The Transgressive Posture
Insights from Nano Discourse into the Ontology of Being a Transgressor

Peter Lemish

is currently a faculty member appointed to the Global Media Research Center at Southern Illinois University (Carbondale, Illinois, USA). Formerly, he was a faculty member, department chair, and academic director in various higher education institutions in Israel. His current research focuses on the roles of the media in social change and conflict transformation as well as civil society organizations' media use.

A humanist living amidst economic injustice, violence, discrimination, and oppression is in a situation ripe for transgression. Whether hegemonic forces are advancing profits, national security, God's word, self, or a combination of all of the above, those whose guiding vision is to realize equality and who are, therefore, deeply concerned about the fate of all others, are likely to be challenged, incessantly, to transgress that society's social norms and laws. In such a situation, I contend, humanists chose to assume an ever-vigilant *transgressive posture* given their sense of the omnipresent necessity to resist infusions of inhumane hegemonic forces into every cell of social life. In exploring the nature of such an aptitude and how it evolves, this essay aims to advance development of a grounded theory of transgression by illuminating aspects of the ontology of transgression in everyday life. Explorations of this larger project are presented through analysis of four autobiographical *nano discourse* exchanges that contributed to the maturing of the author's transgressive posture when living as an engaged humanist academic-activist in Israel-Palestine (1983-2008; n. b., this presentation deals only with the early stages of the author's academic career there).

Problematizing Transgression:
Need for an Ontology of Transgression

The dynamics of transgression - as an act committed by an individual across laws as well as social norms, beliefs, and values- requires investigating matters of existence and action, ontology and praxeology. From ontology (an understanding of the nature of existence), we can ask, what is like to be a transgressor? From praxeology (i.e., action grounded in a vision for social change), how does one perform principled transgression? When linked, we can ask: What is the nature of the experience of performing transgression? How are our actions linked to our Being-a- transgressor? Is there a developmental dimension to Being-a-transgressor?

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927/1952) investigated ontological authenticity - *Dasein*– and claimed that it involves Being-in-the world; that is, Dasein is not experienced alone but in social reality - *Mitsein* - - Being-with-Others-in-the-world (i.e., social ontology; Dreyfus, 1995; Olafson, 1998). Hence, *Dasein* and *Mitsein* evolve through mutually influential interactions, including establishing, respecting, and transgressing borders. Similarly, attempts to change social norms involve two derivative aspects of *mutuality* [mūtō- to change]. First, change occurs through interactions between different communities or supporters and opponents of norms, values, rules, etc. that serve as social boundaries or laws ultimately transgressed. However, I submit that change efforts, including acts of transgression, take place, in ontological terms, in a third zone lying *in-between* borders. The change agent or transgressor enters this zone with their actions and, as a result, experiences social life in a manner significantly different from others who 'reside' [sic] within both borders. Figuratively, this space is separate, it exists in-between, in what I propose be referred to as the *hyphen* zone.

Second, major, minor, failed, or even misguided attempts at transgression involve mutuality in the form of reflecting upon and questioning social situations. Indeed, via Heidegger, Mannheim, Foucault, and Freire, we understand that reflecting on expressions of social knowledge and values can reveal power relations, alternative arrangements, and thus can be an empowering experience. Following Adorno, such *negative* questioning can reveal previous attempts to educate or impose, parochially, a sense that certain norms, values, beliefs, and so forth are immutable (i. e., forms of social engineering

and closed socialization). Thus, transgression is a contra-induction process that exposes attempts to inculcate false, ideological understandings of social reality. Such reflection and questioning are crucial processes in what eventually matures into what I propose be referred to as a *transgressive posture* through which the acts of transgression are eventually committed. Therefore, how the maturing transgressor begins and evolves into such a posture is crucial for understanding the ontology of transgression.

