Palestinian Political Discourse between Exile and Occupation

By E. Badarin (2016)

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Reviewed by Peter E. Jones

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Emile Badarin's book is listed as the twenty-second volume in the series 'Routledge Studies on the Arab-Israeli Conflict'. The value of the book lies in its unique analytical focus on Palestinian political discourse, that is, on the texts, speeches and other communicational artefacts and processes produced by Palestinian actors themselves, as opposed to 'representations' of Palestinian actions or the 'Israel-Palestine conflict' supplied by Western and Israeli actors and their media outlets. More specifically, Badarin undertakes to 'explore the Palestinian representative political discourse since an-Nakba (the Catastrophe) in 1948, while focusing on discursive evolution and transformation, and their implications for everyday life' (p. 1). This 'Palestinian discourse', Badarin argues, 'remains largely an uncharted field of inquiry' (p. 1) and yet an examination of this language 'offers an exceptional possibility to see Palestinians through their own eyes; underlining their agency and bringing this subjugated knowledge to the forefront' (p. 2).

Badarin's ambitious mission is 'critically to investigate the underlying mechanisms and processes that have shaped the post-1948 Palestinian political discourse' (p. 2). Badarin therefore begins from 'an-Nakba', the destruction of Palestinian society by the creation of Israel in 1948, and carefully follows the political logic of the changing discursive 'trails' laid down in Palestinian responses to this event and its consequences from talk

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of 'revolution', 'national liberation' and 'armed struggle', to the language of UN-sanctioned international diplomacy and 'rights' ('self-determination' in an 'independent state'), to the 'peace aggression' of the Political Plan of the first Intifada (begun in 1987) and on to the interminable 'peace process' (whose fate hangs in the balance under the Trump administration today) predicated on 'security' for Israel, to name merely a few of the discursive reference points which Badarin examines in detail in the context of the relevant historical events.

However, Badarin's main argument is that a close study of the evolution of Palestinian discourse allows one not simply to follow (or shadow) gross changes or alterations in the plight, status, aspirations and political actions and projects of the Palestinian people in relation to Israel and its Western sponsors, but to obtain a fuller and more concrete understanding of the social and ideological pressures, conflicts and accommodations internal to the Palestinian movements, forces and actors themselves. His examination reveals a number of key processes at work in Palestinian discourse, or what he refers to in Foucauldian style as 'operative discursive logics or rules of formation' (p. 142): 'the logic of division, replacement, market, and a mathematical-judicial schema' (p. 142). These 'logics', although they require close attention and concentration by the reader, are amply attested in the book and, helpfully, summarised and further explicated in the final chapter ('What makes the Palestinian discourse?'). 'Replacement', for example, is 'a mechanism of substitution of tropes with corresponding new ones' which 'facilitates the transition from one position to another and transforms the content without altering the overall governing structure' (p. 192). The following case illustrates the point:

the substitution and discontinuation of 'liberation rationale' in favor of the 'cause of peace' and an 'honourable peace' suggested the possibility of reinterpreting the colonized-colonizer relationship and reproducing it in the form of a 'dispute' between 'two parties' that needed to be settled through direct negotiations only. (p. 192)

As Badarin argues, such replacements create 'a complex interpretive situation' (p. 192) in which use of 'the same grammar and structure of discourse' can in effect be the vehicle of a radical re-conceptualisation of the political relationships at stake, 'transforming negotiation over inalienable national rights into a dispute over trivial matters' (p. 192).

In addition to his close reading of the more conventional or official political statements and documents, Badarin also provides valuable commentary on the use of flyers as political communication in the first Intifada (84ff) and the cartography of Palestine in textbooks produced for Palestinian

schools and on Google Maps (137ff). The latter ‘multi-modal’ analysis is especially telling, indicating that ‘there are two narratives: one represented in text, the other through imagery’ (p. 141). In particular, Badarin is able to show how the various maps presuppose, imply, reinforce or rationalise political positions or initiatives, which have in common ‘the discontinuation of the imagined Palestine as a totality’ (p. 142) and its replacement by disconnected fragments in order to ‘fit the orthodox framework of peace’ (p. 142).

