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## **Reconsidering the laboratory thesis: Palestine/Israel and the geopolitics of representation**

### **ABSTRACT**

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in the notion of Palestine/Israel as a ‘laboratory’ for the production and export of advanced weapons, security knowhow and technology. Critics of Israeli wars and the ongoing colonization of Palestine use the laboratory metaphor to make sense of Israeli state policies and practices used in controlling Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and fighting wars but also to address how Israeli instruments of violence come to travel elsewhere. This article brings these discussions into sharper focus by examining how the concept of the laboratory is employed in making sense of Israel’s perceived centrality in global patterns violence and militarism, here termed the *laboratory thesis*. I argue that although the thesis develops powerful insights, it has analytical limitations. I further call into question its polemical force, suggesting that critical references to Palestine/Israel as a laboratory reinforce misleading ideological tropes at the core of Israel’s settler colonial project. I take these concerns as an opportunity to re-assemble the policing/security laboratory as a critical concept, in relation to Palestine/Israel, the global war on terror and beyond.

**Keywords:** Security Assemblages; Human Testing; Settler Colonialism; Actor-network Theory; War Economy; Zionism

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in the notion of Palestine/Israel as a ‘laboratory’ for the production and export of advanced weapons, security knowhow and technology. Critics of Israeli wars and the ongoing colonization of Palestine use the laboratory metaphor to make sense of Israeli state policies and practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) but also to address how Israeli instruments of violence repression come to travel elsewhere. They suggest that Israeli security forces’ ability to ‘experiment’ on surplus Palestinian lives has facilitated Israel’s rise as a major global exporter of conventional weapons, security knowhow and technologies (Denes 2011; Gordon 2009). Yotam Feldman articulates these arguments in his 2013 documentary *The Lab*. As Feldman (2014) writes of the film’s central claim: “the product they [Israelis] are selling is unique. Rather than rifles, rockets or bombs, the Israeli companies sell their experience. The long-running conflict with the Palestinians has created a unique and unrivalled laboratory for testing technologies and ideas relating to “asymmetric warfare” [...]. In this manner the Israeli conflict with the Palestinians may be seen as a national asset—rather than a burden”. As a result, Israel relies on the confinement and repression of Palestinians in sustaining its export-led economy, thereby sustaining the Occupation and increasing the likelihood and intensity of future wars. This is what I term the *laboratory thesis*.

While Feldman advances it most vividly, critical scholars (Li, 2006; Weizman, 2007; Graham, 2011), journalists (Cook, 2008; Silver, 2012; Klein, 2007) and activists (Who Profits, 2014) advance similar claims. References to the term ‘laboratory’ are also put to work in more affirmative ways. Advocates of Israeli policies invoke the concept as

a validation of the country's alleged success in 'surviving' in the face of existential threats (Byman, 2011: 9; Jonathan-Zamir, Weisburd, & Hasisi, 2014: 9, 11). Despite important differences between these affirmative and critical references to the laboratory, there is an agreement that Israel has cultivated a status as a leading security purveyor due, in part, to the status of either the State of Israel, the OPT (or both) as laboratory-like experimental spaces. Across these accounts the term 'laboratory' plays three key roles. First, it acts as an *empirical representation* of particular spaces, places and zones of policy experimentation. Second, it serves as an *explanatory concept* for addressing how Israel has emerged a major exporter of weapons, security technology and expertise. Third, we can detect that 'laboratory' has a *normative valence* attached to its usage: the term plays a role both in critiquing and celebrating Israeli security approaches and their global reach. The fact that the term laboratory is increasingly referenced in relation to Palestine/Israel appears to indicate something important. Yet its usage for diametrically opposed political agendas raises questions about how the concept actually *works* analytically and politically. Moreover, despite disagreement about *whether* the status of Palestine/Israel as a laboratory is deserving of praise or condemnation, there is little debate about the concept of the laboratory itself – in other words, *what* the laboratory is. The term has been taken for granted as self-evident and unproblematic by mainstream commentators and critics alike.

This article examines how the concept of the laboratory is employed in making sense of Israel's perceived centrality in global patterns of violence and militarism. It takes the form of a review and intervention into the laboratory thesis, a largely critical body of literature with important analytical and political contributions. I consider epistemological

issues about how truth claims are constructed through references to the laboratory but also address ontological questions about the veracity of these claims. In calling it a *thesis* I do not mean to homogenize all references to the laboratory as singular argument. The concept's usage varies and these differences bear recognition. Nevertheless, these uses converge in important ways. I argue that although the thesis develops powerful insights, it has analytical limitations. I further call into question its polemical force, suggesting that critical references to Palestine/Israel as a laboratory reinforce dominant evolutionary tropes of Zionism. As a result the thesis falls short of its potential as a provocation about settler colonial violence and its complex relationships to Israel's position as a global security leader. My broad concern here is "the historiographical presumption of *progressive history* that supports the idea of Zionism as the unfolding realization of an ideal" (Butler, 2012:100, emphasis added) but also more specific claims including the notion that self-sufficient innovation in science and technology has allowed Israel triumph against the odds, the false sense of symmetrical "sides" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and representations of Israeli statecraft as a kind of omnipotent form of domination that is at once exceptional *and* universal. I take my concerns about the thesis as an opportunity to re-assemble the concept of the policing/security laboratory, situating this project as part of a broader refutation of teleological developmentalist ideologies at the core of settler colonial projects.

The terms of my intervention are informed by two key claims within the field of critical geopolitics. First, is the understanding that "geopolitics is not a singularity but a plurality" based on competing "representational practices" across different societies (ÓTuathail & Dalby, 1998: 4). Second, is the insistence that studying geopolitics cannot

be neutral (Dalby, 1991). More specifically, critical geopolitics is guided by an underlying counter-hegemonic imperative to “problematize [...] the “is” of “geography” and “geopolitics,” their status as self-evident, natural, foundational, and eminently knowable realities” (ÓTuathail, 1996: 52). In mounting a challenge to “commonsense understandings incorporated in widely prevalent geographs”, critical geopolitics calls on scholars to “investigate the politics of the geographical specification of politics”, in other words “to practice critical geopolitics” (Dalby, 1991: 274). Yet feminist critiques of this literature are equally instructive. They have shown that critical geopolitics scholarship reproduces geopolitics as a disembodied, exclusionary and masculinist practice, unwittingly reinforcing the authority of dominant voices whilst perpetuating the silence of others (Sharp, 2000; Sparke, 2000). Building on this work, I interrogate the laboratory as an increasingly common and taken-for-granted geograph within discussions about violence and militarism. The article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews literature invoking the term ‘laboratory’, exploring its key claims, aims and contributions. The second section develops a preliminary critique of the laboratory thesis. The third section proposes strategies for re-invigorating the thesis.

