**Thinking Through Duration: A response to Joyce Dalsheim 31(1)**

**Brian Callan, Goldsmiths University of London. 2016**

Like Joyce Dalsheim, I was in Israel when the three young Israelis were abducted and murdered in June 2014. I had begun an ethnography of Palestinian solidarity activism back in 2011 and remained in Jerusalem until 2015, with my Israeli wife and two children. Though I was no longer attending the weekly demonstrations central to my research, I remained in touch with the transnational community of Palestinian, Israeli and diverse international dissenters who were addressing the ‘creeping annexation’ of Israel’s military occupation with non-violent resistance (Callan 2014). Here, I complement Dalsheim’s account with my own eye-witness account of that time.

Dalsheim’s intervention on Bergsonian duration helps us understand the depth with which our past and anticipated futures are embedded in our perception and imagination, shaping personal interpretations and actions. For Caton (2014), duration may be the very condition of subjectivity, but Dalsheim shows how it is also leveraged for collectivity. The abduction crisis was a national tragedy, drawing together an often fractious public, as secular and leftleaning Israelis ‘shared the fears held by religiously motivated settler parents: anyone’s children could be abducted’ (Dalsheim 2015: 11). In this account, subjective experiences of loss and fear during the ‘contrived interval’ of the abduction reinforced the collective, as Israeli Jews thought of their own children, and those of their neighbours, friends and relatives. It drew in memories of past kidnappings and traumas, particular ‘befores’ which became part of the event itself. The interpretations of that abduction’s duration, Dalsheim writes, were reliant on ‘intersubjective (collective) memories’ (ibid: 10), so reproducing the ‘intractability’ of the conflict.

I present here an alternative interpretation, still very much Jewish and Israeli, of that summer. The duration was widely perceived by Jewish solidarity activists as having begun before the night of the kidnapping and as having continued long after the discovery of their bodies and after thousands of other bodies joined the Israeli boys in death that summer. These Israeli solidarity activists were not just thinking about what *might* happen to their own children, or those of their friends and neighbours. Their fears went beyond the national collective to include what *would* happen to Palestinians and what *was* happening to their own society. ‘Intractability’ manipulated by the cultural apparatus can be transcended, thus altering the subjective experience of the conflict.

My account centres around Israeli solidarity activists, whom I have worked with for four years now. Some, like Judy from the local Israeli branch of the international Women in Black peace network, come from liberal backgrounds and have spent decades opposing the occupation and colonization of the Palestinian territories. The Women in Black have held a silent vigil every Friday at Paris Square in West Jerusalem, and three other cities, for almost 30 years now. An anthropologist herself, Judy left the US in the McCarthy era, as part of a cohort of liberal American Jews who came to Israel in the 50s and 60s to build a better society (see Hirschhorn 2012). She told me once that she had, ‘never been to *Kitah Aleph*’ – First Grade in the Israeli education system. Her point was that she had not been born and raised in a nation which had had to legitimize and reproduce a military occupation. For her, resisting systemic oppression was how she was raised – no exceptions.

My respect for Judy, and those like her, is unparalleled; however, amongst Israeli activists, there are also those who did attend *Kitah Aleph*, and went on to serve in elite combat units or as air force pilots in the second intifada. There are some who were raised in West Bank settlements, or grew up in Likud, National-Religious and even Kahanist1 families. Their family members were known to have claimed that ‘not enough Arabs’ were being killed, and themselves sang songs at school in praise of Baruch Goldstein, who massacred 29 Palestinians in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in 1994. Another was brought as a child to protest against the arrest of Jewish Underground members, who had bombed and murdered Palestinians and plotted to blow up the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Despite the weight of such upbringings, the duration of that summer was experienced by them, not as a fear for their own safety and that of their families, or of the aimless waves of rockets from Gaza, but as fear and dismay at the contempt for and suppression of any sense of compassion as the daily death toll of Palestinians rose and rose – a viciously unbalanced tally supported by most of their neighbours, family and friends.