Overall, then, in both its close attention to the detail of Palestinian discourse as well as in its attempt to offer a politically coherent analysis of the evolution of this discourse, Badarin’s book has much to offer as a contribution to our understanding of the plight, history and present needs and aspirations of the Palestinian people. It is not, I should perhaps add, intended as a history of the region as such but, rather, presupposes quite some knowledge and familiarity on the part of the reader with the relevant events and current political landscape. And so despite the significance Badarin attributes to ‘an-Nakba’ and its aftermath, readers would be best to consult, say, Pappé (2006), to understand the nature and scale of the violent ethnic cleansing of Palestine carried out by the nascent Israeli state in 1948.

The book is also a sustained exercise in ‘discourse analysis’ of a particular kind in which ‘the word *discourse* ... signifies the “rules of formation” or the logics behind a particular conceptualization of a certain social event’ (p. 3) in the style of Foucault and Laclau in contrast with the methodology of ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ (e.g. Fairclough 2015). Thus, Badarin’s analysis proceeds via such discourse-based notions as ‘referentiality’ (a ‘referential function’ which is ‘elastic, incomplete, and always in a state of evolution and becoming’, p. 78), ‘socialization’ (which appears to mean something like ‘domestication’ or assimilation into mainstream frameworks), and ‘internalization’ (to ‘internalize something’ means ‘to go along with something as a *fait accompli*’, p. 106). Despite illustration and a degree of explanation at times, these notions nevertheless remained difficult to assess and quite obscure (at least to this reader), although this is by no means a major criticism of the book. And while Badarin’s analytical commentary not infrequently appeals to a rather deterministic sounding framework of ‘rules’ and ‘logic’, he acknowledges the ‘relative and subjective’ (p. 2) nature of the interpretations of the discursive processes he offers. More to the point, in carefully putting the language of his texts and documents into a relationship with concrete political developments and alignments ‘on the ground’, with the benefit of his own considerable knowledge and insight, Badarin avoids many of the problems associated with the traditions of

Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (Jones and Collins 2006) by engaging in discourse analysis as 'a form of history writing' (Roger Fowler in Collins and Jones 2006:52) in which history and context are taken seriously and responsibly in the exploration of a whole field of dynamically developing action. And while he explicitly claims to 'consider language to be the locus for the constitution of reality, development and change' (p. 10) – a position one might have reasonable grounds to object to – in practice he tends to operate a delicate and nuanced perspective on the role of discourse in social change, in which one can identify, for example, 'PLO/PA reliance on essentially *statist* concepts and terminologies (ministries, ministers, national security, governments, elections, etc.) *without corresponding state-order in the real world*' (p. 121, my emphasis). The 'real world', then, does not vanish altogether behind the play of discursive strategies.

All in all, then, the book is an original, and strongly argued, contribution to our understanding of Palestinian history and politics from the discourse end. It is not an easy read by any means, since it assumes a lot of knowledge on the reader's part and is written in quite an esoteric style as befits its discourse theoretical allegiances. It will be an invaluable, if not obligatory, work for postgraduates and researchers with an interest in Palestinian discourse and politics and may also be of interest too to Palestinian activists who have some familiarity with discourse analytic methodologies and terminology. To my surprise and disappointment, given the rather pessimistic analysis of Palestinian political discourse which Badarin offers, he does not attempt to articulate a way forward for the Palestinian cause either in terms of a renewed Palestinian discourse or a political strategy of any particular kind. Nevertheless, a welcome parting shot seems to sight an exit route out of the confining loop of 'peace process' discourse, pointing us to the 'growing popular global solidarity with the Palestinian narrative and a new creative current, pushing for a different framework based on the universality of human rights and justice' (p. 194). In particular, Badarin notes that '[t]he strength of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), solidarity movements, innovative media, and other strategies of resistance are opening up new possibilities and terms within the discourse on Israel-Palestine' (p. 194).

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