My service, which focused on preparing for the bloody attrition war waged to maintain Israel's occupation of south Lebanon, made clear the manner in which violence becomes an end rather than a mean. The mightiest army in the middle east wasted resources and lives in a war that had no ends to achieve, that was not anchored in any government decision or plan. Our mission was amorphously defined as: 'bringing security to the north', a mission in which the IDF constantly failed, using excessive force, often incompetently, thus regularly provoking Hezbollah fire on Israeli villages. On 4th September 1997, while I was preparing for Lebanon, my 14 years old sister, Smadar, was murdered in a Hamas suicide bombing in Jerusalem. During the seven days of mourning, surrealist scenes took place as both IDF commanders and PLO [Palestine

Liberation Organization] representatives, settlers and peace activists came to offer condolences; most seemed to share the notion that violence was a tragedy, meaning it was suffering brought about by unforeseen consequence of our actions in an unpredictable or intractable world, the work of a vengeful nemesis. But also, that it was a moral instruction, an experience holding a lesson or a necessary social function. My reaction to this discourse was to shut off, move away and not participate; to distrust everything.

It was with this mindset that I arrived in Paris in October 2000, the day Ariel Sharon ignited the 2nd intifada by visiting the Haram Al-Sharif in Jerusalem. The increasing sense of horror and frustration inspired by the terrible news from home pushed me to get involved. I declared I would refuse to serve in the Israeli army and joined the movement Courage to Refuse. As a somewhat self-appointed representative I joined many efforts of solidarity with Palestine. It was this gesture of joining others in protest that opened a door to a world that I knew existed but had never really seen, the world of radical alternative counter culture. I met a huge variety of activists, anti-war, anti-racist, anti-nuclear and antifascists, who welcomed me and were happy to instruct me in their practices, culture, history, which turned out to be my own. Many of the people I met knew my grandfather from his meetings with the PLO and for Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, activities I knew nothing about, maybe because in Israel of the time they were illegal but more probably because we didn't have the language to conceptualize them as meaningful vis-à-vis his 'respectable' military or political carriers. I always saw nonviolence as a personal choice, embracing its weakness and its ineffectiveness, in the name of a moral higher ground. In Paris I came to see nonviolence as the search for a language for community building that allows for self-expression and exchange, while engaging in fierce resistance against the hegemonic discourse.

SV: What is your own experience of using nonviolent resistance in movements? What have you learnt?

EE: My own experience in nonviolence comes from my involvement in a few movements in Israel/Palestine: the parents circle, a group of bereaved family members from both sides, which my father joined in 1998 and I followed in 2000; Combatants for Peace [C4P], which I co-founded in 2004, united Israeli refusers and Palestinian former political prisoners; and the loose coalition gathered around the popular struggle against the apartheid wall which included members of Ta'ayush, Anarchists Against the Wall and many

others. While the two former groups engaged mainly in dialogue meetings and public outreach, the latter's mode of action includes confrontation with Israeli security services, either as participants in the weekly nonviolent demonstrations or in a variety of direct actions. The main thing I learned from these activities is the power of learning. That is, the constant need to listen, reevaluate and redefine concepts and conventions in all that concerns the definitions of weakness and power, violent and nonviolent as well as success and failure in resistance.

A practical lesson I learned quickly concerns the power of the link between the privileges derived from service and the right to protest, as well as its limits. This link is strongly established culturally and seems almost common sense—a Christological tale of conversion and redemption that rings true and is demonstrably effective. Both the war in Lebanon in 1982 and the occupation of south Lebanon were brought to an end by a nonviolent mobilization in Israel, which managed to change prevailing common sense through the coupling of service and the right to protest; returning soldiers outraged by the government's lies and the massacres in Sabrah and Shatila camps in 1982, or mothers of serving soldiers in the late 1990's. Learning to uncouple these two things—the right to protest and the privileges derived from serving—was probably the most important political development in my life. It allowed me to view nonviolence as a principled concrete alternative to the existing order. Up until that point I saw it more as a personal moralist choice, consisting of standing away from the normal, violent order of things, disapproval rather than an alternative.

