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Chapter 12: Sacralised Conflict and Ordinary Ethics: Palestine-Israel in British Universities¹

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Introduction

In early 2011, the Palestine Society at Old Universityⁱ organised a mock Israeli settlement on the main street of the campus. Behind a plasterboard wall, scrawled with the words ‘illegal under international law’ and ‘humanitarian crisis,’ there was a ‘blue territory’ limited to Palestine Society members who were marked with blue ribbons. I was in the early stages of my ethnographic fieldwork exploring students’ experiences of engaging with the politics of Palestine-Israel in Britain, and I loitered uncertainly on the periphery of this area by an information stall laid out with leaflets chronicling human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories. I had positioned myself close to a postgraduate student activist, Laura, who tensely tolerated my presence. We had previously met at a Palestine Society meeting when I had introduced my research to the members. The Society had quite recently been targeted by a ‘counter-extremism’ think-tank, with its members subjected to the burgeoning discourse that associated pro-Palestine activism as antithetical to the values of liberal ‘Western’ institutions. As such, it was perhaps unsurprising that Laura had asked me suspiciously ‘what’s the point of your research?’ and then rejected my request for a further conversation.ⁱⁱ

Nonetheless during a lull in activity at the stall, Laura told me of her distress at a lecture that she had attended that afternoon, which was about public indifference to media representations of suffering. Her words resonated with me; just a few days before I had attended a talk by Dr. Ang Swee Chai, an orthopaedic surgeon and founder of Medical Aid for Palestinians. Dr. Chai had evoked the heroism of medics, contrasting this with graphic descriptions of the murderous violence of the Israeli military and the quiet dignity of Palestinian mothers. This was supplemented by images of horrific injuries interspersed with the innocent gazes of orphaned Palestinian children. Breaking momentarily from her narrative flow, Dr. Chai had reminded the attentive audience of some Zionist protesters who had threatened to disrupt the meeting before projecting a close-up image of the desecrated bodies of dead children onto the screen. When she concluded, the silence was broken by a loud standing ovation. In the questions and answers that followed, Dr. Chai was hailed as ‘an inspirational figure for us all’ as, one after another, the audience members asked, ‘what can we do to help?’

¹ This is the accepted, pre-copyedited version of the following chapter: Sheldon, R. (2017) ‘Sacralised Conflict and Ordinary Ethics: Palestine-Israel in British Universities’, in Doggett, L. and Arat, A. (eds.) *Foundations and Futures in the Sociology of Religion*. London: Routledge.

Standing awkwardly next to Laura as she sought to engage passers-by in the mock settlement action, I recalled the powerful imperative communicated by Dr. Chai. As Laura emphasised her frustration at students' apathy, I felt a strong desire to join the Palestine Society members, to claim an anti-Zionist position and put on a blue ribbon. My decision *not* to do so clearly positioned me, not as a neutral or in-between figure but rather as someone unmoved by and so complicit in Palestinian suffering. In this sense, my inaction felt shameful. Yet I was also conscious that to participate as an activist would alienate me, emotionally and pragmatically, from the members of the Israel Society with whom I had recently made contact. In my early conversations with Justin and Jonathan, Jewish students based at the University, they had argued that the 'disproportionate' emphasis on transnational anti-Zionist activism, particularly as taken up by 'white European' students without an obvious connection to the region, was a latent expression of deep-rooted antisemitism within British student politics. As such, this was the first of many occasions in this fieldwork in which I felt as though I wanted to disappear; there was no 'right' response to my experience of being torn by different moral demands: to respond to the oppression of Palestinians and their supporters *or* to recognise Jewish students' claims of being subjected to a pervasive antisemitism.

