Israel Incorporates Postmodern Strategies in Warfare

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The Philosophy of Murder

> This is a fascinating article about how the IDF is studying some revolutionary thinkers (Debord, Deleuze and Guattari) in order to help them work with urban space and decentralized warfare. It's interesting too if anyone has read Antonio Negri's Multitude since he spends some time talking about the State and Capital trying to adopt decentralized warfare. The IDF apparently is experimenting with this in Palestine.

The Art of War

The Israeli Defence Forces have been heavily influenced by contemporary philosophy, highlighting the fact that there is considerable overlap among theoretical texts deemed essential by military academies and architectural schools
by Eyal Weizman.

The attack conducted by units of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) on the city of Nablus in April 2002 was described by its commander, Brigadier-General Aviv Kokhavi, as ‘inverse geometry’, which he explained as ‘the reorganization of the urban syntax by means of a series of micro-tactical actions’.1 During the battle soldiers moved within the city across hundreds of metres of ‘overground tunnels’ carved out through a dense and contiguous urban structure. Although several thousand soldiers and Palestinian guerrillas were manoeuvring simultaneously in the city, they were so ‘saturated’ into the urban fabric that very few would have been visible from the air. Furthermore, they used none of the city’s streets, roads, alleys or courtyards, or any of the external doors, internal stairwells and windows, but moved horizontally through walls and vertically through holes blasted in ceilings and floors. This form of movement, described by the military as ‘infestation’, seeks to redefine inside as outside, and domestic interiors as thoroughfares. The IDF’s strategy of ‘walking through walls’ involves a conception of the city as not just the site but also the very medium of warfare – a flexible, almost liquid medium that is forever contingent and in flux.

Contemporary military theorists are now busy re-conceptualizing the urban domain. At stake are the underlying concepts, assumptions and principles that determine military strategies and tactics. The vast intellectual field that geographer Stephen Graham has called an international ‘shadow world’ of military urban research institutes and training centres that have been established to rethink military operations in cities could be understood as somewhat similar to the international matrix of élite architectural academies. However, according to urban theorist Simon Marvin, the military-architectural ‘shadow world’ is currently generating more intense and well-funded urban research programmes than all these university programmes put together, and is certainly aware of the avant-garde urban research conducted in architectural institutions, especially as regards Third World and African cities. There is a considerable overlap among the theoretical texts considered essential by military academies and architectural schools. Indeed, the reading lists of contemporary military institutions include works from around 1968 (with a special emphasis on the writings of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Guy Debord), as well as more contemporary writings on urbanism, psychology, cybernetics, post-colonial and post-Structuralist theory. If, as some writers claim, the space for criticality has withered away in late 20th-century capitalist culture, it seems now to have

found a place to flourish in the military.

I conducted an interview with Kokhavi, commander of the Paratrooper Brigade, who at 42 is considered one of the most promising young officers of the IDF (and was the commander of the operation for the evacuation of settlements in the Gaza Strip).2 Like many career officers, he had taken time out from the military to earn a university degree; although he originally intended to study architecture, he ended up with a degree in philosophy from the Hebrew University. When he explained to me the principle that guided the battle in Nablus, what was interesting for me was not so much the description of the action itself as the way he conceived its articulation. He said: 'this space that you look at, this room that you look at, is nothing but your interpretation of it. […] The question is how do you interpret the alley? […] We interpreted the alley as a place forbidden to walk through and the door as a place forbidden to pass through, and the window as a place forbidden to look through, because a weapon awaits us in the alley, and a booby trap awaits us behind the doors. This is because the enemy interprets space in a traditional, classical manner, and I do not want to obey this interpretation and fall into his traps. […] I want to surprise him! This is the essence of war. I need to win […] This is why that we opted for the methodology of moving through walls. . . . Like a worm that eats its way forward, emerging at points and then disappearing. […] I said to my troops, "Friends! […] If until now you were used to move along roads and sidewalks, forget it! From now on we all walk through walls!"'2 Kokhavi's intention in the battle was to enter the city in order to kill members of the Palestinian resistance and then get out. The horrific frankness of these objectives, as recounted to me by Shimon Naveh, Kokhavi's instructor, is part of a general Israeli policy that seeks to disrupt Palestinian resistance on political as well as military levels through targeted assassinations from both air and ground.