## **1. THE LABORATORY THESIS**

While references to Palestine/Israel as a laboratory have certain distinctive features, they are part of a wider literature on the production and global mobility of policing/security knowledge. The volume by Hönke & Müller (2016) on the “global making of policing” uses the concept of the laboratory as a core theme that connects chapters on Palestine/Israel with a range of other empirical sites (also see Clarno, 2017). ‘Laboratory’ is employed to address how certain places become zones of

“experimentation and control” in which “ideas [...] can be tried out” (Slater, 1997: 637) and to understand the production and mobility of policing/security ‘models’, in relation to ‘global’ cities (Amar, 2013; Coaffee, 2004) and in the context of imperialism (McCoy, 2009). Colonial spaces have long been represented as “laboratories of modernity” (Stoler & Cooper, 1997: 5) in making sense of the constitutive trans-local linkages between core and periphery. More recent literature on “war: police assemblages” also invokes the term laboratory in addressing how policies are “tested” by militaries (Bachmann, 2015: 43) and how conflicts or interventions become sites for “learning lessons” (Khalili, 2015: 100). I return to these wider discussions in the final section. Yet my references to the *laboratory thesis* pertain strictly to the term’s usage in relation to Palestine/Israel.

One of the core arguments advanced by the thesis is that given the country’s small population and physical size, Israel seems to have a disproportionate degree of influence in shaping contemporary discourses on and practices of security, especially in “niche” areas of asymmetric warfare and global pacification (Halper, 2015). For instance, Israel is a leading global exporter of drones and an innovator in radical urban warfare and control strategies (Graham, 2010a), emerging as a “homeland security capital” (Gordon, 2011). This status builds directly on the country’s longstanding role as an exporter of conventional weapons and (para)-military training (Beit-Hallahmi, 1987).

In making sense of Israel’s global influence on matters of security, ‘laboratory’ is put to work in a few distinct ways. It is utilized to conceptualize the technological development and production of Israeli security products and services at the forefront of changes in contemporary warfare and spatial control. As Denes (2011: 179) notes, the “prosecution of permanent war [in the OPT] provides the much-vaunted “battlefield

laboratory” in which to develop, beta-test, and demonstrate [Israeli] innovations in the crafts of war and surveillance” (also see Gordon, 2009: 47-8). Weizman (2012: 96) suggests that Gaza can be seen as laboratory in the sense that it “is a hermetically sealed zone, with all access controlled by Israel” (with the partial exception of the Egyptian border). Li (2006: 38-9) represents the Gaza Strip as a space of experimentation in which Israel aspires to create the “optimal balance between *maximum control* over the territory and *minimum responsibility* for its non-Jewish population” (emphasis in original). Hence, the concept of the laboratory draws attention to how Israeli security technologies are refined within territorially-bounded colonial spaces.

Evidence for these claims can be found in marketing materials of Israeli security firms where real-life testing is a persistent theme with firms using stamps of approval like “Combat Proven”, “Tested in Gaza” and “Approved by the IDF” (Halper, 2015: 143; also see Graham, 2010a, 2011; Gordon, 2009, 2011). Israeli security purveyors also frequently reference origin narratives about their products—i.e. stories in marketing materials and business magazines about how their innovations developed to suit the needs of Israel. These promotional strategies present the rise of Israel’s security industries as a natural ‘response’ to regional threats and frame the emergence of the industry as a ‘domestic’ process. According to Gordon (2009: 25): “There is no dispute that many of Israel’s homegrown technological skills were honed inside secret military labs and that military research has given Israel a clear lead in vital aspects of telecommunications and software technology”. He supports this with a quote from an Israeli trade-promotion body: “what grew out of a direct military need with a high-tech edge has [...] placed Israel at the forefront of the global security and homeland security industry” (ibid).



While emphasizing real-life testing and physical enclosure, the laboratory concept is also used to understand the mobility of Israeli security technology, expertise, and dispossession strategies, both within Palestine/Israel and transnationally. A volume on the politics of Israeli architecture notes: “Within and outside of the West Bank, Israel can be seen as an example, an accelerator or even as a territorial laboratory playing alternative scenarios in fast-forward” (Segal & Weizman, 2003: 25). As Li (2006: 36) argues, “just as laboratory experiments are meant to be replicated elsewhere, the territory [of Gaza] is a sort of proving ground for practices that could become increasingly relevant in the West Bank”. Scholars focus on how Israel’s access to real-world test sites in the OPT facilitates the transmission of Israeli security knowhow abroad, arguing that the ability of Israeli companies to ‘experiment’ in real-life situations gives them a competitive edge (Gordon 2009: 48; Denes 2011: 186). Stockmarr (2016: 66) argues that “[Israeli] branding rests on a brutal reality: the testing phase”. As she continues: “[E]very time the IDF uses Israeli HLS technology it automatically tests it”. Laleh Khalili’s work is exemplary in historicizing Palestine’s “location” within global patterns of violence. She argues that the “violence of Israeli counterinsurgency against Palestinians cannot be understood without locating it in a broader global space”, in which Palestine represents “an archetypal laboratory and a crucial node of global counterinsurgencies”. She shows how the techniques of control and domination developed in Palestine—themselves shaped by colonial experiences elsewhere—have come to influence the practices of counterinsurgency elsewhere through various “lessons and borrowings” (Khalili, 2013: ch. 2), emphasizing that this knowledge transmission is multidirectional.

As Israeli security experts advise foreign clients around the world, certain

practices and technologies associated with Palestine/Israel are becoming influential globally. Examples include airborne-targeted assassinations, the growing ubiquity of drones in warfare and surveillance and strategies of urban pacification. Authorities outside of Israel also clearly view the ‘Israeli experience’ as a source of valuable ‘lessons learned’, referencing this ‘experience’ as a “laboratory” (e.g. Henriksen, 2007: 18). In light of these interactions, scholars have linked *global* patterns of violence and control with the transmission of Israeli security ‘solutions’ abroad. Graham (2010a: xxii) argues that although “the colonization of urban thinking and practice by militarized ideas of ‘security’ does not have a single source [...] the Israeli experience of locking down cities and turning the Occupied Territories into permanent, urban prison camps is proving especially influential” (also see Hever, 2010: 201). Some have spoken about the “Palestinization” of resistance to the US-led occupation of Iraq (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 53-4; Khoury-Machool, 2003). As Weizman (2007: 9) further argues, “If the Iraqi resistance is perceived to have been ‘Palestinized’, the American military has been ‘Israelized’”, in the sense that American military planners drew on Israeli expertise in carrying out their counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq (also see Graham, 2010b; Gregory, 2004). Others suggest an “Israelification” of American policing is underway following the Israeli training of US officials (Rabie, 2012).