These solidarity activists would appear to manifest what Hannah Arendt saw as the innate human faculty to transcend the collective durations that reproduce any *status quo*. They demonstrate our capacity to pause and question when ‘everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes’ (Arendt 1971: 191). They show how subjectivity need not be confined to a singular duration, for though experience is laden with what Mills (1967) called ‘received and manipulated interpretations’, these may be tempered by what Arendt called the faculties of *thinking* and *judging*. According to Mills, the first rule for understanding the human condition is that:

*men live in second-hand worlds: they are aware of much more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect. No man stands alone directly confronting a world of solid facts. No such world is available … Their images of the world, and of themselves, are given to them by crowds of witnesses they have never met and never will meet.* (Mills 1967: 405)

These received interpretations shape our thoughts, feelings, morality, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. They are integral to ‘guiding the surface perceptions of an instant no less than the aspirations of a lifetime’ (*ibid*).

Mills argued that these images and interpretations are provided by people we have never met, ‘strangers and dead men’. Most Israelis have never met those who helped craft the various interpretations of Zionist mythologies used and debated in the nation today. Ahad HaAm’s cultural model, the left-wing socialist minimalism of Ben-Gurion, Jabotinsky’s Iron Wall maximalism, Meir Kahane’s messianic nationalism and Matzpen’s2 anti-Zionism have all been passed on by intermediaries. They are reproduced and reinterpreted for later generations through schools, museums, academic journals, media outlets, military units, census bureaux and so on – part of what Mills called the ‘cultural apparatus’.

At the exclusion of others, collective meanings are manipulated by the apparatus over time and from afar, promoting certain understandings. However, collective meanings are also passed on to us through the guidance, praise and admonishments of teachers, friends, family and immediate neighbours. Intimate relationships and genuine practices of nurturing are thus essential and endemic to the functioning of the cultural apparatus. It operates throughout the social sphere from political governance to family dinner tables, providing the interpretations by which the duration of subjective experience comes to be collectively interpreted.

To understand the interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as intractable, we must listen to the voices shaping contemporary discourse in Israel. An unrepentant form of right-wing Zionism has become increasingly visible and vocal in Israel’s cultural apparatus over the last decade. One manifestation of this is the rise of the HaBayit HaYehudi(The Jewish Home) political party, under the leadership of Naftali Bennett who openly advocates the annexation of Area C (Bennett 2010). In his 2014 election campaign, a few months after operation Protective Edge,3 Bennett called on Israelis to ‘stop apologizing’ (*The* *Times of Israel* 2014). Ayelet Shaked, also of HaBayit HaYehudi, re-posted a polemical article on Facebook after the bodies of the three Israeli boys were found. The article referred to Palestinian children as ‘little snakes’ and declared that Israel was at war with ‘the entire Palestinian population’. Shaked was then accused of promoting genocide (Rudoren 2015). Such statements feed into the notion that Israel is locked in ‘an endless war against an unappeasable foe’ (Penslar 2012: 156), publically promoting the narrative of an intractable conflict. It is difficult to argue that such attitudes are on the fringe of Israeli society after Bennett and Shaked were respectively given the ministerial portfolios for education and justice in March 2015. Powerful mechanisms of the cultural apparatus indeed.

Dalsheim is quite correct in noting that the conflict has many ‘befores’ and ‘afters’ which may have been chosen to interpret the abduction, but, following Mills, we must acknowledge that those memories are not entirely our own and that particular choices are promoted by the cultural apparatus. Nonetheless, Israeli solidarity activists show that we need not be trapped by the memories given to us by others and that we have the capacity to choose for ourselves. In this way, some children of Likud, National-Religious and Messianic Zionist families have radically altered their subjectivities. They demonstrate the application of Hannah Arendt’s faculties of *thinking* and *judging*. Arendt described one characteristic of thinking as ‘its withdrawal from the common-sense world of appearances’ (Arendt 1971: 88). This leads to ‘a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, in short, on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics’ (ibid: 175). This destructive tendency allows us to *doubt* the ‘common-sense’ world – Mills’ received interpretations. For Arendt, this doubt is the condition which may ‘make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it’ (ibid: 5).

