

INTERVIEW



# Alienation as Disconnectedness?

Expert Interview  
with Prof. Dr. Ronen Shamir of Tel Aviv University

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conducted by Markus Rudolfi

**SozMag:** *Thank you for giving us an interview, Prof. Ronen Shamir from the University of Tel Aviv. You are a professor of sociology and anthropology. Could you tell us about your research interests in the first place?*

**Ronen Shamir:** In general, I confess to be somehow eclectic when I look back at my research interests. I began my research agenda under the general umbrella of ‘Socio-Legal Studies’ or ‘Law & Society Studies’ which I have been engaged with for many years and which still influence my thinking and my orientation in many respects. As a young scholar I developed into two directions: One that had to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict focusing on the

supreme court of Israel and what I called sustaining and legitimizing the occupation. I focused on lawyers who were working on behalf of Palestinians and tried to understand the reasons behind Palestinians using the court. A very different direction within the same umbrella was working on the US American context of the New Deal which was my first book about the role of the legal profession during the 1930s. In the last few years my main project had to do with infrastructures, specifically with electricity. It brought me back to an area of study that I like a lot which is 1920s Palestine under British rule. What I did was *not* trying to look at Palestine through the prism of the Jewish-Arab conflict which is the dominant hegemonic paradigm through

which most historical studies are done. What I did was trying to look at Palestine as a territorial unit under British rule i.e. as a British colony without ignoring the ethnic situation but bracketing it and trying to do what I call a 'Material Sociology' or a 'Materialist Sociology'. I was looking at the way electricity developed in Palestine and then trying to see how electricity and the electrification of Palestine participated in constructing ethnic relations, colonial policies, etc. This is still a research line that I am engaged with.

8 I am now beginning to take off a way from Palestine because I began to develop a general interest in infrastructures within imperial and colonial contexts, which is relatively understudied. So, one of my newer articles, in some way, begins to compare electrification in Palestine and India because both were under British rule. My current project – which is another spin of this general interest and I think also not sufficiently explored – is to look at the role of British civil engineers and electrical engineers and their role in colonial or imperial decisions about infrastructures in general: railways and electricity in particular.

So, I am trying to bring together the two analyses of British imperialism and the role of civil engineers that were not part of the government but apparently played a big role in decisions of financing or granting concessions for electricity. All this is one line of research I am interested in. On the

other line I began to develop again a totally new agenda that has to do with sociology of health. In this field I am interested in preventive medicine, questions of death and mortality, and the changing notions of health. That is a whole different conversation but it is another line of research that I am currently developing.

**SozMag:** *You mentioned the civil engineers and I immediately have to think of the term 'local knowledge'. Does this play a role in your research?*

**RS:** Definitely! Because more and more I see how civil engineers that are protecting their own guild in London have enormous power on policy decisions and sometimes they have limited knowledge of the local conditions. Their knowledge is mainly about British industries and the state of British industry. Also, but these are only initial thoughts, I have a hunch from reading about India that German engineers and German firms such as AEG or Siemens were more proactive in sending out engineers to get a better understanding of climatic or hydrological decisions. However, this is a wild guess at this moment and these are things that I am currently exploring, but there is a lot going on here. For example, technology in one sense is seen as universal and potentially applicable everywhere but on the ground there are different conditions that are not simply cultural but there are different topogra-

**Prof. Dr. Ronen Shamir**

is a professor of sociology and anthropology at Tel Aviv University. A Phd. graduate of Northwestern University, IL (1992), his research focused for many years on empirical and theoretical issues of law & social studies. In this context he published extensively on legal professions, the social regulation of corporations, and law and courts in Israel/Palestine. His interest in the history of Palestine yielded socio-legal studies such as his book "The Colonies of Law" (Cambridge U. Press) as well as an in-depth study about the electrification of Mandatory British Palestine. His most recent research interests lie with the sociology of infrastructure and with studying the role of engineers in shaping urban and national landscapes.



phical or climatic conditions and so on. So, in colonial settings decision making is very often made away from the ground and this abyss or gap is quite interesting to explore.