Thus, my general claim is that development of a grounded theory of transgression must be concerned with the nature of the transgressor experience as it will enable us to understand the dynamics, forces, and potentialities of the transgressive act. Indeed, transgression is an excellent opportunity to investigate the interface of self-authenticity, ethics, and action; that is, the experience of Self attempting to lead a moral life; here, from the humanist perspective (Bauman, 1973; Heidegger, 1977). Such inquiry was at the core of the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian critical social phenomenologist, who helped us understand the nature of *praxis*: actions undertaken through structural understanding and moral judgment. For example, praxis performance of transgression demonstrates that individuals can 'override' *closed socialization* when they choose to transgress the norms and rules of the social order in which they live. This may be seen as the ultimate form of humanist constructivism and demonstrates the importance of reflection and empowerment that evolves through such a process.

Language is knowledge-power:
The case of nano discourse

The link between *Dasein* and language is key in both the ontology and praxeology of transgression. For example, Foucault's project involved tracing the roles discourse plays in the social processes of constructing, legitimating, and maintaining power relations and truths. He argued (1977, 1980) that power and knowledge are interrelated and discourse is a medium through which subjects produce and reflect power relations.

Nano discourse presented in this paper is an excellent example of the role of language and the potentialities of reflection on *knowledge-power* in illuminating the nature of social reality and, more specifically, the transgressive experience. I define this to be a micro-

communicative act, usually consisting of spontaneously-issued, two-three sentence exchanges between individuals that encapsulate, reflexively, a *weltanschauung* - a worldview or paradigm of thinking. Via Foucault [and Mannheim, below], nano discourse is a reflexive expression of macro-knowledge-power structures. The analysis of nano exemplars is, therefore, a hermeneutic exercise that reveals the reflexive ontological [Dasein] view of the world [Mitsein]. As such, nano discourse is a treasure trove of potential insights for understanding power-knowledge relations in a particular context; and, with reflection, they can play a crucial role in an evolving transgressive posture that is self-revealing and politically empowering. The analysis below seeks to demonstrate these claims in relation to an evolving transgressive posture and, thereby, contribute to development of a grounded theory of transgression.

Grounded Evidence of the Transgressive Posture

Evidence in support of the claim that transgressive posture evolves through activists' everyday life experiences [*Dasein*-authenticity of self - evolves through social interaction, *Mitsein*] is presented through analyses of four nano discourse exchanges. The chronological presentation of these exemplars illuminates the evolving nature of this posture, though I am not advocating a linear development but rather a holistic praxis driven by the need for vigilance regarding violations of the fundamental principle of human equality. Two primary criteria were used to select these incidents from among numerous nano exemplars. First, through reflection at the time they provided *knowledge-power* insights into deep social structures, self, and action potentialities. That is, they demonstrate that social exchanges together with reflection can empower the transgressor, hence priming the activist for transgressive acts. Second, they assist in conceptualization of the evolution of the transgressive posture and experience.

To demonstrate these claims, I analyze each of the following nano cases via Karl Mannheim's (1924) "Documentary Method of Interpretation". Mannheim demonstrated that three interpretations are possible for every social act: *Objective* [descriptive statement of what happened, with whom, when, and where]; *Subjective* [explanations by participants and observers of why act took place]; and, *Documentary* [links the act, as a 'document' of and to deep social

structures]. *Descriptive and Subjective* interpretations are presented [in italics] through my reconstructions of nano discourse [bolded]. The *Documentary* interpretation that follows is my interpretation that relates the incident to deeper social structures and, more specifically, the evolving transgressive posture.

1. Border Framing

My first year academic appointment at an Israeli research university in 1984 included teaching at a satellite campus located at the foot of the Nazareth Mountains. Accordingly, the College's student population is strongly representative of the area's majority Arab population. Breaks between class sessions in the College's faculty room were lively and informative about Israeli society. A geographer who is still an influential, multi-government insider was a leading Monday conversant. Discussing THE CONFLICT *one evening* [reference to Israeli-Arab Conflict], *he led speculation in response to my question - what should Israel do differently? - by surveying all the actions possible in inter-ethnic, civil war situations; as he defined The Conflict. He concluded that Israel had made a fatal mistake in 1948 and since:* **"As we see today, exiling every last one of them [PL: Palestinians]** *is the best - no - the only solution; and until we do so, we will never succeed."*