Within British campuses, as in the wider public sphere, Palestine-Israel has long been one of the most morally divisive and viscerally polarised of transnational political issues; and as described above I experienced this splitting as soon as I entered the field and attempted to move between opposing pro-Israel and pro-Palestine students' societies. In my language, actions and emotional responses – including the most basic decision of whether to name the conflict as, for example, 'Israel/Palestine' or 'Palestine-Israel' – it seemed impossible for me to sustain an in-between position. As a *participant* observer, I quickly learned that I could *either* join a student Palestine Society in protesting 'Israeli apartheid' *or* be identified as colluding with Zionist strategies of 'normalisation';ⁱⁱⁱ I could *either* participate in dialogue initiatives endorsed by the Israel Society *or* commit to what they framed as 'antisemitic' boycotts of these activities by Palestine Society members. I was, then, immediately caught up in the well-established cultural scripts of an issue which has been a focal point of tension within British university campuses for over four decades, and which is currently configured in relation to broader questions of free speech, 'extremism,' antisemitism and Islamophobia in higher education, which are deeply unsettling for British universities.

In this chapter, I draw on my ethnographic study of this student activism to interrogate a key framework for understanding moral conflict that has emerged within the discipline of the sociology of religion. Specifically, I will show how fraught conflicts over Palestine-Israel constitute a highly relevant case for exploring the value and limits of Durkheimian theories of the sacred as elaborated in the 'strong programme' of cultural sociology (Lynch, 2012; Alexander, 2003).^{iv} In the first part of the chapter, I relate Durkheimian concepts of the sacred and social performance to processes that I observed in my fieldwork, as pro-Palestine and pro-Israel student groups appeared to cohere around multiple, conflicting moral truths. Then, by foregrounding the forms of trauma and violence that were latent in these public encounters, I explore how Durkheimian framings of such events run the risk of neutralising and disavowing the psychosocial dimensions of ethical and political life. In the latter part of the chapter, I turn away from these more visible spectacles and abstract theories, taking up the sensibility and methods of an ethnographic approach known as 'ordinary ethics' (Das, 2007, 2010) which is

attentive to the relational, uncodified and psychic registers of ethics and politics, as well as to the significance of different *scales* of democratic encounter. Focusing on conversations between publicly adversarial activists, which took place away from the limelight, I explore how ethnographic research can render visible achievements of meaningful interpersonal connection which are occluded by the sacralising logics of public media. I conclude with some reflections on the divergent genealogies of Durkheimian theories and ordinary ethics, and highlight how the latter approach can speak back to the dualistic grammars structuring sociological theories of the sacred.

Theorising Sacralised Conflict

In 2011, academics and students at Old University staged a high-profile and well-attended public debate about the academic boycott of Israel. This event was organised following a period of heightened student activism across British campuses that developed in response to the 2008 to 2009 Israeli war in Gaza, known as 'Operation Cast Lead.'^v In contrast to the prominent activist repertoires of university occupations, marches and theatrical 'stunts,' this debate was presented by the University authorities as an attempt to engage with this issue in accordance with the civil and rational values of the Enlightenment university.

At the centre of this drama, two academic antagonists engaged in a highly stylised struggle for and against the motion 'this house believes in an academic boycott of Israel.' With pre-prepared speeches, the proponent denounced 'the ideological and material complicity' of 'corrupt' Israeli universities who were, he claimed, actively involved with the military industrial occupation and domination of the Palestinian people. Meanwhile his opponent decried the boycott as 'completely pernicious, completely immoral and completely destructive' arguing that it resonated with histories of anti-Jewish boycott and, he claimed, disproportionately and indiscriminately excluded Israeli Jewish academics from a global academic community, which is governed by the liberal principle of intellectual freedom. The 450-strong audience, marked by *keffiyehs*, *kippahs* and hijabs, clapped and cheered in support of their favoured speaker and then, prompted by the Chair, contributed rhetorical speeches 'for or against' before finally being given the choice to raise their hands in support of or in opposition to the motion. As Sadiq, a Palestine Society committee member later explained, the outcome was fixed from the outset in 'the claps for and the claps against' of the symbolically positioned participants. Despite the illusion of a democratic process, this meeting functioned not to engage participants in dialogical transformation, but rather to affirm the moral certainty of its intensely polarised audience.