In addition to the export of Israeli weapons, security technology and knowhow, scholars have argued that Israel’s continuous ‘experiments’ on Palestinians help to (re)define the norms governing violence internationally. As Weizman (2012: 96) argues: “Most significantly of all, it is the thresholds that are tested and pushed: the limits of the law, and the limits of violence that can be inflicted by a state and be internationally

tolerated”. In other words, Israel is not simply an innovator in techniques of violence but re-defines what counts as ‘permissible’ conduct.

Critics also use the laboratory concept to illustrate how Israel’s commoditization of ‘combat proven’ knowledge, helps to perpetuate, legitimize and entrench its colonial designs. As Silver (2012) puts it, Israel “gets a “(kick)back out of conflict”, thereby allowing the country to sustain economic growth within a climate of global economic instability (also see Klein, 2007; Gordon, 2009: 47). As Israel has solidified its position as a leading exporter of conventional weaponry and security products and services, it has posted strong economic numbers. So although Israel accounts for roughly 2% of global weapons sales, the country posts the highest *per capita* ratio of weapons exports (Halper, 2015). As a result, commentators link its strong overall economic performance to its growing share of the global security and arms market (see Gordon, 2009; Hever, 2010: 74-79), alongside Israel’s shift to a neoliberal export-led economy (Clarno, 2017; Nitzan & Bichler, 2002). Representations of the OPT as a laboratory thereby underscore how Israel’s confinement of and experimentation on Palestinians sustains its economy, prolongs the Occupation and increases the incidence and intensity of violence.

As we have seen, ‘laboratory’ is put to work in describing empirical patterns of violence and control on the ground Palestine/Israel. It also helps to conceptualize these dynamics relationally on a global scale, exploring “how state formations or histories, logics of oppression and exploitation are linked, whether causally or symbolically, ideationally or semantically” (Goldberg, 2009: 1276). Yet the laboratory thesis also represents something more. Naomi Klein’s (2007) suggestion that “Palestinians [...] are no longer just targets” but now have become “guinea pigs”, attempt to re-draw the

boundaries of popular debate surrounding Israel-Palestine conflict on the left. By this I mean that critical references to the laboratory seek to reveal how the oppression of Palestinians is an intentional outcome of Israeli statecraft that is instrumentally exploited as a source of profit. As Feldman (2014) argues, “an unknown truth seems to underlie the public façade” behind Israel’s economic success. This “big secret” includes the close “relationship between a network of military generals, politicians and private business; the use of current military operations as a promotional device for private business [...and] the brutal employment of the Israeli experience” (ibid). Critics thereby reference the laboratory in their efforts to politicize Israel’s position as a leading purveyor of security knowhow, military equipment and high technologies by exposing concealed facts behind the country’s rise as an ‘economic miracle’.

Drawing attention to the politicizing impulses the laboratory thesis is not a critique of it. Nor is it to suggest that all references to the laboratory are equally or self-consciously ‘political’. It is, rather, to stress that the laboratory concept is deployed within a force-field of claims about how forms of violence and militarism in Palestine/Israel should be represented. This is made evident by the fact the concept is not only mobilized in the service of critique. As an Israeli counter-terrorism scholar notes: “Unfortunately, the extent and nature of the terrorism with which Israel has had to cope have made it a world-class laboratory for examining a democratic country’s ability to tackle [...] terrorism” (Ganor, 2013: 227). Thus whereas critics reference the laboratory as an indictment of how settler violence is being instrumentalized and commoditized, advocates of Israeli statecraft use ‘laboratory’ euphemistically as confirmation that these measures are unintended but nevertheless legitimate, largely effective and consistent with

liberal democracy.

These ‘uses’ of the laboratory concept reveal three key things. First, references to the laboratory come with normative valences. More specifically, the laboratory concept has at least two competing political ‘use values’ that hinge on intent and responsibility. Whereas critics use the concept to expose how the Israeli state cynically exploits Palestinian suffering as a ‘resource’, proponents alternatively employ it to suggest that Israel is merely ‘responding’ to and ‘managing’ a hostile external environment. As such, ‘laboratory’ becomes implicated within a broader geopolitics of representation surrounding the colonization of Palestine, i.e. how this process should be represented, theorized, affirmed or contested through *spatial* metaphors. Second, and as a corollary, the meaning of the laboratory concept appears at least somewhat malleable: claims that Palestine/Israel functions as a laboratory are mobilized toward competing, inconsistent arguments. Finally, the above discussion illustrates that the different dimensions of the laboratory thesis (descriptive, analytical, political) are deeply entangled and difficult to isolate. As I explore next, the laboratory thesis also suffers from a number of limitations.

## **2. A CRITIQUE OF THE LABORATORY THESIS**

In this section I evaluate the laboratory thesis, arguing its insights are less than fully groundbreaking and analytically robust. I begin by addressing some ontological issues concerning the accuracy of key claims advanced by the thesis and then develop a broader critique. I argue that the thesis’ findings converge with many of the dubious ideological claims of Israeli state officials and security industry representatives, providing limited disagreement about the basic terms of debate.

*Production*

One set of problems concern the role of the laboratory concept in theorizing the production of Israeli security solutions. Israeli products and services are branded as unique through claims to combat-proven capabilities, hermetic enclosure and homegrown self-sufficiency/domesticity. These claims clearly matter in selling Israeli security solutions and legitimizing Israeli policies. They also reflect the fact that the rise of Israel's weapons industry emerged in response to the 1967 arms embargo imposed on Israel by France (see Aharoni, 1991). Yet industry claims cannot be taken at face value; doing so obscures the constitutive role of transnational connections in Israel's rise as a global security purveyor. Early attempts by Israel to develop greater self-sufficiency in its weapons production relied heavily on transnational capital flows (Barnett, 1992), a trend which endures today. Many Israeli-based firms operate through joint ventures to develop, manufacture and market their products (see Gordon, 2009: 20; Graham, 2011: 149). Graham (2011b) claims that "the US-Israel security-military-industrial complexes are becoming umbilically connected, to the extent that it would perhaps make more sense to consider them as one transnational unit". In addition, many control strategies and technologies used in colonizing Palestine do not originate there. Examples include the roles of British imperial knowledge and practices during the 1930s (Khalili 2010, 2013), the early imports of weapons from Eastern Europe (Ochs, 2010; Pappé, 2006), the tear-gassing of protesters using US-manufactured tear gas (Who Profits 2014) and housing demolitions carried out with retrofitted US-made D-9 Caterpillar bulldozers (Graham, 2004). As a result, the forms of 'experimentation' carried out in Palestine/Israel do not always concern the development of specifically *Israeli* security solutions. Although many Israeli-based security companies have 'field-tested' their systems in Palestine/Israel

(through formal collaborations with the IDF and contracts with settlers), these firms often combine a range of components from around the world within products and services branded as 'Israeli'. So despite their undeniable complicity in colonizing practices, this does not mean that these companies' systems are technologically unique. Moreover, while some Israeli firms develop, manufacture and test all of their products in Palestine/Israel, this is by no means the rule. This raises questions about whether field-testing is "automatic" (Stockmarr, 2016: 66).

