

Dorota Golańska, *Slow Urbicide. A New Materialist Account of Political Violence in Palestine*, Routledge, London–New York 2023, 151 pp.

Dorota Golańska's research, as presented in the reviewed monograph and earlier works (e.g. the Routledge volume co-edited by Golańska, Rożalska and Clisby 2022), is situated at the intersection of political science, international relations, cultural studies, and urban studies, but in general, slightly closer to social sciences than humanities. New materialism and its critical approaches can be seen as a sort of “methodological umbrella” in this multi-discipline research. Even if *Slow Urbicide* is somewhat distant from more historical-philological or textual methods, typically applied by Oriental studies researchers, it can still be interesting and inspiring for those in this field. For example, cartographic methods and critical analyses of Israeli maps of the West Bank, offered in Chapter 3, is of great importance not only for humanities scholars, but because maps are considered important *texts of culture*, which have a great deal of influence on people's worldviews and their everyday life, as well as stimulating transformations of natural landscape. In addition, the researcher offers new ideas and creative reformulations of terms used earlier in several fields of studies, although mostly with a different meaning being applied (as is the case of the key term, i.e., urbicide).

The book is the result of long-term academic work, partially conducted within the framework of research projects (including international), such as “‘How Matter Comes to Matter’ New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship” (Action IS1307, COST European Cooperation in Science and Technology) and “Political Dimension of Violence Against Cities. Urbicide in Palestine – a Case Study” (OPUS 19, grant number: 2020/37/B/HS5/00837), funded by the National Science Centre in Poland.

One of the most important analytical categories used in Golańska's research is “urbicide”, which is a concept originally used in the “context of important reorganizations of large American cities leading to the destruction of traditional streetscapes by new planning projects, elaborated upon by such critics as Wolf von Eckardt and Marshall Berman” (p. 2). The author of *Slow Urbicide*, however, prefers a more up-to-date understanding, linking urbicide to “more extreme forms of conflict and terror connected to urban violence and the unprecedented scale of militarization of urban terrains” (p. 2).



Certainly, there is a linguistic similarity between “urbicide” and “genocide”. However, in Golańska’s opinion, the latter term does not fully encompass the former, especially since, in her view, the concept of urbicide displays a potential to refer to both human and “more-than-human” agents, all of which remain important given the methodological new materialist premise of the reviewed monograph.

Chapter 1 (pp. 31–57) offers an interesting introduction to new materialism and the diversified methods applied by the proponents of this broad scientific current. The categories of agents and agency are also extensively described, with further references to feminist new materialist thinkers (e.g. Iris van der Tuin, Donna Haraway).

In Chapter 2 (pp. 58–83), terms related to issues of urbanity and “urbicide” are explained, linking urban demolition to circumstances of war and conflict, as well as “the interludes between wars” (p. 59), whose examination seems to be crucial for the thorough understanding of the phenomenon referred to here as “slow urbicide”. Interludes between wars are seen as periods of relative calm, but can only be experienced as such by those belonging to the dominating group, in this case – the Israelis. In contrast, the Palestinians perceive interlude periods as very painful, during which they are subdued by the constant processes of Israeli colonization, including being deprived of basic human rights, and utilizing D. Golańska’s vocabulary, denying “the Palestinians’ right to the city/cities”. This perspective is not (and actually, cannot be) totally understood by external observers, and the reviewed book, apart from its purely scientific aims, attempts to confront the “denial of violence” (p. 141), especially since everyday violent practices often remain hidden under the guise of “reconstruction, renewal, urban planning and design”; they also pass unnoticed within the framework of wider discourses regarding “progress, order and modernization” (p. 141), which has been closely related to the Zionist project since its very beginnings at the turn of the 20th century.