This academic boycott debate thus appeared to epitomise the visceral public performance of split, absolute positions that I had encountered from the outset of my fieldwork, albeit mediated by the institutionalised genre of an academic debate, which venerated rationalist norms of restrained emotional expression. As such, this event would seem to be a prime example of the communicative processes that 'strong programme' scholars have theorised as central to democratic civil society (Alexander, 2006b). As Gordon Lynch (2012) has discussed, the neo-Durkheimian hermeneutic approach of the 'strong programme' – which has been strongly influenced by linguistic structuralism – offers explanations for intensely felt political polarisation, taking seriously the subjective meanings of conflict for those involved. Drawing upon Ferdinand de Saussure's work on signification in relation to work on the formation of moral collectives, 'strong programme' scholars have argued that civil society is organised

around binary representations of the sacred and profane. Furthermore, in more recent years, Jeffrey Alexander has developed this framework by incorporating concepts and methodologies from formalist literary and Aristotelian genre theories in order to open up the felt, sentimental and sensual dimensions of culture to theoretical analysis (2006a). Political performances are framed as aesthetic scripts, which utilise techniques of agonistic plotting to produce particular structures of feeling associated with solidarity and exclusion including love, pride and pity, indignation, offence or fear. Put simply, democratic solidarity and conflict is to be analysed in terms of the (re)production and contestation of affectively charged, symbolic distinctions between sacred and profane meanings (Lynch, 2012); these are embedded in 'cultural scripts' and socially performed so that "such bifurcating classification is oriented not simply to mind but to affect and society" (Alexander 1988: 217). The debate on the academic boycott seemed to exemplify precisely this melodramatic performance of polarised relations oriented around sacred and profane meanings, so that the activists engaged in this drama appeared to be, in Alexander's (2006a) terminology, deeply fused with the absolute moral positions affirmed here. In other words, it seemed that their split identifications with pre-determined pro-Palestinian or Zionist positions were *constitutive* of coherent moral groupings and un-conflicted activist subjectivities on campus.

In the immediate aftermath of the academic boycott debate, the student newspaper published an article proclaiming it an exemplary model of academic engagement with this highly contentious issue. Those involved were subsequently venerated in media reports for demonstrating how universities can instantiate Enlightenment values of logical consistency and civility within the public sphere. In this sense, following Lynch's (2012) emphasis on the interplay of *various* contingent sacred forms, and so of the associated intersecting moral collectives, the claim of reason was revealed to be a potent sacred form within the university exerting influence over both pro-Israel and pro-Palestine groups as they also affirmed their belonging to the wider academic community. And while the semiotic framings of 'strong programme' theories take such binary relations to be built into the very structure of moral meaning making, this ethnographic case prompted me to pose some important questions which do not necessarily emerge within that semiotic theoretical framework. What were the conditions which *motivated* the production of such morally coherent and oppositional logics at both institutional and interpersonal levels? And what were their effects over time?

In addressing these questions, it is worth noting that the boycott debate occurred within a political context in which the ideal of the Enlightenment university, as an institution that instantiates universal, neutral reason and 'free speech,' was threatened in multiple senses. In recent years, the vision of the 'liberal' Western university has been increasingly challenged by the pressures of neo-liberalism and marketisation, the securitisation agendas associated with the so-called war on terror, as well as from postcolonial and anti-racist challenges to this self-image (Sheldon, 2016b). In this sense it begins to be possible to understand how students and institutions without any obvious investment in the Palestine-Israel conflict could be drawn into such intense forms of oppositional politics.

However, as my ethnographic fieldwork led me to probe beneath the public representations of the event, and to engage at a more personal level with student activists, I also began to develop a deeper sense of the passionate and violent currents at stake in these encounters. And in contrast to the notion of student activists oriented around abstract values, a more complex

picture of students' experiences of this sacralised conflict began to emerge. In subsequent conversations with me, Sadiq explained how the academic boycott debate had initially been intended to address internal divisions over the boycott *within* the Palestine Society. He described how he personally didn't support the academic boycott, and articulated a commitment to values of communicative rationality, specifically of academic engagement, including with Israeli institutions associated with the University. Yet once the format was changed to an agonistic public debate, Sadiq told me that he raised his hand in support of the boycott, conforming to the symbolic 'pro-Palestinian' position demanded of him. His confession revealed how 'performing the binaries' repressed the expression of tensions and fragmentation *within* seemingly coherent groups such as the Palestine Society. Identifying as a Palestinian who carried diasporic responsibilities to this cause *and* as a British student committed to Western 'liberal' values, Sadiq also experienced conflicting ethical demands – to boycott or to demonstrate his rational civility – as an inner tension. These personal, emotional struggles with the demands of conflicting sacred forms could not be expressed within the terms of the academic boycott debate itself, which demanded that Sadiq identify with one side of a morally split position as a way of also securing the position of the University institution. Yet through psychosocial research which is attentive to lived experiences of fragmentation, and to the tensions that emerge under conditions of globalising, postcolonial and diasporic conditions, I learnt how public moral grammars can distort and repress these more complex emotional formations of ethical and political subjectivities.