This uncoupling came about because such activism never had any effect against Israel's expansionist politics in Palestine. Before the founding of C4P in 2005, I was a member of Courage to Refuse, a movement that very quickly became irrelevant. The reason for that was that it chose to remain spatially, discursively and visually within Israeli discourse, while at the same time really upping the ante in relation to the state. As the movement united more than 500 reservists, combat soldiers and officers, we expected to be heard. So, while the message was phrased in a dovish Zionist idiom, protests were held in habitual sites in the center of Israel, everything was painted white and blue. The movement also questioned radically the Israeli social contract through the act of refusing, i.e., we moved away from the model of the right to criticize that is derived from and balanced by the assurance of service, to the act of denying service until political participation is granted. While being an important and groundbreaking movement, Courage to Refuse, didn't

reach the prominence aspired to; the public support was surprising but so was the backlash and more so the dismissal—this shift in the balance of power was too much for even the most dovish Zionist politician to support.

In our naiveté, we thought that the problem was of advocacy, and that by engaging in dialogue with people who are like us, fighters from the other side, we will be able to get our message across. The initial idea behind Combatants for Peace grew out of the understanding of privilege as a tactical advantage in both societies; as long as service grants me this privilege, I will be heard! And indeed, it was an advantage. This privilege, dearly bought through participation in organized violence, gave us the legitimacy to pass criticism and stand against mainstream discourse. This capital awarded members of C4P unprecedented acceptance in either society, allowing entrance to unique sites, where we inspired some but were dismissed by most.

This was a very confusing and disheartening experience that forced us to reexamine preconceived ideas of who is our audience, what constitutes success, what are the goals, etc. As we tried to apply the principle of 'service grants a voice' as the foundation for our organizations, it turned out that the valorization of service and sacrifice is not useful in the case of Israeli public opinion on the occupation, and it put us in a difficult spot when we constantly had to explain to others—but mainly to ourselves—how the service of a war criminal is being put on par with that of a terrorist. Similar impossible questions presented themselves to the parents' circle, questions such as what grief is representative, what loss is grievable? Do we share in the mourning of the family of a terrorist? What of that of a war criminal? Whose grief do we respect? The mother's or also the brother's? What of a cousin? Surely a wife but what of a girlfriend? These questions, as they were tackled, transformed the parents' circle into the more democratic and inclusive Families' Forum. This is the major lesson from my experience with nonviolent resistance; that simply by engaging with these organizations we transform them as we develop a language that can transcend epithets, a language that acts against the violence that resides in the taxonomies of the state. We had to reevaluate and reexamine every issue constantly, in the light of two political traditions: the Israeli one, which rejected us, and the Palestinian one, which we had to learn. The methods of nonviolent communication allowed us to reflect upon these questions in a profound manner and to see them as deep structural problems. They allowed us to see beyond the official language of the state that defined everything 'they' did as violent and anything 'we' did that, no

matter how horrendous, was not. In this process the terms of success and achievement changed. In the daily work of operating C4P, in the form of endless discussions in coordination meetings and dialogue meetings, while often tiresome and frustrating, we managed to foster a community that spoke our new language, which we used to define and resist the different forms of violence we encountered.

SV: *What are the particular aspects that draws you to such activism as the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza and the Combatants for Peace? Both of these are examples of rather high-risk and contentious forms of resistance, or would you not agree?*

EE: As an activist I was definitely drawn to high-risk and contentious forms of resistance out of the need to challenge, publicly but also personally, the comfortable envelope of Israeli privilege. In an article from 2012, Tali Hatuka explains that traditionally, peace movements in Israel were issued from the serving elite and as such directed their message to the Israeli mainstream, staging protests in central national locations. Movements like Peace Now or later Four Mothers would gather in Tel Aviv; supported by major parties they would promote a narrative of ‘good old Israel’ gone astray—they’d wave Israeli flags as they showed the nation the way to ‘return to itself’. The drastic change in peace activism that developed after the collapse of the Peace Camp in 2000 was evident in the symbolic choice of theatre for their actions. New movements moved away from ‘Israel’ proper and into the Palestinian territories. Groups like Machsom Watch or Ta’ayush positioned themselves as witnesses or participants outside the confines of Israeli discourse, thus creating ‘transformative zones’ that deeply challenged the hegemonic subject position of the Israeli left, which was always statist and militaristic.

In the work of Combatants for Peace, the act of getting out of Israel proper and meeting Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, on their terms as much as possible, and organizing protest activities there, produced these ‘transformative zones’, where all the conventions were peeled off. It became clear how important it is to examine the roots of one’s beliefs. How, for example, the idea of service in C4P promotes a feeling of symmetry between Israelis and Palestinians that was masking the glaring asymmetry between occupier and occupied, or how the right to protest reproduces the access to service, a major signifier in Israeli racial politics, where service is a privilege of the elite, historically excluding women, non-Jews and non-European Jews. Since our practice was highly contentious and involved confrontations,

advocating for conscientious objection and nonviolence, it was extremely important to us to hammer on these issues, until some understanding was produced.