### *Globalization/Mobility*

I also have concerns about the ways the laboratory thesis conceptualizes the relationship between the production of Israeli security knowhow and its mobility. Scholars imply that strategies and technologies *first* emerge to meet the needs of Israeli security forces, are then tested within the OPT, and then 'go global'. As Weizman (2012: 96) notes, the "ability to remotely control large populations is [...] tested, before these technologies are marketed internationally". According to Kane (2017), the OPT serves as "Israel's "lab" – a testing ground for new weapons and surveillance tactics that are then brought to other regions". The problem with such claims is not that they are always necessarily inaccurate. They capture the trajectories of certain Israeli security technologies aptly (Author 2015a). The issue lies with their potential to homogenize and gloss over: they take the story of certain Israeli innovations that *are* unique and asserts it as some general rule that applies to all. The laboratory thesis also risks implying that the 'field-testing' of Israeli security solutions takes place primarily within Palestine/Israel and its border regions with far less consideration to how Israeli products and services are shaped by the requirements of international clientele, albeit with exceptions (e.g. Denes,

2011: 183).

Proponents of the laboratory thesis make extensive descriptive references to the hybrid trans-local assemblages of technologies and practices used to carry out the Occupation and facilitate ongoing wars, sometimes raising questions about the uniqueness of 'Israeli' policing/security approaches (e.g. Segal and Weizman, 2003: 26). Nevertheless, references to the laboratory tend to privilege the representation of Palestine as a hermetically sealed 'domestic' space in which the refinement of colonial strategies takes place. As a result, the thesis fails to reckon with how the specific local practices and technologies involved in carrying out repression and dispossession are co-produced through ongoing "worldly encounters" with global capitalism (Tsing, 2005), missing out on the "generativity" of the "mixtures" (Franklin, 2007: 133) so essential to Zionism and other forms of settler colonialism. Indeed, the implications of authors' descriptions of hybrid assemblages are under-developed. Recognizing the complex multiplicity of influences in the production and mobility of Israeli security solutions underscores looseness of claims to 'Israeli-ness' and in doing so actively troubles the claim that the growth of Israel's security industries represents a "homegrown", "domestic" process.

Claims about Israel's central role in global patterns of violence and militarism, though frequently suggested, are insufficiently elaborated. Scholars have noted limits. Khalili (2010: 422) emphasizes that the emulation of colonial experiences from Palestine historically never resulted in "an exact facsimile" of these practices and tactics elsewhere (also see Graham, 2011b: 137). Khalili (2013) further notes that contemporary US and Israeli counterinsurgency practices are characterized by key differences, despite the points of convergence (also see Denes, 2011: 183; Bhungalia, 2015: 2311). Yet the



laboratory thesis suffers from a lack of empirical follow-through. As argued elsewhere, despite claims that foreign police forces are becoming “Israelized”, such claims are often made in the absence of evidence about *what*, exactly, has been imparted by Israelis to international clients (Author, 2015b). This reflects the tendency among critical scholars to assume that security strategies developed in Palestine/Israel can be moved seamlessly across transnational space, without much consideration to the frictions, barriers and contradictions involved in these processes. I do not mean to suggest that there is no evidence that Israel influences discourses and practices of policing/security abroad. Nor is it to minimize the stakes of this influence. The point, rather, is to emphasize that critical commentators have been imprecise about *what* travels, *how* the global transmission of Israeli knowhow takes place and the practical consequences of these transactions, thereby weakening the force of their claims and potentially overstating Israel’s influence in global violence.

*Economy, efficacy & technological determinism*

There are further questions about the relationships between the repression of Palestinians and Israel’s prosperity. Despite Israel’s undeniable prowess as a high tech leader, Hever (2012: 128) notes that much of the Israeli economy remains “traditional”. He points out that Israel’s security industries only represent 10-15% of the country’s total exports and around 3-4% of its GDP and 1-3% of its workforce, meaning that “one cannot argue that the Israeli economy is primarily based on exploiting the Palestinian population” (ibid: 130). Moreover, although Israel is celebrated as a global provider of specialized (para)-military knowhow, this edifice is built on its position as the single largest recipient of US military aid, thereby disrupting Israel’s self-proclaimed status as a

self-sufficient innovator. More broadly, Wolfe (2012: 152) argues that the success of Zionism was predicated on Israel's access to what he calls "preaccumulation"—i.e. transnational capital from the Jewish diaspora that was "not conditional on the return of a financial profit". This unsettles a core premise of the laboratory thesis, namely that the contemporary Israeli economy is sustained by the exploitation of Palestinian bodies and underscores the need to address the reliance on *primitive* accumulation, not as an initial stage of capitalist development but as an enduring feature of settler colonial projects (Coulthard, 2014).

Though significant, these concerns do not represent an insurmountable impasse. To a degree, they concern questions of nuance regarding the choice of language used by critical commentators reflecting the polemical style of the thesis. If the thesis represents a political provocation in a polemical style, as I suggest, it is not surprising that it glosses over certain details. A far more significant (though connected) problem, relates to the thesis' technologically deterministic, even teleological flavor. Stockmarr (2015: 306) notes, "the patterns of pacification, resistance, and response to Israel's racialised interventions become part of the security production cycle", noting that "the effectiveness of a given technology is measured by the link between the detection of a problem, or security threat and the manufacture of an innovative solution that mitigates the threat". Halper (2015: 45) alleges that this innovation accounts for the global transmission of Israeli knowhow, claiming that Israel's "Matrix of Control" is popular internationally "offering as it does an effective model of counterinsurgency, stabilization and long-term pacification".

