Jess Bier, Mapping Israel, Mapping Palestine: Occupied Landscapes of International Technoscience (New Texts Out Now)

By : Jess Bier

Jess Bier, *Mapping Israel, Mapping Palestine: Occupied Landscapes of International Technoscience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

Jadaliyya (J): What made you write this book?

Jess Bier (JB): Years ago as a student involved in the movement against the Israeli occupation, I came to see that even in progressive circles, many of us who were not Palestinian were not capable of really listening to our Palestinian co-organizers. For those who have a particular form of privilege, even when we want to empathize and understand, we are limited by our imaginations, our ways of seeing, the knowledge at our disposal, and our personal and geographic networks. More than that, the world itself is built and maintained in a way that enables our ignorance.

As someone trained in geography, and who has some forms of privilege but not others, I was particularly interested in the varied ways that power and knowledge interact across space, and how the world can be remade to facilitate only certain kinds of empirical awareness. So I wrote this book to address these complex interactions, which I call the "geographic production of knowledge," and to better understand the specifics of how they are situated differently in particular places, times, and societies.

In the book, I focus on critiquing narrowly liberal conceptions of scientific knowledge, and the related claim that knowledge arises from a free debate and exchange of ideas. I show that knowledge circulates in specific, and at times quite limited forms and ways—and that the supposedly free spaces of negotiations over knowledge, data, and statistical facts, are actually fully enmeshed in unjust social and political landscapes.

The effects of political and geographic landscapes on peoples' perspectives are not given or obvious, but they are pervasive. This means that there are no neutral actors who are somehow outside the conflict they are seeking to understand, including international actors like the US and the EU. Relatedly, Palestinian representatives are often asked to be equal partners in negotiations, but such calls for "equal" cooperation often neglect the drastically unequal and unjust conditions that exist for Palestinians on the ground.

With this in mind, throughout the book I work to demonstrate the serious social and political consequences of the ignorance that comes from only considering the experiences of the (relatively) powerful. I examine the damage that even well-meaning international actors can do when we fail to acknowledge that our understanding of what is happening is itself politically and geographically situated.

J: What particular topics, issues, and literatures does the book address?

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JB: In a practical sense, the book addresses the commonly-held view that science and technology are politically neutral. In my experience, in humanitarian and development organizations there is sometimes a belief that science and technology alone can be used to "solve" political conflicts. Then, when that inevitably fails, there is a tendency to see differences in observation as failures of methodology. So if two people see things differently—say they are counting residents, and one person says that eight people live in a certain apartment, and the other person says there are four—then the difference is usually explained by claiming that one person made a mistake. They must have counted incorrectly. And for a variety of reasons, often the person in a relatively less powerful position is assumed to be the one who “fails.” So in the context of the Israeli occupation, whenever there is failure to be attributed, it is incorrectly attributed to Palestinian organizations.

This attribution of failure is both highly political and, by silencing those with less privilege, it shapes the knowledge that is available. Instead of explaining away those differences as failure, I sought to understand why they arise. I found that by systematically encouraging the disenfranchisement of Palestinians, the Israeli occupation shapes what can be known *about* the occupation by all those involved. Even more, that shaping itself is different in different circumstances, and for different groups, so it must be acknowledged and examined in its own right.

J: How does this book connect to and/or depart from your previous work?

JB: Since I was very young, I have been conscious of events in Palestine/Israel through my family and those around me. I was raised as a secular Catholic, but my grandfather came from a Jewish family, and they strongly influenced me while I was growing up in the US. As I started to read more about the region, and after living briefly in Cairo as a student at the start of the Second Intifada, it became increasingly difficult to understand how those around me could be in favor of the Israeli Occupation as it now stands. It seemed like even self-described liberals could not admit to themselves that the experiences of Palestinian people under the Occupation could be valid or real, even when the injustices were happening right in front of our faces. Understanding that disconnect—how you could work to advance human rights but then circumscribe who you

see as human to such an extent that it fundamentally changes what and who you literally see in everyday life—was one of the original reasons I wanted to do research.

Even so, my first published work was on a different topic: Syrian and Lebanese communities in the greater New York City area, where I lived and was a community volunteer in the early 2000s. That work influenced this book through its focus on how people circulate and why, and how aspects of the landscape, as well as the very land itself—including infrastructure, neighborhoods, buildings, city boundaries, and roads—are made and remade to channel that circulation in particular directions. This book departs from my earlier work, however, in the sense that it focuses more on the forms and mobility of data and digital technology.

J: Who do you hope will read this book, and what sort of impact would you like it to have?

JB: I hope this book draws greater attention to how international forms of knowledge, such as science and technology, are themselves shaped by the geographic and political landscapes where they are produced. For example, if powerful researchers believe that there is one best kind of knowledge for all situations, and that Europe and North America epitomize that knowledge, then people elsewhere end up scrambling to emphasize how much they are like Europe and North America. Otherwise their forms of knowledge might seem as somehow less viable *precisely* to the degree to which they differ from the dominant forms. This restricts the kinds of knowledge that are seen as valid, and circumscribes what can be known, and by whom.