However, in parallel to the activity in C4P, I felt very strongly the need to dismantle this binding of service and the right to protest as it privileged the rights of certain people to protest, people who fit the definition of service or sacrifice. I felt a need to participate in actions where my past would not define me in such a way. I joined more and more the nonviolent demonstrations, protests and direct actions with the Palestinian Popular Committees in the west bank. Of course, in a reality of occupation one cannot escape these questions and I found participation in the demonstrations to be an embodiment of the debates mentioned above as they encounter political violence. It enabled me and others to understand what it means to take part in a struggle in which one is by definition in a supportive role, which requires trusting one's partners' experience and political analysis, even at the price of discomfort. There, one could experience the asymmetry, as the soldiers brutally repressed a protest that I would not consider violent. It was there that one could exercise different use of privilege, believing that Israeli bodies are not deemed expendable by the Israeli regime and therefore maybe their presence in the protest would mitigate violence. It was there that one could see state violence presented as a pure end: a retribution leveled at the very idea of protest, which is defined as 'violence'.

Beyond all reasoning and theorizing, the decision to board the Estelle to Gaza stands out as a different one. It just felt like the right thing to do. There was some thought about the effect that our presence, Israeli activists, would have on both the takeover of the boat and on the coverage of the event, but mainly we came as individuals, not supported by any organization. The outrage against the siege of Gaza was so great that I felt that as a human being it is right to come there myself to show solidarity, to apologize and protest the terrible collective punishment imposed by my country and ignored by all others.

SV: *What are the connections between nonviolent resistance and Yiddish culture? Are there any models or examples? What are the challenges?*

EE: Talking about Yiddish culture I am referring to the cultural project of Yiddishism, a national liberation movement in eastern Europe, which existed in parallel to Zionism and was considerably more popular. Yiddishism, born

under the rule of the Russian Tsar, was an ideology demanding general government reform and civil rights, along with particular national rights, expressed as cultural autonomy for Yiddish speaking Jews in Eastern Europe. This ideology loosely united many movements, most notably the social democratic Bund but also liberals and revolutionary parties. While differing wildly on questions of politics, the shared understanding was that national rights and social rights are intertwined; the right to one's culture is a right that must be fought for but can only be attained and assured in conditions of social justice. In stark contrast to Zionist ideology, which fantasized about Jews as a majority in the making, Yiddishism conceived itself as 'Diaspora Nationalism', as a movement of a national minority that operates from a position of weakness and does not seek to take power. Thus, the modes of action selected were democratic, participatory, legalistic, popular and community based, grounded in unionization and mobilization, strikes, boycotts, mutual aid, education and culture. Clear ideologies of nonviolence can be found but are rare, as many did uphold the right to self-defense, class warfare etc., but the actual praxis of these different movements was almost strictly non-violent.

The model presented by the Yiddishist radical culture in the first decades of the 20th century is fascinating with regards to questions of dissemination of knowledge, community building or the production of organic intellectuals. In these respects, Yiddish culture provides inspiring models. Yiddishist movements took a leading role in the 1905 failed Russian revolution and suffered greatly from its outcomes and from the reaction that followed. Many then directed most of their energy to culture and education, producing a system of schools, social and cultural institutions that supplied much needed services to the members of the new Jewish proletariat, while at the same time forming them as revolutionary subjects in a self-reproducing system. Yiddish activists and intellectuals would publish in the movements' presses, work in their institutions or teach in their schools. They would transmit to their students materials that they themselves produced, encouraging them to engage with reality in a similarly critical manner. These networks were joined and interconnected in a variety of ways, creating an opportunity for social engagement that was truly constructive and participatory.