The Limits of Sacralising Frameworks: Tragic Realities

The academic boycott debate was just one instance of the high-profile polarised conflicts that recurred in my fieldwork. Such 'successful' civil events, which received a high media profile, were precariously positioned democratic exercises shadowed by the threat of violence. For example, shortly before the academic boycott debate, in late 2010, the Palestine Society at Old University had organised a meeting with a controversial Palestinian journalist Abdul Almasi, who had previously been accused of extremism and anti-Semitism. This garnered wide publicity and attracted a large audience of students associated with the Palestine and Israel Societies. As the meeting developed, Almasi embodied a position of extreme ambiguity, refusing stable categories of political identity. Projecting himself as a victim of extreme suffering, he aggressively denounced the censorship of the 'Jewish lobby,' so mobilising a term weighted with antisemitic connotations which also evoked tensions over the relationship of Judaism and Zionism for Jewish students. In various ways, the visceral, embodied dynamics of this meeting created a drama in which the audience experienced a sense of moral truth as two things at once; resistance to the colonisation of Palestinian voices *coincided* with the expression of antisemitism. The meeting culminated in the moment when a Jewish student, Jonathan, angrily sought to silence Almasi by producing an image, attributed to Almasi's newspaper, of a Star of David with a swastika superimposed. By introducing the association of Zionism with fascism, Jonathan's actions had seemingly unintended consequences as another member of the audience responding by calling him a Nazi. In Jonathan's words, the meeting then "all got a bit hazy"; this unthinkable blurring and reversal of categories of victims and aggressors, shaped by the claims of painfully entangled pasts, was acted in out in the visceral aggression that followed.

This was a rare moment of excessive affect spilling out into physically violent actions, which transgressed dominant institutional norms of autonomy, rationality and civility. It seemed that,

in these moments, feelings were expressed which were repressed by the dominant oppositional relational matrix epitomised in the boycott debate. In that context the fixed symbolic positions of victims and aggressors prohibited the expression of more complex, ambivalent feelings about identification with victimhood in relation to Palestine-Israel, feelings that were bound up with the *tragic* ambiguous truth that protagonists in this conflict can be *both* victims and aggressors. My broader theoretical claim here is that it was in moments when the stability of sacred and profane oppositional meanings between victims and perpetrators traumatically *broke down* that feelings of visceral aggression were acted out on campus. Thus, the polarised framing of the academic boycott debate can be seen as an attempt to contain the tragic, traumatic reality in which the very possibility of coherent meaning or stable moral categorisations of self and other are under threat. In other words, such institutionally endorsed forms of polarised interaction can be understood as a response to the ever present threat of violence associated with uncertain meanings, contradictory positions and ambiguous desires. Yet, as the cycles of attempted containment and violent excess on campus reveal, these responses are inadequate to the task at hand, as they force people to adopt fixed positions, refusing to acknowledge more complex and ambivalent subjectivities shaped by entangled histories and transnational connections. The dominant order may appear to provide a containing framework of moral coherence and certainty, drawing people who do not appear to have a personal investment into an oppositional political structure. But this entails forms of repression which, as the continuing campus disruptions around Palestine-Israel reveal, return to unsettle and disrupt relationships over time.^{vi}

