

Mordechai Vanunu: “The Atomic Spy” as a Nuclear Threat to Discourse in Israeli Society

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Abstract : Using the case of Israeli Atomic Spy Mordechai Vanunu as an example, this study sought to examine social response to political deviance whereby social response can be mobilized in order to achieve social control. Mordechai Vanunu, a junior technician in the Dimona Atomic Research Center, played a normative role in the militaristic discourse while working in the “holy shrine” of the Israeli defense system for many years. At a certain stage, however, Vanunu decided to detach himself from this collective and launched an assault on this top-secret circle. Israeli society in general and the security establishment in particular found this attack intolerable and unforgivable. They presented Vanunu as a ticking time bomb, delegitimized him and portrayed him as “other”. In addition, Israeli enforcement authorities imposed myriad prohibitions and sanctions on Vanunu even after his release from prison – “as will be done to he who desecrates holiness.” Social response to Vanunu at the time of his capture and trial was studied by conducting a content analysis of six contemporary daily newspapers. The analysis focused on use of language and forms of expression. In contrast with traditional content analysis methodology, this study did not just look at frequency of expressions of ideas and terms in the text and covert content; rather, the text was analyzed as a structural whole, and included examination of style, tone and unusual use of imagery, and more, in order to uncover hidden messages within the text. The social response to this case was extraordinarily intense, not only because in this case of political deviance, involving espionage and treason, Vanunu’s actions comprised a real potential threat to the country, but also because of the threat his behavior posed to the symbolic universe of society. Therefore, the response to this instance of political deviance can be seen as being part of a mechanism of social control aiming to protect world view of society as a whole, as well as to punish the criminal.

Keywords : militarism, political deviance, social construction, social control

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