If you still believe, as the IDF would like you to, that moving through walls is a relatively gentle form of warfare, the following description of the sequence of events might change your mind. To begin with, soldiers assemble behind the wall and then, using explosives, drills or hammers, they break a hole large enough to pass through. Stun grenades are then sometimes thrown, or a few random shots fired into what is usually a private living-room occupied by unsuspecting civilians. When the soldiers have passed through the wall, the occupants are locked inside one of the rooms, where they are made to remain – sometimes for several days – until the operation is concluded, often without water, toilet, food or medicine. Civilians in Palestine, as in Iraq, have experienced the unexpected penetration of war into the private domain of the home as the most profound form of trauma and humiliation. A Palestinian woman identified only as Aisha, interviewed by a journalist for the Palestine Monitor, described the experience: 'Imagine it – you're sitting in your living-room, which you know so well; this is the room where the family watches television together after the evening meal, and suddenly that wall disappears with a deafening roar, the room fills with dust and debris, and through the wall pours one soldier after the other, screaming orders. You have no idea if they're after you, if they've come to take over your home, or if your house just lies on their route to somewhere else. The children are screaming, panicking. Is it possible to even begin to imagine the horror experienced by a five-year-old child as four, six, eight, 12 soldiers, their faces painted black, sub-machine-guns pointed everywhere, antennas protruding from their backpacks, making them look like giant alien bugs, blast their way through that wall?'3

Naveh, a retired Brigadier-General, directs the Operational Theory Research Institute, which trains staff officers from the IDF and other militaries in 'operational theory' – defined in military jargon as somewhere between strategy and tactics. He summed up the mission of his institute, which was founded in 1996: 'We are like the Jesuit Order. We attempt to teach and train soldiers to think. […] We read Christopher Alexander, can you imagine?; we read John Forester, and other architects. We are reading Gregory Bateson; we are reading Clifford Geertz. Not myself, but our soldiers, our generals are reflecting on these kinds of materials. We have established a school and developed a

curriculum that trains “operational architects”.’4 In a lecture Naveh showed a diagram resembling a ‘square of opposition’ that plots a set of logical relationships between certain propositions referring to military and guerrilla operations. Labelled with phrases such as ‘Difference and Repetition – The Dialectics of Structuring and Structure’, ‘Formless Rival Entities’, ‘Fractal Manoeuvre’, ‘Velocity vs. Rhythms’, ‘The Wahabi War Machine’, ‘Postmodern Anarchists’ and ‘Nomadic Terrorists’, they often reference the work of Deleuze and Guattari. War machines, according to the philosophers, are polymorphous; diffuse organizations characterized by their capacity for metamorphosis, made up of small groups that split up or merge with one another, depending on contingency and circumstances. (Deleuze and Guattari were aware that the state can willingly transform itself into a war machine. Similarly, in their discussion of ‘smooth space’ it is implied that this conception may lead to domination.)

I asked Naveh why Deleuze and Guattari were so popular with the Israeli military. He replied that ‘several of the concepts in A Thousand Plateaux became instrumental for us […] allowing us to explain contemporary situations in a way that we could not have otherwise. It problematized our own paradigms. Most important was the distinction they have pointed out between the concepts of “smooth” and “striated” space [which accordingly reflect] the organizational concepts of the “war machine” and the “state apparatus”. In the IDF we now often use the term “to smooth out space” when we want to refer to operation in a space as if it had no borders. […] Palestinian areas could indeed be thought of as “striated” in the sense that they are enclosed by fences, walls, ditches, roads blocks and so on.’5 When I asked him if moving through walls was part of it, he explained that, ‘In Nablus the IDF understood urban fighting as a spatial problem. […] Travelling through walls is a simple mechanical solution that connects theory and practice.’6