**SozMag:** *Such as during the post-communist era when civil engineers or the 'social engineers' were trying to 'plan' society basically from top to bottom/top down. Indeed, very interesting!*

*In your book "Current Flow: The Electrification of Palestine" you did a historical analysis by using the approach of the Actor-Network-Theory. Would you give us a brief summary regarding the message of the book?*

**RS:** I will try to simplify this on two levels and then maybe discuss methodological

issues which for me are very important. So, what I try in this book is to work on two separate levels: One is a conversation with the history of Palestine and at this level, as I mentioned before, there is a hegemonic paradigm of analysis that is typical for many approaches about the history of Palestine. In this paradigm the ethnic tension between Arabs/local Palestinians and the Jewish settlers/immigrants is dominating the analysis to an extent in which many articles have a teleological dimension because we know the end. We know the end in terms that it turned into a bitter, enduring and bloody conflict. One of the reasons I was always interested in the 1920s is because of my conviction that in the 1920s there were many roads open which point out that the ethnic con-

flict was not inevitable. It is a matter of so called historical junctures where things happened and very often they do not happen according to a plan or a vision. There are numerous types of intersections and junctions in which roads are taken for a variety of reasons and which are not necessarily ideological or political; they can be technical, they can be practical, they can be accidental and so forth. However, in most studies the end result follows the paradigm that in Palestine two separate communities have developed independently. Separatism has been the historical fact that drives the history of Palestine and, in this respect, the message of the book is that separatism is not built into the situation but had to be constructed. Constructed not in the typical sense of “being imagined” but constructed in the material sense of the word: that if separatism became an overwhelming paradigm it is because all kinds of material processes enabled this type of imagination. What I tried to look at is the role of electrification in creating these two separate universes, this ethnic separation.

So, I begin my book by arguing that although the electrification of Palestine has been in the hands of Zionist institutions from the beginning there is no evidence whatsoever that there was a master plan to use electricity which to benefit the Jewish community and for gaining advantages over the Arab community; but to the contrary, the effort was to create a

universal grid. I show how various types of dynamics that are neither necessarily intended nor planned created a situation in which Jews benefitted from electricity by far more than the Arabs did. Electricity created a kind of geographical separation between communities and towns in which the grid is connected to Jewish settlements but leaving out Arab towns for various reasons. So, an actual material process of separation that proceeds to some extent and lays the groundwork for what we call the “Paradigm of Separatism” of the two separated economies. That is a message at the level of speaking to the history of Zionism and the sociology of Palestine.

And then there is an attempt to contribute to literature in general: A contribution to anthropological and sociological literature – and that is where the Actor-Network-Theory comes in – about the importance of infrastructures and material processes (material in the literal sense of the word) for understanding societies. It is about how connections, flows and all kinds of technical arrangements are playing their part in building societies from an approach that supposes that too many sociological works assume that material conditions of existence are just a stage on which society plays. Actor-Network-Theory, on the other hand, tries to remind us that society does not exist “out there” and independently of all these material arrangements. I think it is almost common sense but the kind of a common sense that sometimes makes you

look differently at your data. So, in this respect, the message of the book, if I have to say it in one sentence, is that electrical grids are social in and of themselves; they embody social arrangements and social configurations.

**SozMag:** *The issue of this volume is “alienation” and I feel that connections can be made to what you just explained. Do you have thoughts on this and if so, which connections do you see?*

**RS:** To be honest, this is a challenging question because I never thought about alienation as a concept that guides me in my own studies – apart from the fact that I teach modern theories and about alienation and the Hegelian, the Neo-Hegelian and the Marxist versions of it. It is a very interesting question and I would have loved to think more about it. When I come equipped with this “toolbox of Actor-Network-Theory,” my first inclination is not to think of alienation in terms of spiritual or ideal meanings, or a matter of ideas or a subjective state of mind but I would first of all adopt the Marxist dogma of alienation as an objective condition that something is disconnected or misconnected, a breakage or rupture. The classic Marxist version is that you produce something and lose control over your own products. So, first of all, I would insist on this material way of thinking about alienation that something is disengaged or disconnected. When you be-

gin to work with the concept of alienation this way you can begin to toy around with the idea that alienation is the other side of connection. Then you might work through this concept of alienation by asking who is connected and who is disconnected, which is a major thing in my book. What does it mean to be “off the grid”? What are people doing in order to join the grid? What technical arrangements are being put there in order to facilitate interconnection or disconnection? People feel alienated by being off the grid. This is why I write in the introduction that to think about the grid in terms of connections, disconnections or what I sometimes call “those who are yet-to-be-connected” has some relevance to the way we may think about the internet, about digital connections, about smartphones, because we all know how lost we feel nowadays if we run out of charge or if we cannot connect to the internet. Many studies in this area are being done who talk in terms of addiction. However, thinking with my approach and maybe also in terms of alienation, the problem is not that we became addicted and therefore feel lost if we do not have access to a grid – whether electrical or internet –, but when we are disconnected, we are thrown out of society. We can almost say this is an objective material condition and not only psychological and subjective. My book is an invitation to think about the meaning of being disconnected or misconnected or not having access and I play a little bit

with it in the introduction. If you can see connections to the notion of alienation you are most welcome to follow it. I begin to see the connection and it seems quite promising.