The challenges presented by this model are very relevant to the discussion of protest in our days and it is not by chance that Yiddish radical culture is enjoying such popularity in certain radical circles. The Yiddishist political program of a personal, non-territorial, cultural autonomy undermines today,

as it did then, any idea of a centralized authority or sovereignty. Like what is derisively called ‘snowflake mentality’, it is a program that allows anyone to challenge central authority and assert their particular identity, and thus, in the eyes of some, also disrupt any move towards effective organization and action. Another particular challenge is to the manner one habitually reads history. In Jewish thought on modernity, particularly in its Zionist articulation, the ability to use force and deploy violence was seen as the marker of sovereignty, a right that like self-determination was denied from Jews. The commonplace holds it that this affinity to violence distinguishes the new Hebrew nation from humanist assimilated Jews, who translated the long Jewish tradition of aversion to violence and militarism to a commitment to human rights and to the liberal state, which guarantees their safety. The fact that Yiddishist movements, who tried to formulate a different relation to the state, were the main organizing force in Jewish political life in eastern Europe up until WWII is a very powerful refutation of Zionist claims. By presenting a model for organizing a self-determined community that is effective, aggressive and forceful on questions of class or race but is overall non-violent, these movements also call into question much of the discourse on Jewish modern politics, and cast an intriguing light on the works of scholars such as Hannah Arendt and others who never mention them as a viable alternative to either assimilation or rabid nationalism.

SV: How does nonviolent resistance link with research and academic work in your life?

EE: In general, I see scholarship and nonviolent resistance as closely linked. While the theory produced in academia often informs the thought and praxis of activists, the production of theory becomes itself an activist act as it participates in challenging conventions, imposing new rules of discourse, attacking and dismantling oppressive canons and in general being disruptive. Scholarship can also be experienced as activism when it produces alternative, oppositional, transformative knowledge. Personally, I am fascinated by the very use of scholarship as a means of resistance. Here I find great inspiration in the legacy of Yiddish culture, which turned the disciplines of humanities and social science into practices of resistance. In the turn of the 20th century, Yiddishist scholars and activists such as author I.L. Peretz and the famed ethnographer S. An-sky, promoted a method by which the practice of ethnographic, sociological and historical study was harnessed for the mission of building a modern, just and secular Yiddish culture. Young

people were encouraged to conduct studies, were informally trained (An-sky even produced a questionnaire for DIY ethnographic expeditions to conduct in one's own community) and were expected to ground their programs or art in the findings. This gesture of moving from being the object of the academic gaze to being its owner was a powerful move. It constituted the lives of Yiddish speaking Jews as worthy of interest, after a century of hearing from reformers right and left, inside and out, liberals, Marxists or anti-Semites, that it's this very life that is pathologically flawed and is to blame for their sorry state. By doing so, they legitimized the political efforts conducted to deal with issues of this life and defined themselves as the subject of this historical process. This turned scholarship into the treasured patrimony of Yiddishism and gave its intelligentsia a bizarre aura of leadership. Between the wars a new generation of unemployed university educated Jews, rejected from universities due to structural racism, worked in the Yiddishists schools and institutions, engaging in workers' education, teachers' trainings and independent research, producing fascinating works on art and politics, the effects of racial discrimination of gender, class, mental health and many other topics. They used Yiddishist schoolchildren or members of youth movements as both case studies and research assistants, distributing questionnaires and field study kits by mail or through the press. It was the people issued from this system who had put in place the Oyneg Shabess archives in the Warsaw ghetto. Dr Emanuel Ringleblum and other scholars studied life in the ghetto in which they were concentrated and documented every aspect of it in a huge hidden archive, that was to serve as a last line of resistance—documents for the prosecution that they were confident would follow the defeat of fascism.

The subversive potential of scholarship as resistance is clear from the often-quoted witticism of linguist Max Weinreich, the founder of the Yiddish Language Research Institute (YIVO) and the closest thing to a president Yiddishism ever had: 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy'. By mastering the discourse of the other, he was able to use it to demonstrate how all the hierarchical underlying assumptions are in fact historically and politically contingent. In this fashion, taking over the academic means of production, so to speak, can be a remarkably empowering process for people whose language is reduced to an idiom, whose lives are not represented as grievable, to borrow Judith Butler's words. For people whose very being is defined as transitory, like traditional communities, immigrants, refugees or displaced people, scholarship of that kind is a powerful mode of nonviolent

resistance, capable of supporting and generating many others.

SV: What recommendations would you give to younger activists entering into academia and to younger academics contemplating a combination of their work at universities with activism?