To understand the IDF’s tactics for moving through Palestinian urban spaces, it is necessary to understand how they interpret the by now familiar principle of ‘swarming’ – a term that has been a buzzword in military theory since the start of the US post cold War doctrine known as the Revolution in Military Affairs. The swarm manoeuvre was in fact adapted, from the Artificial Intelligence principle of swarm intelligence, which assumes that problem-solving capacities are found in the interaction and communication of relatively unsophisticated agents (ants, birds, bees, soldiers) with little or no centralized control. The swarm exemplifies the principle of non-linearity apparent in spatial, organizational and temporal terms. The traditional manoeuvre paradigm, characterized by the simplified geometry of Euclidean order, is transformed, according to the military, into a complex fractal-like geometry. The narrative of the battle plan is replaced by what the military, using a Foucaultian term, calls the ‘toolbox approach’, according to which units receive the tools they need to deal with several given situations and scenarios but cannot predict the order in which these events would actually occur.7 Naveh: ‘Operative and tactical commanders depend on one another and learn the problems through constructing the battle narrative; […] action becomes knowledge, and knowledge becomes action. […] Without a decisive result possible, the main benefit of operation is the very improvement of the system as a system.’8

This may explain the fascination of the military with the spatial and organizational models and modes of operation advanced by theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari. Indeed, as far as the military is concerned, urban warfare is the ultimate Postmodern form of conflict. Belief in a logically structured and single-track battle-plan is lost in the face of the complexity and ambiguity of the urban reality. Civilians become combatants, and combatants become civilians. Identity can be changed as quickly as gender can be feigned: the transformation of women into fighting men can occur at the speed that it takes an undercover ‘Arabized’ Israeli soldier or a camouflaged Palestinian fighter to pull a machine-gun out from under a dress. For a Palestinian fighter caught up in this battle, Israelis seem ‘to be everywhere: behind, on the sides, on the right and on the left. How can you fight that way?’9

Critical theory has become crucial for Nave's teaching and training. He explained: 'we employ critical theory primarily in order to critique the military institution itself – its fixed and heavy conceptual foundations. Theory is important for us in order to articulate the gap between the existing paradigm and where we want to go. Without theory we could not make sense of the different events that happen around us and that would otherwise seem disconnected. […] At present the Institute has a tremendous impact on the military; [it has] become a subversive node within it. By training several high-ranking officers we filled the system [IDF] with subversive agents […] who ask questions; […] some of the top brass are not embarrassed to talk about Deleuze or [Bernard] Tschumi.'10 I asked him, 'Why Tschumi?' He replied: 'The idea of disjunction embodied in Tschumi's book Architecture and Disjunction (1994) became relevant for us […] Tschumi had another approach to epistemology; he wanted to break with single-perspective knowledge and centralized thinking. He saw the world through a variety of different social practices, from a constantly shifting point of view. [Tschumi] created a new grammar; he formed the ideas that compose our thinking.11 I then asked him, why not Derrida and Deconstruction? He answered, 'Derrida may be a little too opaque for our crowd. We share more with architects; we combine theory and practice. We can read, but we know as well how to build and destroy, and sometimes kill.'12

In addition to these theoretical positions, Naveh references such canonical elements of urban theory as the Situationist practices of dérive (a method of drifting through a city based on what the Situationists referred to as 'psycho-geography') and détournement (the adaptation of abandoned buildings for purposes other than those they were designed to perform). These ideas were, of course, conceived by Guy Debord and other members of the Situationist International to challenge the built hierarchy of the capitalist city and break down distinctions between private and public, inside and outside, use and function, replacing private space with a 'borderless' public surface. References to the work of Georges Bataille, either directly or as cited in the writings of Tschumi, also speak of a desire to attack architecture and to dismantle the rigid rationalism of a postwar order, to escape 'the architectural strait-jacket' and to liberate repressed human desires.

In no uncertain terms, education in the humanities – often believed to be the most powerful weapon against imperialism – is being appropriated as a powerful vehicle for imperialism. The military's use of theory is, of course, nothing new – a long line extends all the way from Marcus Aurelius to General Patton.