Through these representations critics downplay stories about failures, challenges and disruptions faced in controlling and dispossessing Palestinians and translating the knowhow derived from these activities elsewhere. This is because they portray a perpetual cycle of innovation, whereby Palestinian resistance is itself re-appropriated by Israel as a vector of improvement. Khalili goes the furthest in confronting issues of failure, emphasizing that British and Israeli efforts to subdue Palestinian resistance have continuously fallen short of their objectives, driving searches for alternatives. Drawing on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, she argues that "the failure to destroy nationalist sentiment has been met both by the British and the Israelis with a more determined commitment to reproduce—more perfectly—the very techniques that failed" (Khalili, 2010: 427). Yet, making sense of the global transmission of British and Israeli policies, practices and technologies elsewhere is even less straightforward, precisely because their efficacy in suppressing violence is anything but obvious. Critics have effectively countered Israel's official claims to "surgical" precision, confronting the logic that targeted killing constitutes a form of restraint (e.g. Weizman, 2008: 340). But this is where the critical interrogation of Israel's claims to efficacy and precision largely ends. Although dismantling the slippery and duplicitous logic of Israel's "lesser evil" necro-economy, questions about how well (or poorly) Israel's instruments of control perform are sidelined among claims about "frictionless and humanless separation" aided by Israeli "high technology" (Stockmarr, 2016: 70).

The term 'efficacy' is difficult to nail down and always a matter of perspective: the status of particular security policies, technologies or interventions as either successes or failures often remain vigorously contested. Moreover, the practical utility of any

product is never a good indication of its popularity. Yet what disappears in the laboratory thesis is the recognition that security solutions (Israeli or otherwise) always remain a *fetish* in Marx's sense: their value is derived from a "mystical value not based on its use value" (Neocleous, 2008: 153). My point here is not that the ability to experiment in real life situations does not help Israeli firms refine and improve the performance of their tactics and technologies over time. It clearly does. Instead, I want to open up a discussion about how their improvements, limitations and failures square with their globalization, in ways that reconsider intuitive understandings about the relationships between innovations' perceived preeminence and superiority. I return to this issue in the final section. Here I want to emphasize that the thesis' technological determinism reflects an even more general and significant problem, namely its resonance with and reification of Zionism's ideological underpinnings.

#### *Critical & affirmative convergences*

As noted above, it is not only critics who reference the laboratory in understanding Israel's rise as a global security purveyor. This is not to equate mainstream policy literature and industry claims with critical uses of the concept. Their political 'use values' are diametrically opposed. Yet critical and affirmative references converge in significant ways. One realm of convergence is about the significance of real-life 'testing'. As outlined above, the laboratory thesis suggests that Israeli state officials and industry actors view Palestinians as a surplus population and knowingly exploit this 'resource' in refining and marketing their solutions. In agreeing with Israeli official narratives that the exercise of Israeli state violence is progressive in character, however, critics straddle condemnation and validation. Weizman (2017) cites an Israeli general's claim that "the

Israeli military had become ‘world champions in occupation’ and has managed to turn its control of millions of Palestinians into ‘an art form’”, conceding that “Such bragging is not necessarily an exaggeration”. Stockmarr (2015: 298, 305) argues that “Israel’s security innovation process and the role of Palestine as a ‘laboratory’ bind together intent and effect in one circular motion”, where Israel’s constant “refinement of the security apparatus” in border control “sustains the permanent siege of Palestine”. Thus on one hand, critics claim that Israeli policies are immoral, unjustified and ineffective at suppressing violence and destroying Palestinians’ political aspirations, further countering Israel’s self-proclaimed ability to conduct ‘surgical’ strikes. On the other hand, they suggest that access to live test sites has allowed Israel to approach a perfect system of domination, thereby reinforcing its self-professed claim to hold a ‘natural’ omnipotence over the global security field (see Tamari, 2009: 23).

In focusing on how Israel’s access to real-world test sites distinguishes its security industry from competitors, moreover, critics agree with proponents of Israeli statecraft that Palestine/Israel represents an exemplary ‘case’ of violence that is categorically different from others, whether in kind, duration, or intensity. That is, they suggest that Israel’s ability to test in real life in combination with other “internal factors” (Gordon, 2009: 17) makes the Israel’s security industries “unique and unrivalled” (Feldman 2014; also see Halper 2015: 37). Weizman (2007: 9) uses the laboratory concept to develop such exceptional claims, noting that the brutality of the techniques used to control the OPT constitute “a laboratory of the extreme”. Elsewhere he implies a quantitative difference, representing Gaza as “the world’s *largest* laboratory for airborne assassinations” (Weizman, 2008: 330-1). Yet while the exceptional nature of

Palestine/Israel as a categorically different kind of experimental space is strongly suggested, the case for this is never made convincingly.

I return to questions about scale and exceptionality below. Here I want to focus on the significance of the convergence between critical and affirmative narratives. These overlaps do not simply reveal a common understanding of key facts between critics and proponents but a shared reliance on functionalist and technologically-deterministic reasoning. In exposing how the repression and killing of Palestinians is turned into a source of profit, critics can give the impression that even in its most repugnant forms, the control of Palestine constitutes a process of seamless refinement and innovation. This conflates the *branding* of Israeli security products as “combat proven” with an actual status as “proven effective” (Who Profits 2014). In doing so, the laboratory thesis helps reify (rather than disrupt) the teleological Zionist story of Israel as an innovative “startup nation” (Senor & Singer, 2009).

Despite its efforts to mount a challenge to Israel’s security industries, the laboratory thesis is potentially counterproductive to challenging their global reach. By this I mean that explicit criticisms of Israel’s security industries unwittingly work to reinforce and naturalize Israel’s dominant position as a security leader, providing free (and false) advertising. Halper (2015: 139) claims: “There are no grounds to doubt that the capabilities built into [...Israeli security] systems [...] can perform as advertised”. “Israel’s system of control”, Weizman (2017) maintains, “has [...] hardened into an exceptionally efficient and brutal form of territorial apartheid”. I do not want to suggest that critical commentators have played any significant role in the expansion of Israel’s security industries nor that their work has been “weaponized” (Koopman, 2016). It is,

however, to emphasize that at the level of discourse (where the laboratory thesis intervenes), some of its claims resonate with the dominant evolutionary tropes of Israeli marketing materials and official narratives.