Chapter 3 (pp. 84–135) enriches the aforementioned theoretical framework with examples and field observations. Two case studies are introduced. The first one tackles the cartographic and everyday physical transformation of the West Bank, with geography being employed as an actual weapon of war in this process. The second case study, and in my opinion, the most revealing and interesting in the book, concerns the region of Negev/an-Naqab Desert. The study examines the transformations of this remote and rather inhospitable area that have taken place since the State of Israel’s captured it during the 1948–1949 Arab-Israeli war. In this regard, the Negev/an-Naqab Arabs (who are often imprecisely called “Bedouins”), have been subjected to processes of displacement and forced migration to newly established townships, even though they had already been granted Israeli citizenship (in contrast to the Palestinians from the West Bank). The effect of this policy is a dramatic precarization of the society, and the further destruction of both the natural environment and traditional ways of life. Actually, the observations presented in this chapter, as well as its methodological framework, could be used in the analyses of many other similar cases, such as, for example, the transformations of East Jerusalem’s landscape and demography due to the construction of new Jewish settlements and the development of major infrastructural projects (such as the Jerusalem Light Rail).

The aforementioned analysis builds on references to post-Zionist and anti-Zionist Israeli scholars of history (e.g. Ilan Pappé), architecture and visual/spatial studies (e.g. Eyal Weizman), urban studies and political geography (Oren Yiftachel), eminent Palestinian thinkers (such as Edward Said and Nur Masalha), and last but not least, reports of NGOs documenting rights violations in the region (B'Tselem, PeaceNow). In addition, each chapter of *Slow Urbicide* is followed by quite comprehensive and informative “Bibliographies”.

In “Acknowledgements”, the Author declares that most of the material covered in the study was gathered during ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Israel and the West Bank in December 2018, January 2019, and February 2020. The effects of this field research are especially easy to recognize in Chapter 3. However, if we could formulate a critique, it would refer to the rather excessive volume of methodological material as compared to the examination of case studies presented in the book. It seems slightly disproportionate if we consider the book’s concept in general. At the same time, however, it must be underlined that the author of *Slow Urbicide* moves skilfully through the abundant terminology offered by new materialism, different strands of feminism, and urban studies. Nevertheless, it should be noted here that the new materialistic approach, its research merits aside, also has some limitations. It remains openly politically engaged, very much taking sides with “the oppressed”, and not even approaching any sort of balanced account. Along with this, the researcher seems to focus extensively on the colonial nature of the Israeli project and its subsequent impact. This rather harsh and politically suggestive language is, however, justified, and the examples of both the limitations of the Palestinians’ human rights and the Israeli transformations of natural landscape as well as the deliberate usage of “more-than-human” agents for political purposes abound in the book. Argumentation seems to be convincing but, in the course of reading, sometimes one may have the impression that Palestinians are treated only as passive objects of colonial policy, to some extent losing their subjectivity, self-agency and internal diversity.

However, these reservations in no way reduce the high scientific value of the monograph. It is a material which will be of interest to many researchers, from different disciplinary backgrounds, who are working on contemporary political violence in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian (Arab) conflict in particular. *Slow Urbicide* can also inspire further research on the topic, especially given the fact that different types of texts of culture can be approached from a new materialist perspective. Even the contemporarily famous Israeli Netflix series *Fauda* (2015–2023, dir. Avi Isacharoff, Lior Raz) can offer quite substantial material related to *Slow Urbicide*, considering how Palestinian cities (Ramallah, Nablus, Gaza) are represented in the series. In the last few years, there have also been some new Polish publications that can be, at least to a certain extent, juxtaposed with the reviewed book. These include, for example, articles and the doctoral dissertation of Aleksandra Katner (2018, 2022), which analyses Palestinian discourse(s) in a sociolinguistic light of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as well as Maria Piekarska-Baronet’s studies (2020, 2023) concerning the politics of afforestation in a material-semiotic perspective and in the context of the Jewish-Israeli culture of

memory. This attests to the fact that the research presented in *Slow Urbicide* can provoke interesting comparative approaches and trigger new analyses and case studies based on different, as well as similar, methodological orientations.

References

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