Future military attacks on urban terrain will increasingly be dedicated to the use of technologies developed for the purpose of 'un-walling the wall', to borrow a term from Gordon Matta-Clark. This is the new soldier/architect's response to the logic of 'smart bombs'. The latter have paradoxically resulted in higher numbers of civilian casualties simply because the illusion of precision gives the military-political complex the necessary justification to use explosives in civilian environments.

Here another use of theory as the ultimate 'smart weapon' becomes apparent. The military's seductive use of theoretical and technological discourse seeks to portray war as remote, quick and intellectual, exciting – and even economically viable. Violence can thus be projected as tolerable and the public encouraged to support it. As such, the development and dissemination of new military technologies promote the fiction being projected into the public domain that a military solution is possible – in situations where it is at best very doubtful.

Although you do not need Deleuze to attack Nablus, theory helped the military reorganize by providing a new language in which to speak to itself and others. A 'smart weapon' theory has both a practical and a discursive function in redefining urban warfare. The practical or tactical function, the extent to which Deleuzian theory influences military tactics and manoeuvres, raises questions about the relation between theory and practice. Theory obviously has the power to stimulate new

sensibilities, but it may also help to explain, develop or even justify ideas that emerged independently within disparate fields of knowledge and with quite different ethical bases. In discursive terms, war – if it is not a total war of annihilation – constitutes a form of discourse between enemies. Every military action is meant to communicate something to the enemy. Talk of 'swarming', 'targeted killings' and 'smart destruction' help the military communicate to its enemies that it has the capacity to effect far greater destruction. Raids can thus be projected as the more moderate alternative to the devastating capacity that the military actually possesses and will unleash if the enemy exceeds the 'acceptable' level of violence or breaches some unspoken agreement. In terms of military operational theory it is essential never to use one's full destructive capacity but rather to maintain the potential to escalate the level of atrocity. Otherwise threats become meaningless.

When the military talks theory to itself, it seems to be about changing its organizational structure and hierarchies. When it invokes theory in communications with the public – in lectures, broadcasts and publications – it seems to be about projecting an image of a civilized and sophisticated military. And when the military 'talks' (as every military does) to the enemy, theory could be understood as a particularly intimidating weapon of 'shock and awe', the message being: 'You will never even understand that which kills you.'

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A full version of this article was recently delivered at the conference 'Beyond Bio-politics' at City University, New York, and in the architecture program of the Sao Paulo Biennial. A transcript can be read in the March/April, 2006 issue of Radical Philosophy.

1 Quoted in Hannan Greenberg, 'The Limited Conflict: This Is How You Trick Terrorists', in Yediot Aharonot; http://www.ynet.co.il (23 March 2004)
2 Eyal Weizman interviewed Aviv Kokhavi on 24 September at an Israeli military base near Tel Aviv. Translation from Hebrew by the author; video documentation by Nadav Harel and Zohar Kaniel
3 Sune Segal, 'What Lies Beneath: Excerpts from an Invasion', Palestine Monitor, November, 2002; http://www.palestinemonitor.org/eyewitness/Westbank/what_lies_beneath_by_sune_segal.html 9 June, 2005
4 Shimon Naveh, discussion following the talk 'Dicta Clausewitz: Fractal Manoeuvre: A Brief History of Future Warfare in Urban Environments', delivered in conjunction with 'States of Emergency: The Geography of Human Rights', a debate organized by Eyal Weizman and Anselm Franke as part of 'Territories Live', B'tzalel Gallery, Tel Aviv,
5 November 2004
5 Eyal Weizman, telephone interview with Shimon Naveh, 14 October 2005
6 Ibid.
7 Michel Foucault's description of theory as a 'toolbox' was originally developed in conjunction with Deleuze in a 1972 discussion; see Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, 'Intellectuals and Power', in Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. and intro. Donald F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1980, p. 206
8 Weizman, interview with Naveh
9 Quoted in Yagil Henkin, 'The Best Way into Baghdad', The New York Times, 3 April 2003
10 Weizman, interview with Naveh
11 Naveh is currently working on a Hebrew translation of Bernard Tschumi's Architecture and Disjunction, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997.
12 Weizman, interview with Naveh

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