Of course, critical development and race scholars have been making related critiques for decades. This book is an attempt to work in conversation with those critiques to contribute an analysis of how specific geographic landscapes can shape one's ability to know the world. I also show that rather than being "solved" through the use of digital technologies such as Google Maps and Geographic Information Science (GIS), this shaping actually becomes more complex. Despite the hype that often accompanies topics like algorithms and big data, digital technology alone cannot alleviate the fundamental social and political issues that are related to science and tech. For that you need heterogeneous ways of knowing, including social theory and the humanities, as well as the many forms of knowledge that come from outside of academia.

So I hope that researchers, reporters, activists, and educators will read the book and find ways to address the ways that one's social and geographical positions can affect what you see around you every day. I wrote the book to draw attention to the limits of individual observations and individual perspectives, but also to show how, even if they never fully go away, those limits are something that can and must be engaged with, for example through the method of "traveling ethnography" that I develop. It does take ongoing effort, however, both systematically and in terms of your own ways of relating to the world, because learning to further social justice is every bit as difficult as becoming proficient at any scientific or technical skill.

J: What other projects are you working on now?

JB: My current project is still in its early stages, but it will be about shipping and logistics. Whereas this book focuses on the work that goes into making facts and data, now I am examining the automated collection and processing of big data. I am seeking to understand the different ways that algorithms are being implemented, and how they might foreclose or open up new possibilities to alter the forms and distribution of contemporary capitalism.

Tech is often promised to bring greater equality, but then it is used in ways that often streamline, rather than ameliorate, unjust distributions of wealth. In terms of logistics, what I am really interested in right now is how the implementation of new tech can affect how certain connections between places are made visible and emphasized (such as the Port of Rotterdam's role as the largest and most automated port in Europe), whereas other equally tight material connections (for example, its key role in the global industrial waste trade) are effaced from what is known about the port and its role more globally. This selective shaping of visibility, and the related shaping of social and material reality, reinforces economic injustices and thereby circumscribes the possibilities for globally just alternatives to capitalism.

Excerpt from the Book:

Chapter Five, pgs. 158-162:

Far from simply revealing themselves as existing truths that are out there, waiting to be collected, facts must be laboriously *made* in particular places and times. Houses and people must be observed and counted, categories need to be devised and defined, and percentages and errors must be calculated. All this effort takes place in specific landscapes, through the arduous work of those steeped in particular scientific and technical traditions. Indeed, scientific practice has helped to produce the very idea of a separation between human and land, subject and object—or in the case of segregation, between subject and subject. The material and social consequences of these separations then feed back into technoscientific practices in those same landscapes.

That feedback and the diverging observations that result are the subject of this chapter. In what follows, I analyze several crucial ways that landscapes can and do shape the observations carried out during the long process of producing data and facts. To investigate how differing geographic positions might influence the act of observation—and through that, the production of facts themselves—I compare and contrast the maps of Israeli settlement expansion that are produced by these two organizations, ARIJ and Peace Now. They are perhaps the two most prominent NGOs whose members map ongoing empirical changes in the landscape. Both NGOs share the goal of ending Israeli settlement expansion. Israeli settlements in the West Bank are considered illegal under international law. They have been constructed precisely to cement the hold of the Israeli government on areas believed destined for a future Palestinian state. However, to date there is little agreement on the extent and location of these settlements. Rather than using agreed-on facts to support political arguments, actors often debate the intrinsic composition of the facts themselves, including the ways they are made. As a result, calls to use the facts to settle disagreements or confirm facts through further observation rarely lead to consensus.

Thus, the challenges of validating observations in the context of the occupation stem from the ways that such fact making is firmly and sometimes oppositionally rooted in social worlds born out of experience. The advance of the settler movement along with the resistance that results has led the occupation forces to impose extreme forms of segregation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem—a segregation that aims to consistently privilege Israelis. Jewish Israelis are formally allowed only *within* the settlements, whereas most Palestinians with West Bank visas can only travel *within* Palestinian areas that lie outside the settlement fences, walls, and other barriers. Similarly, Palestinians are increasingly prevented from entering settlements, viewing them from

without, while Jewish Israelis primarily view Palestinian areas from *without*. This double, thoroughly unequal segregation fosters diverging sets of experiences among Palestinians, Israelis, and internationals. It can result in sometimes widely differing observations of places and events, even when people occupy spaces that are allegedly the same. Segregation and its related power asymmetries therefore have complex consequences in terms of shaping empirical knowledge of the occupation.