EE: I would say that my big recommendation to both would be to be positive. I mean to say: we often see great effort to make our active life and our contemplative life sit so well together and great disappointment from the fact that they never do. Academia is never activist enough and activists can be hostile towards rigorous thought, and both spheres are plagued with similar systemic issues. However, one should try to be aware of the manner in which these two experiences are distinct spheres, albeit overlapping and interconnected, each with distinct norms and procedures. These norms and procedures can complement rather than contradict each other, even if the latter impression is more readily available. By complementing each other I mean of course the manner in which theory supports and is inspired by radical praxis, the manner in which transformative knowledge is created and scholarship is a means of resistance. Coming into Israeli academia as activist, especially from the field of Israeli Palestinian solidarity that at the time was new and untheorized, I felt great alienation from the institution. Discussions on topics close to my activism seemed irrelevant and discussions on other topics were of no interest to me. I felt that everywhere, the songs that they constantly played said nothing to me about my life. It took me a while to see that academia and activism answered to very different emotional needs and that there is a place for abstract and detached contemplation just as there is a need for direct decisive action. As long as we don't expect the spheres to reform we can always promote change, or at least have fun by pointing out to professors how oppressive their hierarchies are or by asking activists really hard questions.

SV: What are the most important things that activists can learn from an academic perspective; and, vice versa, that academics can learn from an activist perspective?

EE: I am thinking of the manner in which these two distinct spheres, activism and academia, can be interpenetrated and disturbed by each other, as the most instructive thing about this encounter. The fact is that academia as an actual, not contemplative, sphere of life makes it a site of conflict between contradicting power structures that is perfect for the deployment of

nonviolent resistance practices. The nonviolent practices of both resistance and dialogue that are to be found in different struggles on campus, on issues of labor, questions of race and gender and so on, could learn from but also instruct a seasoned activist. In the same manner, activism could use some practices of rigorous thought and scientific criticism to balance its facile tendency to quickly understand the world and an academic could definitely learn about, and from, that experience of knowledge that flashes in a moment of danger, the instantaneous understanding that puts everything in place once one picks a side, which is sometimes much more accurate than the most rigorous scientific investigation.

SV: *What are the major challenges of combining academic work with activism?*

EE: I find that the biggest challenge is mentally accepting that we work and operate in institutions and disciplines that are not party to our struggle. Expecting them to be so is frustrating. Most people, and activists more so, have a rather positive historical perspective according to which knowledge production is geared towards the advancement of humankind and that a work environment or discursive culture is something most people 'like us' would like to see transformed into safe and inclusive spaces. Therefore, there is a bitter disappointment when we see that this is not the case, that universities are not revolutionary environments but liberal institutions set on instilling ideology, perpetuating inequality, justifying racist practices through science and devising new ways to exploit and subjugate while being unsafe and abusive work environments. They do also permit, under artificially created and carefully monitored conditions, free exchange of opinions. For both research and teaching this constitutes a challenge. It is very hard to settle this understanding while committing to an environment of free speech and it is very easy to see the university as just another oppressive system to take down. However, at the same time this is also a work environment and community where one is responsible for other people, and is obliged to maintain for their sake the illusion of a safe space of exchange, in whose value one believes, in spite of everything. One has to devise strategies to make his opinions known and his criticism clear, while not blocking off differing opinions but also without disparaging the commitment the students undertook, by opposing the very institution. It is more useful to point out the places where the university enables activism; but in order to do that one has to understand the university and understand his idea of education as a transformative and radical device.

This is a challenge in the classroom but also beyond as it concerns the manner of teaching as well as the research one does. It is easy to desire to be the voice that would strike a blow at the hypocritical discourse, by force of one's double expertise. It is very tempting to instruct in class or write in a paper as one would in a meeting, with the effortless conviction that what is said is true and that most of the audience already agree. However, this is the best way to find oneself missing out on crucial points that might undermine one's certitude. For example, the need to see Yiddishism as an essentially better alternative to Zionism collides with the fact that its program indeed was unrealistic, that in spite of the difference it shared all the illnesses of nationalism, that its commitment to nonviolence was a product of the circumstances and that many members of Yiddishist movement did see violence as a right deprived from them, which they claimed in sites like national armies, the Red Army of Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union or the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. It is also very easy to dismiss other opinions that would point to these facts, thus alienating one's addressees. Someone whose name is attached to a cause would always be scrutinized more than a 'normal' professor who simply dismisses views, therefore the need to be careful is so much greater.

SV: *What do you hope for the future? What kind of academic work and activism need to evolve according to you? Why?*

EE: I hope to see the development of solid networks of exchange between activists and academics. Drawing on my fascination with the Frankfurt school I would love to see more independent institutions that are doing serious and engaged research while addressing their publications and instruction to a market that is not strictly academic. Drawing on my engagement with Yiddish culture and my experience working at City College, I hope to see such institutions direct their efforts towards communities where their resources are scarce, and create conditions for independent research by those who are underrepresented. I hope to see more students both in struggles and governance of institutions and hope for greater cooperation. I think a necessary mission both for scholars and activists is to find the effective ways to wage struggles like Black Lives Matter, justice for Palestine and issues of climate and social justice as connected and interlinked. To make revolutionary knowledge now produced around the world available and useful in a way that will enable the imagining of a global theory of change. And mainly assist the inspiring awakening of the radical spirit we see in young activists today.