Documentary: At the time, this opinion – increasingly popular in Israel in recent years - was rarely voiced in public. On reflection, then, this statement provided me with a 'border framing' of two important primary truths that continue to drive the Zionist Project: First, the foundational statement in the state's 1948 Declaration of Independence that Israel is a "Jewish and democratic" state is not a commitment to two equally weighted values, rather there is a clear priority: it must be first and foremost Jewish and, then, democratic. Second, the ideological demand to create a solely Jewish state of Israel drives conclusions from historical and social analyzes that lead "rational thinking [Jewish] Israelis" to accept multiple governments' actions taken in order to assure the state will continue to exist. These truths explain why clearly undemocratic policies and actions taken by the state against Palestinians living within and beyond Israel's

1948 borders – such as, post-1967 annexation of East Jerusalem and settlement activities in occupied Palestine, use of economic sanctions against residents of Gaza, the Wall, maintaining sub-standard living conditions and second class citizenship for Palestinians living in Israel – are rationalized and accepted by Jewish-Israelis across nearly the entire political spectrum.

Transgression: Born and educated in California, I first came to Israel as a non-Zionist, Jewish graduate student in 1971 to study the 1930s movement of Palestinians and Jews to establish a bi-national, democratic state. I returned there over a decade later with my young family after completing doctoral studies in the United States. Thus, though I had a strong interest in developing the democratic nature of Israel-Palestine, the geographer's concise statement 'primed' me by framing so concisely the non-humanist foundations of the Zionist Project. Problematizing the fate of 'democratic' meant that seeking to achieve the fundamental humanist-driven democratic principle that Israel *become* a 'state of all its citizens' would involve transgressive actions. Hence, upon reflection, this statement was judged to be a violation of a fundamental humanist principle and this in turn became a focus for resistance, for example, to later legislative action that forbids political parties from stating this fundamental democratic principle in the party platform.

Reflection on this stark *border framing* influenced my understanding that these were the fundamental assumptions of nearly all of the Israelis I met in everyday interactions. More concretely, this statement encapsulated the truths inculcated into students participating in my courses – both Jews and Palestinians, though each held diametrically opposing views of their veracity. While I could have ignored this highly politicized situation, I acted in a transgressive manner when I declared in the first session of every university course: "As in mathematical or biological discussions, inquiry conducted in an academic institution should be conducted free of national, religious, or any super-imposed borders." In doing so, I sought to create a *hyphenated* classroom, in-between ethnic or religious borders, in which Jews and Palestinians were invited to experience crossing their communities' own boundaries when engaged in intellectual discourse. Pursuing this approach led some Jewish-Israeli colleagues and students to refer to me, cynically, as the "Palestinian lecturer."

2. Having a Safe Haven

*In 1993, a Palestinian sociologist and I discussed transitions in our lives as engaged academics and reflected on our life-histories as we drove to meetings in Jerusalem. Coincidently, each of us had been living for extended periods in another country - me an American living in Israel, he a Palestinian living in Canada. At one point he observed that "it must have been hard for you to adjust". To which I replied, spontaneously: **"That is the last thing I want to do"**.*

Documentary: My statement is the ultimate rejection of the Zionist Project [i. e., to establish a Jewish state in Israel] assumed to be embraced and embodied by all who live in Israel [Jews and Palestinians]: Namely, to normalize Jewish life – as a state and as a culture. For the newcomer, usually the Jewish immigrant, this involves all manner of *closed* socialization; from macro-nationalized tasks (e. g., learning Hebrew, completing compulsory military service) to micro-infusing every cell of one's Being-Zionist (e. g., songs on the radio, children's names).

Transgression: This exchange is paradigmatic of the knowledge-power nature of nano discourse. Though never self-identified as a Zionist, on reflection I understood that in this statement I was speaking 'truth to power'. Furthermore, in defining myself as Being-as-Other, I declared here that I live a *hyphenated* existence in-between the Jewish and Palestinian societies.

