



Producing Spoilers: Peacemaking and the Production of Enmity in a Secular Age, by Joyce Dalsheim. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 256 pages. \$24.95 hardcover, \$16.99 e-book.

REVIEWED BY ANNA BERNARD

Joyce Dalsheim’s provocative book joins a body of work by scholars (Gil Anidjar, Jonathan Boyarin, Judith Butler, and John Collins, among others) who have sought to articulate what Palestine and Israel might tell us about larger contemporary formations of globalization, colonialism, secularism, and religiosity, and the changing fortunes of the nation-state. Like these scholars, Dalsheim encourages her readers to “make the familiar strange” (p. xvi) by thinking beyond the fixed ethnic, religious, and political categories that characterize much popular and academic thinking

about the region. Her book, however, is perhaps more iconoclastic than most. Dalsheim argues that the U.S.-led peace process is flawed not because it favors Israeli interests, as many other commentators have observed, but because it marginalizes religious “extremists”—namely, Hamas and religious Israeli settlers—by constructing them as what Dalsheim calls “spoilers,” meaning that they are routinely blamed for the failure of negotiations. Dalsheim criticizes both liberal peacemaking and left-wing activism and scholarship for relying on a secular notion of the nation-state that designates religiously motivated Palestinians and Israelis as “enemies” not only of the peace process, but also of each other. This constricted vision, she argues, overlooks already existing modes of negotiation and exchange, beyond territorial nationalism and the demand for national sovereignty, which could lead to viable forms of political resolution.

Dalsheim is a cultural anthropologist whose first book, *Unsettling Gaza: Secular Liberalism, Radical Religion, and the Israeli Settlement Project* (Oxford University Press, 2011), was an ethnographic study of religious settler communities in Gaza, based on fieldwork conducted immediately before the Israeli withdrawal from the territory in 2005. Rather than introducing entirely new material, *Producing Spoilers* develops the earlier book’s insights about the adverse theoretical and political consequences of disregarding and demonizing the worldview of these communities. It is methodologically unconventional, even eclectic: Dalsheim states at the outset that it is an anthropologist’s account of the dynamics of peacemaking, and as such it addresses “a range of local knowledges, sensibilities, and practices found among people in Israel/Palestine . . . that some might find inappropriate, unappealing, or just irrelevant” (p. xviii). Alongside interviews with subjects including a “crazy” rabbi, a “collaborating” sheikh, Palestinian and Israeli residents of Hebron, and the Palestinian politician and academic Sari Nusseibeh, Dalsheim brings together postcolonial theory, modern and contemporary critics of the nation-state, and ideas of storytelling and narrative (where she invokes a very diverse group of sources, among them Louis Althusser, Hayden White, Ursula LeGuin, and Salman Rushdie). The book as a whole reads like something of a thought experiment: what might happen if international academics, activists, and politicians took religious narratives of the conflict seriously, rather than seeing them as “anachronistic” or “crazy” (p. 99)? What alternative forms of resolution might become possible if we listened to “stories that point to different moral orders” (p. 173)?

Producing Spoilers is at its most thought-provoking in moments such as these, when it articulates the challenge that (for example) the Hebron settlers’ understanding of time as cyclical rather than linear poses to secular liberal thought (chapter 4), or when it points out the unlikely parallels between figures as disparate as Nusseibeh and the “crazy” rabbi, who for very different reasons are both willing to relinquish political sovereignty over the land of Palestine and Israel (p. 153). Sometimes these parallels are pushed uncomfortably far. It seems a stretch to describe the Jewish settlers in Hebron as “subaltern” on the basis of their exclusion from the “hegemonic secular,” when they benefit disproportionately from a state-sponsored settler-colonial order, as Dalsheim acknowledges on a number of occasions (pp. 55, 64–65, 78, 96, and 100). I take Dalsheim’s point that the automatic designation of the settlers’ stance as “evil” (p. 75) may prevent their views from being heard, but she risks trivializing the Left’s rejection of settler colonialism as a legitimate form of politics when she suggests that this opposition is partly motivated by “our sense of offense” (p. 55). It also seems a stretch to suggest that support for the Palestinian-led boycott and divestment

campaign repeats pre-1948 support for the founding of the Jewish state, on the grounds that both seek to fulfill the demands of an oppressed people (p. 45). I am reminded, by contrast, of Edward Said's insistence that we must distinguish between the political genealogies of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism, rather than seeing all nationalisms as politically equivalent.* Finally, given the centrality of the idea of "narrative" to the discussion, it would have been helpful to engage further not only with narrative theory, but also with previous work on the idea of "national narrative" in discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which, as Nancy Partner has noted, narrative is regularly assumed to "be primary and causative, a mold, not a mirror of reality,"† as Dalsheim also suggests (pp. 7, 30, 77, 97). These points aside, *Producing Spoilers* is a compelling book, which boldly argues that "recognizing humanity in all its complexity must surely include recognizing the humanity"—and the political imaginaries—"even of the [apparently] despicable anachronistic others who live in the past" (p. 99).

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* Edward Said, "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1984): p. 31.

† Nancy Partner, "The Linguistic Turn along Post-Postmodern Borders: Israeli/Palestinian Narrative Conflict," *New Literary History* 39, no. 4 (2008): p. 826.