If through *thinking* we come to doubt the validity of our received interpretations, it is through *judging* that we shed ourselves of those certainties and so alter subjectivity. Arendt’s understanding of judging remained unfinished at the time of her death, but she considered it the most political human faculty – an intersubjective attempt ‘to see things not only from one’s own point of view but from the perspective of all those who happen to be present’ (Arendt 1968: 221). Whereas thinking is destructive, judging produces understanding. Judging is neither easy nor commonly undertaken. As Jackson notes, it is more than intellectual movement from one’s own position to another:

it involves physical upheaval, psychological turmoil, and moral confusion. This is why suffering is an inescapable concomitant of understanding – the loss of the illusion that one’s own particular worldview is universally tenable, the pain of seeing in the face and gestures of a stranger the invalidation of oneself … such hazards and symbolic deaths are the cost of going beyond the borders of the *local world.* (Jackson 2009: 239; emphasis added)

Thus, the duration of the abduction was radically different for Israeli solidarity activists, in both content and temporality, to that related by Dalsheim. As a supporter of solidarity activism, as a resident of Jerusalem and as a father of two young Jewish Israeli boys, the duration I now describe was also very much my own.

Gilad Shaer (16) and Eyal Yifrach (19) on 12 June 2014 were not, for me, far-off events. The young men were kidnapped while hitchhiking between al-Maasara and Beit Ummar, a stretch of road in the occupied Palestinian territories I had travelled many times to join the weekly protests of the Popular Committees there. The imagined future of the West Bank at this time, in which the twisted logic of the abduction emerged, was one in which political negotiations come to nothing. The Kerry peace initiative had collapsed a few months earlier. Officials on all sides pointed fingers, according blame for this. Most Israeli activists had long felt that the notion of Israel as a partner for peace was another contrivance. As the search for the boys (and not the bodies) continued, I met with Israelis who had gone to Hebron to be with their Palestinian counterparts. They hadn’t witnessed such devastation by the Israel Defense Forces since the second intifada.

According to official Israeli interpretations, Hamas was to blame. No evidence was presented to this effect, but hundreds of Hamas affiliates were arrested. Most had been newly released as part of the Kerry negotiations. Nine Palestinians were killed during the 18-day search, before the bodies of the youths were found in shallow graves in fields west of Beit Ummar on 30 June. The boys had been killed within minutes of their abduction. The Israeli authorities were almost certain of this a day or two into the search, but placed a gag order on the recording of Gilad Shaer’s desperate call to the emergency services: ‘They’ve kidnapped me’, Gilad was heard to whisper, followed by the sound of automatic gunfire. Then just the voices of the killers, singing in Arabic.

These ‘first’ 12 deaths apparently were insufficient. Rabbis, members of Knesset and Facebook groups screamed vengeance in various public forums. On the night of Tuesday 1 July, a group of Jewish men tried to abduct 10-year-old Moussa Zalum on the main street of Shua’fat in East Jerusalem. His mother beat them off with her bag and the men sped off in a car. Early the next morning, 16-year-old Mohammed Abu Khdeir was abducted from the same neighbourhood, taken to a nearby forest and burnt alive. Almost incidentally, but inevitably, a conflict in Gaza escalated. Perhaps it could have been avoided, but violent conflict with Gaza *is* the *status quo*. The random abduction and murder of children was new.

Sirens wailed three times over Jerusalem as rockets approached from Gaza, the nations rallied and rioted and righteousness and violence ran amok. Once, I took my children to the safety of my apartment block stairwell when the sirens went off. I wasn’t particularly worried about the apartment being hit, but my mother-in-law had already admonished me to heed the siren’s call. I was more worried about exposing my children to the narrative of conflict at such a young age. What I feared most that summer were the roving mobs of Israelis – teenage boys and girls, grown men and mothers – gathering in the centre of town, chanting ‘*Mavet l’Aravim’* – death to Arabs. I could hear the chants from my balcony, borne along on the summer breeze. The slogan was painted on my children’s ‘bi-lingual’ school, Yad-b-Yad, the only institution in the city where Palestinian and Jewish children learn together.

The chants were more than idle talk. Night after night, gangs of Jewish Israelis rampaged and Arab workers were dragged out of shops and restaurants and beaten. My Israeli activist friends, already long familiar with derision, intimidation and brutality, were in shock at the overt violence on the streets. Protests for peace were quickly organized and immediately attacked, physically. Right-wing thuggery coalesced and organized itself around Lehava, a Jewish anti-miscegenation group that has long agitated against relationships between Jews and non-Jews. As Israeli journalist Hagai Matar wrote of one protest against the Gaza operation, in Tel Aviv: ‘When the sirens sounded into the night, only one thing was obvious to all of us: the fascists in front of us are more dangerous than the rockets on the way’ (Raz 2014). The chants were now ‘Death to Arabs! Death to leftists!’.