The importance of this statement for me then, and now, is as a declaration straight from the *transgressive posture*. I was also acknowledging an awareness of my need for omnipresent vigilance and continuous praxis – including the need to act at any given moment to counteract, oppose, and transgress forms of Zionist culture, including the nuclei of Being, albeit unwilling, but still party to a colonialist enterprise. In terms of the ontological nature of transgression and understanding the reflective potential of power-knowledge, this spontaneous statement was the act that placed me in the hypen-zone. However, as praxis, this was a 'minor' act of transgression emitted in a safe, non-conflict situation; that is, with a like-minded Palestinian. Another insight gained from this *nano* exemplar is that safe havens are needed by activists in the process of

developing a transgressive posture, as occurs when participating in vigils, demonstrations, and transgressive group actions.

3. Resistance

In 1990, a few Israeli and Palestinian educational activists received a Ford Foundation-grant to conduct a project enabling senior educators involved in Jewish and Palestine reconciliation - co-existence projects to reflect on our efforts with colleagues from other intractable conflicts. As Project Coordinator I was able to secure sponsorship and housing of the project in the Haifa University Jewish-Arab Center. A new Center Director had been appointed in the interim between submission and receiving the grant; a [different] Jewish geographer in place of a Palestinian professor of literature.

*When we met to discuss this project, the new Director questioned our use of 'Palestinian' to refer to Israel's Arab citizens [PL then about 18% of the population within the pre-1967 borders]. We explained that research studies- including those conducted by historians and sociologists who are members of the Center's Board - verify that this self-referential form of identification is both widespread and historical. The Director rejected this argument and issued the following ultimatum: **"Since they are Arabs, not Palestinians, you must change the wording or lose the project."** Supported by the Ford Foundation, we refused to comply and moved the project to the International Center for Peace in the Middle East.*

Documentary: This incident references Israel's now historic strategy to refuse any manner of reference to Palestinians in public discourse. The most famous 'document' supporting this claim is the statement by Prime Minister Golda Meir in an interview with *The Sunday Times* on June 15, 1969: "There is no such thing as a Palestinian people... It is not as if we came and threw them out and took their country. They didn't exist." Obviously, accepting this term, from the Zionist perspective, would legitimize Palestinian claims of historic residency and ethnicity. Instead, the two terms "allowed" in state documents and public discourse, until today, are references to Arab Israelis [note the Center's name] or identification by religion – Moslem, Christian,

Druze, Circassian. The irony of the second set of references is that the Zionist Project repudiated non-Jewish societies and states' historic references to Jews living among them in Europe or the Americas as a religious group. Furthermore, this incident is exemplary of the depth of penetration of the Zionist ideology and collaboration of academics in reproducing this ideology; hence, proving the claim of the totalizing infusion of the Zionist enterprise, even in a research center dedicated to studying and discussing both Jewish and Arab/ Palestinian societies.

Transgression: This incident contributes three aspects to our understanding of an evolving *transgressive posture*. First, this exchange might be viewed, arguably, as a form of jousting or even taunting, as happens in academic debate. While, admittedly, this is often enjoyable and serves to hone arguments in academia and in public discourse, in terms of transgression, such jousting serves as a form of "testing the waters [borders]" – of self and others – to gain a sense of what is possible, or how far one can go.

Second, the boundary set by the Director was too serious a matter to be allowed to remain solely in the domain of discourse. From our point of view, active *resistance* and transgression of the Zionist view was necessary, since accepting the ultimatum would violate two principles: [a] the right of any people to use its own terms of reference; [b] one of the primary aims of this project was to investigate the need for asymmetrical or "uni-national" work, as a remedy to refusal by Israeli educational authorities to allow Palestinians to study their own history and culture in formal educational institutions.

Third, resistance and taking a stand meant living in unforeseen ways with the consequences of the act of transgression. While this may be unforeseen given the spontaneous nature of nano discourse, there are always multiple consequences of such acts. The positive consequences were solidarity among project leaders and participants, finding a new home for the project, and advancing the work of the project, too, as acts of resistance and educational activism.