Despite their provocative intentions, moreover, critical references to Palestine/Israel as a laboratory contribute to the representations of Palestinians as passive, disembodied objects of control and violence by replicating Israeli representations of Palestinians “as mere rats in a laboratory [...] to be experimented on at will” (Cook, 2008: 211). The laboratory thesis pays little attention to how Palestinians experience, re-work or contest security laboratories as embodied, everyday realities. This reflects a more general tendency in literature on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that Palestinians are portrayed as “merely silent objects: Israel is the powerful side, and its politics are behind all the developments” (Ghanem, 2012: 365). This runs against efforts to re-situate Palestinians and their lived experiences at the centre of conversations about geopolitics (Harker, 2011; Smith, 2011; 2016).

I have so far argued the dissonances between critical and affirmative uses of the laboratory concept—i.e. what they are disagreeing *about* – are insufficient and mostly normative. I now turn to a diagnosis of this convergence and its relationship to the thesis’ broader deficiencies. I posit that the thesis’ limitations come from three sources, one theoretical, one methodological and one related to the *kind* of political intervention that the laboratory thesis articulates. The theoretical problem is rather simple: the laboratory thesis does not theorize, problematize or even elaborate the concept of the laboratory as such (also see Tamari, 2009). Scholars discuss the multiple ways that empirical dynamics associated with the colonization of Palestine can be understood as a kind of ongoing real-

life experiment. Within these accounts, however, what (scientific or ‘real-world’) laboratories *are* and *do* is assumed to be self-evident and widely agreed upon. Yet these operating assumptions are not the subject of debate or theorization, meaning that use of the term is loose and commonsensical: once policies, practices or technologies are introduced to real-world settings, their efficacy can be ‘tested’, producing ‘lessons learned’ to be imparted elsewhere.

The methodological issues concern epistemological questions about how critics analyze industry actors and their claims but also the thickness of their descriptions. The laboratory thesis is based on empirical data including interviews with key officials as well as analysis of promotional materials and policy documents. One reason why critics of Israeli statecraft use the laboratory metaphor is because security professionals employ it within their discourses. Although critics have derived powerful insights from this material, they have treated official narratives as authentic and unproblematic.

Finally, the laboratory thesis suffers from limitations related to its strategy of provocation as revelation. The laboratory thesis attempts to expose concealed truths behind Israel’s rise as a global security purveyor. It has uncovered convincing evidence that Israeli officials view Palestinians as a surplus population and exploit this ‘resource’. Yet precisely because representatives of Israel security industry brag that their security knowhow is derived from real-life testing, critics struggle to provide information that is entirely new. Elements of the “big secret” (Feldman 2014) behind Israel’s success as a global security purveyor are not terribly well-guarded. More importantly, the thesis’ critique ultimately upholds much of Zionism’s teleological progressivism.

We seem headed toward the conclusion that the laboratory metaphor needs to be



dispensed with altogether because it does more harm than good. This remains a possibility that cannot be dismissed out of hand. Yet if we reference ‘laboratory’ in scare quotes or abandon it altogether, we cede the term’s meaning to the authors and apologists of colonial violence. Rather than claiming that the concept is *inherently* unhelpful, I want to suggest that its utility depends on *how* it is mobilized. Indeed, one of the best arguments in favor of re-assembling the concept is that it is deployed more responsibly by some than others. In the following section I therefore discuss some possible ways forward.

### **3. RE-ASSEMBLING THE LABORATORY THESIS**

In this section, I propose some ways for developing the concept of policing/security laboratories further as well as exploring considerations surrounding methodology and approaches to critique. These proposals remain tentative but reflect a broader set of challenges and opportunities related to critical writing on settler colonialism and the global war on terror, building on the strongest formulations of the laboratory thesis to date. As I have stressed, Khalili’s work avoids key pitfalls of the laboratory concept’s usage. She helpfully moves beyond discussions of Palestine’s depiction as a hermetically sealed zone, grappling with its making as an exemplary “node” of global violence. Yet Khalili largely adopts the laboratory’s commonsensical usage. Moreover, her handling of issues of failure and institutional reproduction, though instructive, is unsatisfying. Her deference to *Discipline and Punish* recalls critiques of Foucault’s own functionalism (Garland, 1986). There is no any easy way out of this dilemma but approaching the re-assembly the laboratory thesis as part of a critique of Zionism (see below) provides possibilities. I explore these in three sections below:

theory, methodology and political strategy.

### *Theory*

In beginning to develop the concept of ‘real world’ laboratories further, I take inspiration from what Acuto and Curtis (2014) term “assemblage thinking”, incorporating approaches from actor-network theory (ANT), science and technology studies (STS) and assemblage theory, though do not reflect on the distinctions between these approaches. Following Collier (2014) I move away from abstract theorization, focusing on the motivations of inquiry and practical considerations about how to carry out successful assemblage thinking. This is not some radical departure. Proponents of the laboratory thesis have engaged with assemblage thinking, sometimes drawing on Latourian ideas (e.g. Weizman, 2012: 323). Walters (2014) extends Weizman’s work in understanding relationships between materiality and security, mobilizing conceptual resources from ANT. Moreover, scholars of Palestine have utilized ANT within the study of colonial government in Palestine (Shamir, 2013). Building on this work, I focus rather more narrowly on how assemblage thinking can help to redress thesis’ lack of problematization of policing/security laboratories as well as its technologically-deterministic inclinations.

In contrast to the loose and commonsensical ‘uses’ of the laboratory above, STS/ANT scholars have carefully interrogated laboratories as part of their efforts to challenge the most taken-for-granted underpinnings of modernism and social theory. They take a counterintuitive approach to “laboratory life”, guided by an “irreverent approach” to the study of science (Latour and Woolgar, 1986: 29). ANT emerges out of discussions about the social construction of scientific facts, focusing on the central role of scientific laboratories in constructing truth claims. This focus on “construction” does not

mean that scientific facts are not true. What first-hand study of scientific laboratories revealed, rather, was that “to be contrived and to be objective went together” (Latour, 2005: 90). ANT is also a direct response to problems of technological determinism within the study of science and technology – guided by a *denaturalizing* impulse. ANT actively seeks “to free the matters of fact from their reduction by ‘Nature’”, challenging the idea of a “direct relation between being real and being indisputable” (Latour, 2005: 109, 112). As such, ANT addresses how truth claims are constructed, whilst showing the potential for things to be otherwise.