**SozMag:** *You mentioned that psychologists are now engaging in this topic of alienation in terms of addiction. Do you know of any research here in Tel Aviv or in Israel in general that addresses these problems or even related topics? What kind of research catches your interest?*

**RS:** Unfortunately I do not. And I dare say that is because there aren't any. I think where interesting work is being done is within political geography and by sociologists who study the wall and the checkpoints, they study how roads are being made so they bypass Arab villages and allow Jewish traffic. And I suspect that it is not only because of my own bias nowadays towards infrastructures but because there is a lot of action going on there. Ariel Hendel is one political geographer who is doing this type of work.

**SozMag:** *What about the question of methodology? You have already mentioned it earlier and I would really like to hear more about that!*

**RS:** Here, I also have a small confession to make, which is that I would have loved my book to be quite different in the way

it is presented than what it is now. Let me explain this. In my research I based a lot of my findings on treasures that I found mainly in the British National Archive and in the archives of the Israeli Electric Company. I found beautiful handmade maps of grids, of how to install street lamps, other maps, diagrams, statistical tables, all kinds of graphic representations of the process and working. With Actor-Network-Theory in mind, for me maps and graphs and even letters sometimes, are not representations of reality "out there", they are not simply illustrations of reality but they are the thing itself. The map does not only represent something, the map is an active player in allowing something. You cannot put a wire from one street to another without an engineer signing a visual plan; it is part of the process and not only representing it. My idea, when I began this project, was trying to innovate on the methodological level by using these visual sources as they are and not interpreting them, not transforming them into text but trying to even minimize the text and to instead give priority to those artifacts. In the end, the book would be full of maps and graphs, so that the reader will move from one actor to another. However, such experimental type of presenting a sociological study is simply too costly for an academic publishing house, at least in most cases of a study like mine. This is the practical truth of academic life. But then I began to give talks that were methodological. People

asked me to talk about electricity and I would talk about the maps and the graphs and say, “listen, these are the materials, they tell the story, they created a story, they made a story” and maybe we begin to think about doing sociology and anthropology by using less of our interpretive texts and more of these artifacts/materials. I know it is expensive, especially in hard print; but as a methodology, this is why I call it methodology: because it is a logic of inquiry that does not look for documents when we talk about archival research as representing something, but as the thing in and of itself.

**SozMag:** *Interesting, indeed! This is my last question for you: What would be your future recommendations to people who want to study infrastructures?*

**RS:** I keep an interest in urban sociology and almost as a sociological hobby I began documenting the appearance and disappearance of urban infrastructures. For example, in many cities public toilets are disappearing and in order to use a toilet you have to enter a private place, a café, a restaurant, a hotel. There is a whole infrastructure of public benches: in some places more, in some places less. Nowadays, there are growing infrastructures for bicycles, so the urban landscape is changing as it begins with bike lanes but at the same time you need to solve parking issues for bikes. In London nowadays I begin to see

air-pumps. It all requires a whole new way to envision the urban landscape and other infrastructures are disappearing such as public pay phones. It is an infrastructure that is disintegrating and disappearing. So, this whole way of looking at a city through appearing and disappearing infrastructures for me is a great prospect for research on planning and the city.

**SozMag:** *Which again is related to alienation or disconnection in this respect...*

**RS:** Here we talk about alienation in the sense that you begin to ask, what makes a city a city; it is not only a design of materials and concrete. What makes a person feel like a part of the city has a lot to do with the way you connect to certain infrastructures. What is this process of adjustment and what facilitates connections? Again, I am translating alienation as connection and disconnection. You can think about alienation also in the sense of how it is to walk in the city like in the work of Michel De Certeau. When we walk in the city, what allows you to connect to the city and what is happening that keeps you away from connecting to it? Of course, you can go to these directions and for me these are really just early thoughts inspired by you.

**SozMag:** *And I guess you will inspire many others with this talk, too! Thank you very much!*