Ordinary Ethics: The Precarity and Achievement of Shared Meaning

In March 2011, the Israel Society at Old University organised an 'Israel Awareness Week' in a central street of the campus. Alongside a memorial to Israeli citizens who had been killed the previous week, free hummus and a stall raising money for an Israeli humanitarian charity, there was an information table draped in blue cloth. Literature about Israel was carefully displayed on this table, including copies of a booklet entitled *Israel: Frequently Asked Questions*. Israel Society members stood in the street and sought to engage passers-by, passing round a sign saying 'we support a two-state solution' and taking photos of people holding this sign, which were later posted online. Shortly after I arrived, I noticed Sadiq approach the information table. Holding a booklet and protesting its narrative, he began an intense conversation with Daniel, an Israel Society member. They faced each other directly, staring intently, with only the width of the table between them, and began a lengthy, repetitive and intense debate which continued for over two hours. Around them, a group of us listened in as they debated the meanings of 'homeland,' 'Zionism,' 'security' and 'justice,' shifting between intellectual argumentation and personal narratives. As this encounter rolled on, audience members variously listened, interjected or withdrew. Noticing that Daniel had stepped back for a moment, I asked if he often had discussions like this. He nodded and explained,

It's always better talking with Palestinians about this; they tend to be much more knowledgeable than your average person who's just got into politics when they turned twenty.... Sadiq and I often have these arguments.

Surprised, I asked how often they saw each other. Daniel turned to Sadiq and interrupted his flow to put the question to him. Sadiq responded, "[a]ll the time, but we don't always talk about

politics” and then turned back to continue debating. The following day, the Israel Society posted pictures of the event on their Facebook page. Among them was a photo of Daniel, smiling as he stretched out his arm far across the table in order to shake Sadiq’s hand. Sadiq looked up towards the camera, half smiling, half grimacing, as if caught off guard.

In the final part of this chapter, I would like to pause at this scene in order to suggest that, within the theoretical terms discussed so far, it is both puzzling and unsettlingly indeterminate. Here was Sadiq, a pivotal public figure within campus conflicts, ambivalently acknowledging a friendly relationship with an active member of the Israel Society. This exchange appeared on social media as a highly politicised, symbolic moment, frozen in an image and circulated to an audience; and yet from a more intimate ethnographic perspective, it was also an amicable disagreement shaped by a feeling of mutual care for this issue. As I have previously discussed, Palestine-Israel politics at Old University was publicly enacted through aggressive oppositional encounters between antagonistic, polarised student societies. This exchange between Sadiq and Daniel provided a rare glimpse behind the scenes of these most visible political dramas, pointing towards the embeddedness of political activities in lived relationships between students who knew each other more intimately. But how did Sadiq and Daniel come to form and develop this relationship? And what were the conditions that made Sadiq and Daniel’s co-presence possible in that campus street on a cold March afternoon?

This encounter between Sadiq and Daniel occurred during the first months of my ethnographic fieldwork at a time when my attention was focused on understanding the dynamics of the high profile spectacles which resonated with my Durkheimian theoretical agenda. It was only many months later that I returned to ponder upon their exchange, and then to seek out Sadiq in order to learn more. In the intervening period, something had shifted in my own ethnographic and epistemological practice as I had learnt to question my own desire, as a Jewish ethnographer, for an objective, neutral analytical position. Gradually, as I spent time with particular students who were able to articulate their personal struggles in relation to this conflict – and as I participated in sociological networks that value the researcher’s personal and embodied experience as a source of knowledge – I began to hear and respond to the complexities of others’ experiences; to learn for example, about how complex histories of the conflict were carried by students who *seemed* not to have personal connections to Palestine-Israel.

As I became more attentive to forms of communication which did not fit the authoritative Durkheimian model, I began to learn more about the work of a student-led ‘Israel-Palestine Forum’ at one of my fieldsites. Somehow the approach of this small group of students diverged from the highly politicised and somehow instrumental models of inter-faith dialogue that have been subject to important critiques (see Sheldon, 2016a, 2016b). In this setting, students from different political and diasporic backgrounds had sought to build relationships of trust over time, away from the gaze of university managers, policy specialists and the media. More specifically, I had *participated* in a forum meeting which educated me in practices of speaking and listening about the same entangled histories of colonialism, the *Nakba* and the *Shoah*, that had provoked such violent outbursts at Old University. Working together slowly in small groups, the participants had expressed uncertainty about our inherited narratives of the conflict, voiced ambivalent feelings around our implication with forms of violence, and put into words the very experiences of being pulled by conflicting ethical demands. In this way, an alternative opened up to the endless questioning of the authenticity of the ‘other side’s’