A View of Har Homa, the View from Har Homa

The positions of ARIJ and Peace Now within the landscapes of the West Bank also reflect power imbalances between Palestinians and Israelis, both locally and internationally. In contrast to the broader reception of Israeli accounts, until recently Palestinian perspectives were not widely represented in Europe and North America. Even on the occasions when Palestinian intellectuals and activists discussed the conflict with a (non-Arabic-speaking) international audience, their experiences were frequently downplayed, in part because they didn't fit the dominant conception of what a *voice* would need to be in order to be considered credible. As a result, their accounts were sometimes characterized as unscientific. They were criticized for providing not facts—meaning, not statistical facts—but instead stories and witness testimonials. Palestinian cartographic efforts are in part an attempt to respond to such accusations by adopting cutting-edge statistical and cartographic visualization techniques.

The international perception of Palestinians is more than a minor matter, because international public opinion has long played a central role in the Israel occupation. Lori Allen has remarked that "the problem of how to make themselves audible and visible has been a central stumbling block" for Palestinians. Allen points out how in the mid-twentieth century, "Palestinians were without any territory or institutional platform to express their national aspirations." This political and geographical context made "establishing the credibility of the testimony takers just as important as that of the testimony". In contrast, although anti-Semitism continues to significantly affect the broader reception of work by Jewish researchers, Israeli scientists have been successful overall in terms of presenting themselves as credible observers. This is in no small part a result of the legitimacy afforded by the state of Israel as well as the perception of Israelis as culturally European and racially white (see chapters 2 and 3).

These power dynamics have crucial implications in terms of the international validation of Palestinian eyewitness accounts of the occupation. Validation depends on the ability to reproduce observations, yet observations of the effects of the occupation are inaccessible for many outsiders. So before delving further into the international reception of Palestinian data, it is worth outlining the steps of this *invalidation* of Palestinians' experiences in greater detail. First, Palestinians are targeted as a group under the occupation, so they experience particular injustices precisely *because* they are identified as Palestinians. Second, by definition, those aspects of the occupation are not directly accessible to non-Palestinians who can't or are far less likely to personally experience them. But third, this means that in order for those unique experiences of occupation to be transformed into international knowledge, the outsiders must acknowledge Palestinians' accounts as valid observations of events. Fourth, however, such an admission is absent precisely because of the same discriminatory tendencies that make it possible to target Palestinians in the first place, thereby bringing us back to step one.

Such an acknowledgment of the possible validity of Palestinian accounts is exactly what has long been lacking in international debates. On an international level, Palestinian advocates risk speaking a private language, and this presents another level of power imbalances. A hypothetical scenario illustrates the common response to Palestinian claims. Imagine that in the course of negotiations over the occupation, the Palestinian team told the international negotiators, “The Israeli military demolished our homes.” The negotiators might then reply, “Are you sure? Because all our homes are still standing.” To the negotiators, it might seem obvious that demolitions are rare, but that’s only because their homes wouldn’t be targeted *precisely* because they’re international negotiators who might have the power to retaliate. To counter such tendencies, Palestinian advocates must not only produce facts. They must develop a community of Palestinian observers, whose accounts are verifiable within the community, as part of a legitimizing process that in turn can convince international organizations. To do this, there is a need to develop an institutional infrastructure of validation that allows for observations to be verified among professionals from within the group, while simultaneously presenting their observations in a statistical form that is internationally recognizable.

The power imbalances that sometimes preclude validation are not just confined to political negotiations. They also condition the reception of scholarly research both locally and internationally. To offer an example, Moshe Brawer, one of the founders of geography as a discipline in Israel, draws on Orientalist stereotypes of inconsistent, irrational Palestinians in his review of the edited atlas by Walid Khalidi, a highly esteemed Palestinian geographer working in the United Kingdom. Brawer, whose work is equally respected, places particular emphasis on his criticisms of Khalidi’s fieldwork method, contending that it “leaves so much to be desired—in systematic and consistent description of geographical features, in accuracy, and in scholarly observations.” What Brawer does not mention, though, is how Khalidi’s position as a Palestinian academic might lead to challenges in his access to sources and field sites—and thus to potential difficulties conducting the types of extensive, standardized observations that Brawer expects.

These portrayals also affect research that is completed in government or non-governmental organization (NGO) capacities. Reacting to negative characterizations of their work, one cartographer in a Palestinian NGO related that “the first thing when you got conferences is, ‘What’s your sources?’ … In the early days, it was all about emotions … but soon enough they ask you, ‘What’s your source?’ … In the early days, we’d say, ‘What source? I’m telling you,’ and they would go, ‘It’s your word against theirs. What facts do you have?’” His words point to a twofold labor on the part of Palestinian organizations and academics. On the one hand, it is necessary to be recognized as a credible observer in a political game that depends on such recognition. On the other hand, it is necessary to formulate claims precisely in a way that will be heard—to produce a community capable of putting forward the allegedly objective facts the serve as a metaphoric entrance fee to the debates.