ANT further provides concrete insights into how laboratories function, capturing their territorial and relational dimensions. Clearly, scientific laboratories have very real physical boundaries. Yet how laboratories produce truth claims, according to ANT scholars, is precisely *not* because they are insulated and disconnected; the very ‘inside’ character of laboratories is a direct function of the relationship of scientists to the ‘outside’ world. ANT situates the laboratory as a physical site of experimentation as well as a relational construct, operating through interactions that bring disparate elements together (Miller & O’Leary, 1994: 469). This representation unsettles the conception of “testing” as a process, which *proves* the effectiveness of a given idea. ANT scholars argue that scientific facts are not verified independently inside the space of the laboratory but rather validated through their “extension” into other arenas of social reality, thereby consolidating truth effects (Latour and Woolgar, 1986: 182). This rendering of laboratories provides further insights into qualifying the relative significance of particular laboratories over others. “Any laboratory scale is, *potentially*, immensely small or big. It would be foolish, on the observer’s part, to decide in advance and for good what its real

size is” (Latour, 2005: 180, emphasis in original). Doing so would be to prematurely decide this as a settled matter rather than opening it up as a question to be investigated empirically.

These insights resonate with key claims of the laboratory thesis but also offer points of disjuncture. In accordance with the thesis’ efforts to broaden understandings of the laboratory, ANT scholars have long called for expanding the definition of laboratories beyond actual scientific laboratories (e.g. Miller and O’Leary, 1994). ANT renderings of laboratories further resonate with the thesis’ use of ‘laboratory’ to capture the artificial (rather than ‘natural’) character of patterns in Palestine/Israel. And like ANT, the thesis invokes the concept laboratory in understanding the production of truth claims. Yet ANT formulations of laboratories offer three key counterpoints to the thesis’ rendering of the laboratory. First, if the laboratory metaphor is relevant to Palestine/Israel, it is not because it is ‘hermetically sealed’ zone cut off from the ‘outside’ world. Rather the emphasis needs to be placed on how its connections with other places are developed, enabling a range of disparate elements to be brought together. The fact that complex assemblages are at work in the production/mobility of security solutions branded as ‘Israeli’ is not an afterthought to be brushed aside. It should be placed front and center in re-thinking policing/security laboratories. Yet this does not render different actors as a single “transnational unit” (Graham 2011b).

Second, ANT provides a framework through which to make sense of how certain forms of knowledge, practices and technologies become generalized without conceding that this outcome reflects their superiority. ANT scholars closely grapple with issues of success and failure in understanding broader questions of institutional re-production,

drawing attention to how outcomes of policies and projects “are negotiated and gradually realized as functions of success or failure” rather than treating “success” and “failure” as uncontested descriptors (Latour, 1996: 184). The closely related literature on the historical sociology of technology (including that of weapons systems) (MacKenzie, 1990, 1996) has reversed intuitive ideas about how certain technologies become seen as universal and superior. Technologies, MacKenzie (1996: 7) argues, “may be best because they have triumphed, rather than triumphing because they are best”.

Finally, assemblage thinking gives us reason to be cautious about making claims about Palestine/Israel being, “unrivalled”, “largest” or most “extreme” and proceeding to use this exceptional qualification as a way to account for Israel’s disproportionate degree of influence in shaping global patterns of violence. There can be no simple reason why certain experiences of violence are looked at as exemplars and others not. However, the fact that the vast majority of conflicts around the world do not come to be seen as case studies with valuable ‘lessons learned’ challenges the idea that policing/security laboratories exist in a straightforward ‘natural’ sense. This resonates with ANT’s conception of laboratories as quintessentially *artificial* spaces. Similarly, Mitchell (2002) argues that ‘cases’ do not exist in nature but rather develop through the colonial practices and forms of knowledge used to make them knowable and thereby governable.<sup>1</sup> He shows how the forms of expertise used to describe cases do not simply ‘discover’ some preexisting empirical reality ‘on the ground’, but instead constitute this reality, whilst claiming to stand outside of it. Mitchell thereby gestures to the importance of grasping

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell (2011) does make a few passing references to places/experiments as ‘laboratories’ in the loose way that I have critiqued.

*how* the ‘reality’ of certain ‘cases’ come to be understood as such rather than accepting their existence as stable and pre-given.

### *Methodology*

Methodologically, I would like to propose a few ways forward for researching the sites, spaces, discourses and networks that sustain the global war on terror. In trying to understand how certain forms of violence come to be seen as exemplary without naturalizing these representations, genealogical analyses of particular “war-economies” would be apt, precisely because it would help to reveal the contingencies of certain historical examples as models of dispossession and militarism. Existing genealogies of counter-terrorism have shown how Israeli state actors gained traction within these early debates and defined their underlying terms (Stampnitzky, 2013). Ethnographic approaches also offer fruitful opportunities. Despite references to certain spaces and relationships as *laboratory-like*, there has been no attempt to conduct accounts of “laboratory life” within the actual scientific laboratories where Israeli weapons and security technologies are developed. There are enormous ethical and practical challenges of doing this. Nevertheless, as Gusterson's (1998) anthropological analysis of nuclear weapons laboratories demonstrates, there are fruitful possibilities for critical ethnographic study within these well-guarded sites of state power. We would also benefit from ethnographic accounts of the spaces where modes of warfare and control are allegedly ‘tested out’. Building on feminist geopolitics (Dowler & Sharp, 2001) and subaltern geopolitics (Sharp, 2011) literatures, there is much more to be said about how the policing/security practices experienced and embodied realities by those who cope with and resist everyday forms of violence, extending illuminating studies of infrastructure in

Palestine in this vein (e.g. Jabary-Salamanca, 2015: 172). Such a focus would help to reclaim the agency of actors in the global South to move beyond their prevailing representation voiceless “lab assistants” or “human test subjects” (Bilgin, 2016: 172).

If claims about the repercussions of these transactions are to carry more weight, more needs to be done to empirically “follow” (Peck and Theodore, 2012) policing/security policies, practices and technologies transnationally and unpack the meaning of “learning” (see McFarlane, 2011). Here there are also significant obstacles related to the secrecy that surrounds policing and security agencies particularly after the September 11th attacks (see Coleman, 2016), limiting the extent to which the repercussions of knowledges and technologies can be observed and qualified as they circulate. We also need to find ways to analyze the rich empirical data found within professional security discourse that more self-consciously avoids (re)producing official claims and terms of debate. Industry narratives should not be approached as unproblematic *admissions* as per Graham (2010b: 41) but as ideological and at times deeply misleading re-presentations to be critically interrogated. In short, they need to be taken *seriously*, not *literally*.