communication, so that students could reflect on how we learnt ways of relating which might be coded as antisemitic or as oppressive. Now, this meeting was of course a specific group, at a particular time, made possible by the institutional conditions of a redbrick university institution whose socio-economic conditions and political culture allowed for such forms of sociability. And yet it had effects which somehow radiated beyond this moment – for example teaching a form of communication which I carried into my subsequent fieldwork and which, I suggest, poses a question to the epistemic and theoretical assumptions of ‘strong programme’ theories of moral communication.

In August 2013, on a warm bank holiday, I went to visit Sadiq, who had graduated from Old University and was, for the moment, living back in his home town. With some anxiety, I had sent Sadiq extracts of my ethnographic writing, including my account of the events discussed in this chapter. Sadiq smiled as he greeted me at the station and led me towards a nondescript café in a quiet pedestrianised street. We sat at right angles around a small round table, enjoying the hazy sunshine as people strolled past. Then, cautiously, we began to speak in a register that felt new to me, with a kind of clarity and directness. The pace of our conversation was slow, at times stilted, both of us pausing and laughing as we punctuated our sentences with the words ‘I don’t know.’ Then slowly, we departed from the defensive tone of our initial meeting as we began to make connections. Sadiq told me more about the pressures that he had felt to support the academic boycott, despite not agreeing with it, and to perform as a hard-line activist during his time at Old University. He described how this pressure came not only from other activists but also somehow from his own need to be loyal to his Palestinian father and grandfather. As he glanced at me, I felt the honesty of his speech, the risk that he was taking in confessing a sense of uncertainty that had been silenced within the politicised spaces of the campus. Cautiously, Sadiq asked me more about my own family history and said that he had always assumed that Jews in Britain were from ‘similar backgrounds’; and he began to ask me more about these differences and about the history of Jewish migration to Britain. He told me that he was also somewhat inside and outside of ‘his community’ for, though his father was Palestinian, he had not grown up within an Arab or Muslim community, only learning the narrative of ‘they’re all out to get us’ when he was older. Slowly we began to make connections in the complex inheritances that we carried as the grandchildren of refugees, our singular yet somehow related embeddedness within the entangled histories of the *Shoah* and the *Nakba*.

As our conversation was drawing to an end, I asked Sadiq if there were other things he wanted to talk about. He responded by asking, “[w]hat’s the point of your research? Where does it lead?” repeating the familiar question posed by Laura at the beginning of my fieldwork. And yet, while in that context this had expressed scepticism and mistrust, somehow Sadiq now asked the same thing with the opposite tone. In response, I began to voice, in embryonic form, some of the claims that I develop in this chapter, so that Sadiq helped me to articulate what my research could mean for activists.

Somehow, when Sadiq had said, “I don’t know how to begin”, he had articulated the key to the uncertain yet committed quality of our conversation that afternoon. His acknowledgement of the precarious, unknown quality of this conversation was the beginning, *not* the limit of our exchange. It can be helpful here to imagine his expression of uncertainty as a moment of what philosopher Stanley Cavell (2005) describes as ‘passionate speech.’ This connotes forms of communication that call us into relationships which are ethical precisely in that they exceed

social codes, conventions and rules. In this sense, the reciprocal quality of our encounter depended on a form of responsive acknowledgement. It required a sensory practice of listening that could hear how the potentially aggressive question “[w]hat’s the point of your research?” could be voiced in a non-rhetorical register that arose out of – and responded to – our shared experience of caring about this conflict. It required us to commit to a shared ordinary language in which, rather than sceptically positing endlessly deferred motivations and meanings, a person asking a question could mean just what they said (Cavell, 2002). My suggestion is that this kind of encounter depends on qualities of courage, care and risk-taking which emerge within living relationships and cannot be guaranteed in advance. In other words, this is an approach to the other that can only occur at the level of the interpersonal. It is a form of relationality which can be rendered visible by an ethnographer who explores ethics registers and forms of meaning-making beyond those that are refracted by public and social media, within what Veena Das (2007) describes as the domain of the ordinary.