In a sense, I really hope for something new. I look at my students, at young activists I meet in Israel and elsewhere, and at the risk of sounding old I am eager to see what new strategies and practices, what new models will appear to deal with the unprecedented challenges facing us today. Since I became an activist so many tried methods were proven obsolete, and groundbreaking ideas became old by the dizzyingly changing reality. We refused, we formed dialogue groups and protested in solidarity, we took ships to Gaza; all these actions that were absolutely relevant for their moment did not result in the change we expected and lost a lot of their bite in the maddening flow of things. Now that the coronavirus crisis pushed this feeling of accelerating changes ad absurdum, adding to the crisis of capitalism, the climate crisis, the rise of the populist and antidemocratic regimes, a global pandemic and an economic crisis that lay bare all the failings of neoliberal economy, I must admit I am a bit at a loss. Social distancing and its complementary measures, travel restrictions, closed borders and the abuse of immigrants in the USA, Europe and other places, bring to mind Hannah Arendt's words of the 'existence of ever-growing new people ... who live outside the pale of law,' that is now growing even more due to the fragility of that global class, created by an economy that was all about mobility but has never bothered with stability. It is fascinating to see what this new reality—all the talent which was sedated by cheap flights and lucrative opportunities—where would it head now?

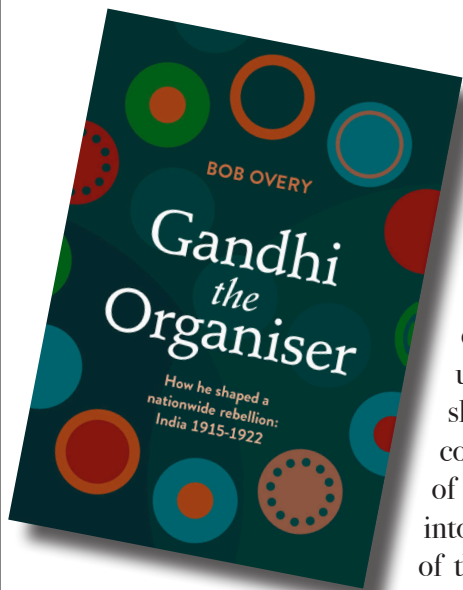
I'm interested in that spirit and its movements for my own selfish reasons as well. One surprising, totally unforeseen aspect of the new radical turn is a rise in the interest in Yiddish studies, which no one could predict when I started my PhD. Young Jewish Americans developed a keen interest in Yiddish culture, which I see as part of the renegotiation of their relation to Israel, the state which in its heavy-handed clericalism, its on-going romance with the American right and its abuse of human rights, fails as an anchor of identity for young liberal Jewish-Americans. Some, like members of JVP [Jewish Voice for Peace], one of the fastest growing organizations today, take a particular interest in the radical aspects of Yiddish and other in its culture. In any case, it is a golden moment to introduce a discussion about radical culture, social justice, cultural activism etc. Yiddish anarchists, gathered in Warsaw in the 1920's, many of whom were students with visa issues, aspiring immigrants stuck along the way as well as proper exiles and refugees, came up with theories of displacement, defining it together with the lawlessness and homelessness that accompany it, as a key experience in

fashioning a radical new culture. A culture which they created in the image of a modernist collage, where debris from past traditions were fused together with the energy of revolt. I think it's a kind of thinking that might be relevant in this day and age.

SV: Thank you very, very much Elik Elhanan for this interview! Thank you on behalf of the JRS and our readers.

BOB OVERY

GANDHI THE ORGANISER, HOW HE SHAPED A NATION WIDE REBELLION: INDIA 1915-1922



This book is a unique contribution in two ways. Firstly, it puts the focus on the least understood element of the Indian anti-colonial liberation struggle, yet the one emphasized by Gandhi himself: the constructive program, or the building up of self-governed institutions and skills, enabling real autonomy from colonial rule and local empowerment of ordinary Indians. Secondly, it goes into the empirical detail of key campaigns of the liberation struggle, showing how the constructive work in a dynamic way connected with the resistance against British colonial rule.

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