Israeli activists coordinated ‘Protective Presence Patrols’, in an attempt to prevent, or at least to bear witness to attacks on Arabs in the streets. I began to join these patrols, alternating nights with my wife. The Women in Black, considered cancelling their weekly vigil. I joined these women, most of them in their 70s or 80s, along with the protective presence activists. Departures from the vigil were coordinated and we moved in groups back to the parked cars. Attacks on anti-war demonstrators occurred after the protests, when the police presence had moved on. I also returned to the demonstrations against the evictions in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah. It was peaceful there, but by the end of that demonstration we heard that three people had been shot and killed at an anti-war protest at another of my fieldsites, Beit Ummar in the West Bank. Each new day brought new horror.

Arabs and protesters were not the only targets. Any public expression of doubt, at either the legitimacy or even the utility of the mounting death toll in Gaza, was also suppressed. The gears of the cultural apparatus locked down, leveraging violence on the streets, populist intimidation, threats by private employers, state institutions and cries of treachery on the Knesset floor. Journalist Orli Santo (2014) detailed how an ‘entire spectrum of formerly acceptable left-leaning opinions and sentiments [became] taboo’ during that summer. Actress Gila Almagor received death threats after expressing her sense of shame at the murder of Mohammed Abu Khdeir. Comedian Orna Banai expressed the opinion that: ‘We all are suffering from this situation. Us and the Palestinians. On their side, women and children were killed today, and it makes me feel terrible’ (ibid). She was fired from her position with a cruise ship operator.

Amnon Abramovich, a Channel 2 news commentator, had to be rescued after at least 100 right-wing rioters wrapped in Israeli flags surrounded the studio shouting ‘Traitor!’, ‘Terrorist!’, ‘It’s a shame you didn’t die in the war!’. Gideon Levy, the veteran left-wing columnist for the *Haaretz* newspaper, had a bodyguard hired for him. MK Yariv Levin called for Levy to be tried for treason. A Facebook page, Enemies of Israel, was set up to track down ‘leftists’ on social media and ‘out’ them to their employers.

Bar-Ilan University reprimanded a professor and issued a public apology after he had expressed sympathy ‘for all victims’ of the fighting. Foreign Minister Lieberman called for a boycott of Arab businesses that went on strike in solidarity with residents of the Gaza Strip. He and Minister of Communications Gilad Erdan demanded that *Al Jazeera* be shut down in Israel. It was still only July.

In August, I left for Ireland with my two children. When I returned, the Gaza war had ended and life in Israel had quickly returned to normal. However, normal now includes the duration of that summer of blood-lust and contempt. So it was that in November that same year, I was neither surprised nor shocked when three of Lehava’s young acolytes set fire to the Yad-b-Yad school in Jerusalem, tagging the building with the phrase ‘Coexistence is a cancer’. They broke into a classroom, piled up the teaching materials and exercise books on the floor and torched them. It was my six-year old son’s classroom. He was in *Kitah Aleph*.

It is difficult to be positive about such a situation. At the time of writing (October 2015), blood stains the streets of these lands once again. I do not underestimate Dalsheim’s contribution of duration to the weight of subjective experience which events like ‘the abduction’ have in making conflicts intractable. Given that the expression of compassion for the death of Palestinian women and children is now considered treachery in Israel, this does not offer any hope that the nation’s cultural apparatus is geared to reinterpret the meaning of ‘intractable’. But subjectivity is far too complex and nuanced to have a single process described as its essence. As powerful a notion as it is, duration does not attend to the human capacity to realize that received interpretations are often exclusive and fail to account for the plurality of the human condition in a shared world. I am thus forever impressed by the capacity of Israeli and Palestinian activists to transcend the narratives which exclude the innate humanity of the other and legitimize disgraceful acts of violence against each other’s children. Instead of suppressing or dismissing such thoughtful and painful reassessments of why or whether the conflict is ‘intractable’, by acknowledging and promoting those who have thought beyond the collective and judged the lives of others with compassion, we may help to unpack intractability itself.