Conclusion

In adapting Emile Durkheim’s insights to the context of complex and differentiated modern Societies, Jeffrey Alexander has emphasised that attending to the sacred and profane is not a comprehensive sociological theory, but rather helps us to understand specific empirical processes (2003). Drawing on the work of Roger Caillois and Edward Shils, he has introduced a third term ‘the mundane’ to contrast the moral intensity associated with sacralised events with the routine, ordinary dimensions of everyday life (Lynch and Sheldon, 2013; Lynch, 2012). In making a distinction which marks out the ‘sacred’ or ‘the good’ as a higher realm of symbolic values that orient moral relations and are set apart from ordinary interactions, Alexander draws on a dualistic theoretical genealogy which has at times been presented as a universal sociological framework for understanding moral relations (Lynch and Sheldon, 2013; Lynch, 2012). However, in a related set of debates within anthropology, postcolonial scholars have challenged the neutrality of this distinction between a higher moral symbolic realm, and an eviscerated, taken-for-granted realm of the ordinary, arguing that this apparently secular theorisation is shaped by a repressed Christian imaginary which denigrates ordinary life as the locus of ethical and spiritual possibility (Das et al., 2015). Offering an alternative, Das has made the case for a very different framing of ethics, as a form of responsiveness to the singularity and complexity of the other, a mode of relationality which refuses frozen scripts and symbolically mediated moral categorisations of, for example, ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators.’ Significantly, Das’ work resonates with a key insight within the Jewish ethical tradition articulated by Emmanuel Levinas, who as Annette Aronowicz (1994: xxviii) writes, locates the transcendent in precisely that moment “when a person interacts with other human beings in their specificity, without the grid of a [symbolic] system.”

In this chapter, I have brought the cultural sociology of the sacred into conversation with work in anthropology that is attuned to insights derived from Jewish and postcolonial ethical traditions. In doing so, my aim is to deepen our theoretical understanding of how the sacred and profane are produced, experienced and responded to; and to highlight how structuralist or semiotic framings are the product of *situated* genealogies, which can obscure the multiplicity of ethical formations within social life. Drawing on the case of the politics of Palestine-Israel on campus, I have argued that the enactment of moral splitting expresses a desire for moral coherence that arises under historical and psychic conditions of tragedy and trauma. I have also

claimed that this *process* can distort intersubjective relationships with others and within the self in ways that lead to violence. Finally, I have shown how this mode of relationality can also be unsettled, even transfigured, within interpersonal relationships that occur in a more intimate scale. In this way, my ethnographic analysis of a diasporic politics, which troubles the moral coherence of the 'Western' academy, is also a theoretical intervention; it is by drawing on such diasporic ethical traditions that I suggest sociologists of religion can explore the richness – the multiple scales and registers – of contemporary moral life.

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ⁱ All names of institutions, media outlets and individuals have been changed or anonymised in order to protect the identities of the students who participated in this research.

ⁱⁱ In Sheldon (2016b), I describe in detail how student politics around Palestine-Israel has in recent years become shaped in relation to the government's policy agenda around 'preventing violent extremism.'

ⁱⁱⁱ The term 'normalisation,' long used to identify the reproduction of colonial structures in the Middle East (see Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, 2014), has been taken up by pro-Palestine student activists in Britain to identify ways in which seemingly benign policies and initiatives around enhancing 'dialogue' and campus cohesion are used to legitimate unequal and oppressive relations on campus.

^{iv} Between 2010 and 2012, I conducted participant observation at three universities, attending campus events, observing online forums and conducting interviews with members of Jewish, Palestinian, Islamic and Socialist Worker student societies and with a student-led Israel-Palestine forum. For the purposes of this chapter, I will presume familiarity with the basic contours of the Israel-Palestine conflict, in its regional and transnational formations. For further discussion of this context as well as the methodological, epistemological and ethical questions raised by this research, see Sheldon (2016b).

^v See Sheldon (2016b) for further details of these political events.

^{vi} In the years following the completion of my fieldwork, the national media has frequently reported on campus conflicts which have taken the form identified in my research, including for example a recent case of violence at University College London (Pells, 2016).