4. Playing for High Stakes

In 1994, the International Center for Peace in the Middle East [ICPME] Board of Directors recommended my appointment as Executive Director, charged with the task of leading their efforts

*to support implementation of the 1993 Oslo Peace Agreement. Though ICPME was the civil society action arm of the full spectrum of social democratic parties in Israel, final confirmation required receiving approval of the organization's unofficial leader, a high ranking Labor Party member and former Minister of Justice in the early 1970s. Our meeting took place in his well-appointed offices in Tel Aviv. Asked about my current activities, I described my organizing discussion sessions for the country's first conference on torture, sponsored by various organizations of Jewish and Palestinian mental health workers, doctors, and educators. The ICPME titular leader stated briskly: **"Torture? What torture?"** To which I explained that for me that question was answered in 1971 when **"I walked behind the police station near the Russian Compound late at night."** "I see," he said, interrupting me in an abrupt manner: **"I think that will be all. We'll be in touch."** I did not receive the appointment as Executive Director.*

Documentary: Situated next to the beautiful Russian Orthodox church, outside the walls of the Old City, in the newer, western side of Jerusalem, the police station was built by British in the 1920s during the Mandate period. The activities undertaken by the security forces in the police station were an open secret at the time, audible to anyone walking behind the Russian Compound along Zamora Street in the middle of the night. The implications of admitting such policies are obvious and demonstrate Jewish-Israelis' acquiescence with policies of denial of anything that imputes what multiple governments have defined to be their highest mission - willingness to commit any and all actions to secure the Jewish state (e. g., manufacture and possession of nuclear armaments, attacks on civilian populations in Occupied Palestine, recent arrests of Palestinian-Israeli human rights workers).

Furthermore, this nano exemplar is an interesting documentary referent because it exposes [a] Labor Party culpability for policies that many persons outside of Israel consider to be inhuman; [b] the borders and manner with which Israel interprets its commitments to international agreements; and [c] so-called Jewish 'left' parties are first and foremost Zionist, and then, perhaps, committed to humanist-democratic principles.

Transgression: This incident exemplifies four key points regarding the inquiry undertaken here: First, as I recall, this incident meets the *spontaneous* criterion of nano discourse, as it was neither planned nor a consciously intentional act of transgression. Second, this is by all accounts a transgressive act, at least in the view of the public represented by the media and politicians who accused organizers of the conference of being state traitors. Third, this is a mature example of the transgression posture guiding activist praxis, as it evolved through processes exemplified in previous accounts. Fourth, less positive consequences occurred in this case, as I was denied the position which at the time had the potential for involvement in significant processes that we know in hindsight, ultimately failed.

Discussion

This essay explored aspects of the posture through which transgressive actions are undertaken, in this case via analyses of *nano discourse* - a rich resource with potential for insights into micro knowledge-power relations that have not been the focus of social inquiry for quite some time (e. g., Garfinkel, 1967). The overarching goal, in doing so, was to contribute to development of a grounded theory of transgression. Beyond this investigation, future studies of the ontological nature of transgression might investigate the claims made in this essay by probing other aspects of experiencing Being-a- transgressor and experiencing transgression beyond the four examined here - framing, safe havens, resistance, and playing for high stakes.

Another rich area for further investigation and conceptualization is Being in-between, in the *hyphen* zone, from which transgressive actions take place. Entering this zone might be conceived of as the experience portrayed by Kierkegaard as a "leap of faith". If so, we might ask, proverbally: OK, once one has made the leap – in our case, crossing borders of social norms, breaking laws, and so forth, what is it like to experience doing so and to act from beyond the previous border? Are new understandings and views developed there in the zone in-between social borders, as well as, looking back, a-cross the border, into one's former world? Or, perhaps performing transgression is not such a dramatic, one-time move? Rather, the border proves to be more porous and fluid than once imagined, and multiple *crossings* are undertaken. If so, what is the

nature of these experiences? If these latter versions occur, then transgression is a very dynamic process, and, as the transgressive posture matures, as transgressors move back and forth and gain experience, what new understandings of life within and beyond former borders develop?