#### *Political strategy*

In relation to re-articulating the laboratory thesis as a radical political provocation, I have suggested that a focus on revelation will not do. This issue pertains not only to settler colonial studies but concerns questions about critical research on violence and geopolitics. As Cowen (2012) points out in relation to the study of militarism, we need to question the limitations of critiques by way of exposure to ensure that such interventions actually transform rather than “recharge” the terms of debate by “cultivating alternative

knowledge, vision and practice”. Towards this end, bringing new perspectives into the conversation is necessary. Yet this move is insufficient. We also need to actively re-make the prevailing geographical imaginations that the global ‘war on terror’ depends on and sustains by interrogating of the temporal narratives that represent time as linear and progressive (Closs Stephens, 2011). Following Butler's (2012) critique of Zionism, critical analysis of security industries can more effectively challenge the teleology of official narratives of innovation and progress in the face of dangers. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Butler (2012: 223-4) argues that, “Catastrophe is precisely not a chain of events where something in the past leads to something in the future. Under conditions of catastrophe, there is only one catastrophe, and it keeps on happening”. So while acknowledging that strategies and tactics of settler colonialism can and do change over time, our analysis of these changes must more explicitly disrupt the basic terms of Zionism’s progressivism. We cannot simply oppose Zionism’s aims but must contest the way in which it (and other forms of domination) ideologically structure our understanding of historical and technological change, thereby taking up Shenhav's (2006) call to move beyond the “methodological Zionism” underpinning the epistemologies of even some of Israel’s most ardent critics. This concern is not limited to Zionism. As Veracini (2010: 99) argues, it is settler colonialism’s “linear narrative structure”, which defines it in structural contradistinction from other colonial forms, noting that “settler colonialism mobilises peoples in the teleological expectation of irreversible transformation”. Recognizing and challenging this tendency is thus paramount analytically but also essential to charting new political possibilities for radical scholarship.



It is for this reason in particular that I have devoted close attention to ANT: it emerges as a refutation of technological determinism and the reduction of reality to ‘nature’. Given critiques of this literature for its aversion to making normative claims, my suggestion to engage with it may seem contradictory. However, I would suggest that such a reading is misguided. Scholars have productively used ANT to open up questions about the kinds of relations and conditions under which new kinds of politics and possibilities for contestation might emerge in the context of extraction and violent dispossession (Mitchell, 2011). As Mitchell notes, understanding the ways in which opportunities for contestation and politics arise should never be understood in a general way based on a pre-defined set of external conditions, such as life under occupation (Abourahme & Jabary-Salamanca, 2016: 751). The emphasis, rather, should be placed on locating “histories of vulnerability or points of vulnerability and trying to identify where those points of vulnerability lie” (ibid: 752). ANT’s central focus on the roles of socio-technical controversies further addresses how “political subjects become not just objects of sociotechnical experiments but participants in them” (Mitchell, 2011: 240). None of this implies that ANT should be immune from scrutiny, especially given its own complicity in the marginalization of indigenous knowledges (Todd, 2016).

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has reconsidered how far the laboratory thesis takes us, both analytically and politically. While the thesis provocatively interrogates how Israel’s experience as a settler colony has been re-packaged as an export commodity, I argue that it dangerously upholds many of the industry’s core narratives and terms of debate. Although the laboratory thesis represents an important a timely provocation into re-

thinking the terms of the Israel-Palestine conflict and its relationships to global patterns of violence and militarism, its mode of critique has made it considerably less disruptive than it might – and should – be. Critical uses of the laboratory concept re-produce “a paradigm that is hermetically sealed and has the force of nature” from which “[t]here seems to be no escape” (Tamari, 2009: 23). This reflects a wider tendency by critical analysts to normalize familiar “scripts” of global processes, thereby contributing to the perceived dominance of centers of power and the inevitability of certain trends (Gibson-Graham, 2006: Ch. 6).

That Naomi Klein agrees with right-wing Israeli scholars that Palestine/Israel functions as a laboratory of ‘real-world’ experimentation is striking. Despite their differing operating assumptions and conclusions, both sides are clearly talking about many of the same dynamics, i.e. patterns of unending war, settlement construction, the building of the separation barrier, etc. This might suggest the concept’s aptness in capturing and theorizing empirical trends *regardless* of the authors’ political orientations. Yet I read this convergence in another way: it does not simply reflect the fact that critics and proponents of Israel’s security industries are talking about the same trends but more worryingly, shared terms of analysis between proponents of Israeli statecraft and their opponents. The principle sources of disagreement between critics and proponents are whether the laboratory’s existence is intended or unintended, whether this ‘fact’ is something to be celebrated or condemned. These are mostly normative disagreements about the legitimacy of Israeli state violence and the state’s self-declared status as a liberal ‘Western’ democracy. The way the term ‘laboratory’ is invoked, however is largely consistent: critics and proponents of Israel both agree that Palestine/Israel *is* a

laboratory (in an empirical sense) and that this status helps to explain other key trends, such as Israel's status as a global security and high-tech superpower (in an analytic sense). In other words, critics do not tell an alternative story about how Israel's technological prowess has been constituted but instead tell a very similar story toward a different conclusion.

What makes the concept of the laboratory appealing is its ability to 'explain' the rise of Israel's security industry in a self-evident way. The problem is that critics have accepted a rather impoverished, atheoretical and apolitical understanding of what laboratories are and do, which is not ultimately very *analytical* at all. Much like "geopolitics", "laboratory" has become "a free-floating signifier" (Ó Tuathail, 1996: 139) that appears as obvious and unproblematic. Yet I have shown that when scrutinized, the term can productively unsettle and denaturalize how the colonization of Palestine is related to various else-wheres. I have therefore proposed some preliminary alternative possibilities for re-assembling the laboratory as a critical analytic that might more aptly address how security laboratories actually function and in doing so break apart Zionism's "narrative lockdown" (Butler 2012: 25) over efforts to theorize, politicize and contest these dynamics. It is incumbent on critical scholars to foreground the constitutive role of violence in settler colonial domination. Yet in doing so, we must avoid tacitly reifying the supposed genius at the heart of nation-building projects and the triumphalist narratives of progress that surround and sustain them. Otherwise we risk ceding an undue level of coherence and omnipotence to colonial enterprises, silencing the voices that help us find fissures and contradictions within them. In conclusion, I want to emphasize that the concerns raised about the laboratory thesis travel well beyond discussions about

Palestine/Israel. They reflect a far wider set of challenges about how to conduct critical research on the global war on terror without reifying the dominant terms of analysis and public debate (see Toros, 2017). They may even travel further than this. Across the social sciences, countless empirical examples are represented as “laboratories” for understanding phenomenon X or Y. These wide-ranging but highly uncritical references invite a broad re-appraisal of the term’s meaning and potential utility. This article has sought to illuminate the political stakes of such a debate and sketch a preliminary path forward for re-invigorating the laboratory as a productive critical concept within but also beyond studies of violence and militarism.

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