For example, from an ontological perspective, we could investigate the nature of Being in the *hyphen* zone as an experience and way of Being different from, though necessarily related to, one's former 'home'. One may speculate that reflection and viewing social life from this new perspective provides us with new avenues for exploration and discovery; poses challenges, for example, in terms of identity development; requires resourcefulness and fortitude in dealing with oppositional critique and judgment from home – and quite possibly by fellow transgressors co-inhabiting this new territory; and, in doing so, leads us to seek sources that provide us with validation and support.

Investigating Being from this rich, new perspective, with these dynamics, should lead us to understand relations between Being in this domain and resources drawn upon beyond our geo-political and/or social domains that inspire, enrich, and drive transgressive praxis; such as, the Declaration of Human Rights, work of human rights organizations, and the International Court of Justice – in the case of transgressive, democratic activists in Israel. In other words, Being in the *hyphen* zone may well involve relations with other spheres of influence and resources involved in transgressive social change efforts.

In terms of praxeology, investigating praxis from this enriched, dynamic view of the *hyphen* zone may enable us to understand the creative and productive nature of transgressive actions. More specifically, investigating actions undertaken by transgressors Being in-between may help us understand the creative potential and productive nature of hybridity as processes that involve creation of new material and conceptual entities that both draw upon but are more than the sum of the stimuli from one's 'home' and the Others' zone, as well as, from sources beyond ones geo-political and social domains. Thus, investigating the transgressive posture and Being in-between borders is essential for understanding how social change develops as a global entity, as we see in relations in contemporary popular social movements from the Tea Party Movement and the

Arab Spring to global Occupy Wall Street Movement – at the time of this writing - and beyond?

Continuing this dynamic, multi-dimensional view of transgression, we can argue that while the experience of transgression is an individual action, as in the existential leap of faith, it is in returning to Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* also an action undertaken with others who are there physically or supporting you beyond your context, from a far, even globally, via mediated forms of virtual and social media, as well as, contributions of ideas and funds. If so, we should also be investigating the role of global social interaction in the dynamics of experiencing transgression.

Aside from investigating these domains and questions, I hope this essay has demonstrated that advancing development of a grounded theory of transgression requires investigations of a rich, varied corpus of transgressive acts and experiences. Such a corpus includes transgressive acts performed in the *macro*-public sphere; such as, dramatic acts of resistance that attract media attention, revealing state secrets as undertaken by WikiLeaks, or – in the case of contemporary Israel – violating legislation passed in July 2011that supporters of the BDS Movement [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] be held culpable for financial damages suffered by Israel-associated entities, such as Settler enterprises in Occupied Palestine. More directly related to the analysis presented here, I submit that transgression performed in *micro*-social encounters is extremely relevant in developing a ground theory of transgression; such as acts performed in transgressing religious, gender-sexual, and general social norms.

Finally, let me acknowledge that approaching conceptualization of the *transgressive posture* through autobiographical analysis required that I address nano incidents from several decades ago. Certainly events in Israel-Palestine have shifted dramatically from this period when we felt that democratic forces might still have an impact against the overtly colonialist Zionist enterprise. Historically, other scholars have produced insightful analyses of Israel during this period and since from a humanist perspective (e. g., Kimmerling, 2001; Pappe, 2010). However, as I began initially in this essay, my experiences in Israel-Palestine as well as the empirical exemplars of nano discourse were selected to be illustrative of the totalizing forces that infuse micro-aspects of social life, as well as, sites where the transgressive posture matures and is acted upon in everyday

social life. Such situations are not limited to Israel-Palestine, as there are multiple contemporary situations, globally, in which humanists and those seeking to advance democratic cultures and systems feel compelled to resist anti-democratic forces; such as actions taken by super-nationalist, anti-GLBT, or global capitalist forces opposing realization of equality among all citizens and residents of countries, as we see in the Occupy Wall Street movement spreading across the world. Similarly, democratic initiatives by activists in China and the 2011 democratic movements in Arab countries are rich resources for investigating the evolution and maturing of transgression and the transgressive posture. Conducting investigations of these and many other such phenomena have the potential to contribute not only to developing a grounded theory of transgression, but, more broadly, are essential if we are to understand the nature of activism and social change.

Acknowledgments

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