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Inside the Mind of Netanyahu

By Lawrence Davidson
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Dan Illouz is an Israeli lawyer and a former legal adviser to both the Knesset's leadership coalition and the Israeli Foreign Ministry. He is also a big fan of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. On 13 April 2016 he wrote an opinion piece for the *Jerusalem Post* entitled, "A fresh perspective: Understanding Netanyahu's mind."

Among the many synonyms of "fresh" offered by your average online dictionary are "unusual" and "undeveloped". Though Illouz would certainly not agree that these terms fit his effort to explain the prime minister's consciousness, it turns out that they actually do.

For instance, there is his *unusual* claim that "Netanyahu is one of the deepest thinkers among world leaders". At the same time Illouz emphasises that Netanyahu comes from a "very ideological" background bequeathed to him by both his revisionist Zionist father, Benzion Netanyahu, and the American neo-conservative worldview.

As we will see, both outlooks are *undeveloped*, one-dimensional frames of reference.

It is true that our perceptions reflect a worldview structured by the aspects of family and society we choose to embrace, or rebel against. It could go either way.

According to Illouz, Netanyahu has embraced the restricted worldview of a brand of Zionism which teaches that, if the Jews are to survive in the modern world, they must be militarily all powerful and remain unmoved by any and all calls for compromise with alleged enemies.

Also, according to Illouz, Netanyahu sees the world through the myopic lens of the American neo-conservative movement, which preaches that both the United States and Israel are allies in a never-ending battle of good against evil.

The unalterable consequences of compromise in such a struggle have been taught to us by the history of the 1938 Munich Agreement with Adolf Hitler. All such compromises in this imagined struggle must end up in catastrophe, especially for the Jews.

The conclusions Illouz draws from this description of Netanyahu's mindset are, to say the least, baffling. Not in the sense that Netanyahu is cemented into a worldview which itself is modelled on a narrow slice of history. This indeed seems to accurately describe him. But rather in the claim that by seeing the world this way, the Israeli prime minister shows himself to be a "deep thinker."

What does it mean to be a "deep thinker"? It should entail some capacity to break free of the structural framework or the worldview we start out with. For example, a degree of independent thought that allows us to discern when the past serves as a useful guide to the present and when it does not. This all adds up to an ability to be original – to understand present circumstances in novel ways that lead to breakthrough solutions to problems, be they political, social or scientific.

That is what it takes to think deeply. Does Netanyahu qualify? No, he does not. He is no more a "deep thinker" than George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld or John Bolton.

Then why does Illouz say he does qualify? Because this Israeli lawyer, who is himself no "deep thinker," mixes up profundity of thought with a skewed notion of "prudence" – which, in this case, he interprets as a "reluctance to embrace a utopian view of the world that progressives push forward".

Examples of such "utopian views" are peace agreements such as the Iran accord, and the notion of "unilateral withdrawals". In other words, Netanyahu is a "deep thinker" because, in the name of "prudence", he shuts down all consideration of diplomatic compromise. For Illouz that also makes him one of the world's leading "realists".

In truth, Illouz's assessment of his prime minister's mind is itself a product of the same narrow, static worldview shared by neo-conservatives and Likudniks alike.

For instance, according to Illouz, Netanyahu's refusal to withdraw from the occupied Palestinian territories is stark realism motivated by a desire to "stop history from taking a wrong turn" – as it did in 1938.

The comparison of the Palestinian desire for an independent state in the occupied territories and the Munich agreement of 1938 is so patently inane that I won't waste words on it.

However, Israel's absorption of the territories can be judged as the very opposite of realism – it is a utopian (actually dystopian) scheme that is in the process of doing untold damage to both Jews and Palestinians while isolating Israel from the rest of the world.

There is a contradiction between profundity of thought and the ideologically determined worldview. To be in a position to achieve the former, one must, at the very least, eschew the dogmatic aspects of the latter. Neither Netanyahu nor Dan Illouz are capable of doing this.

Analysing Illouz's presentation is not hard. His mistaken take on "deep thinking", the lessons of history, the notions of realism and utopianism are quite obvious. This being the case, one might ask why the editors at the *Jerusalem Post* thought it proper to print such balderdash? Perhaps because they too see the world in the same one-dimensional fashion.

If we are to believe the reports coming out of Israel, the Jewish majority there is undergoing an unchecked withdrawal into itself. The "us against the world" attitude that has always characterised some of the world's Jewry has now taken command in Israel. And, except for a small portion of the population that has managed to break free of this warped worldview (and as a consequence is being labelled as traitors), the mass of Israeli Jews are following their Pied Piper leaders into dangerous isolation.

This state of detachment has led to a series of policy decisions that are anything but realistic.

The continuing expansion of illegal settlements and destruction of Palestinian houses, the resulting ethnic cleansing, the utter barbarism of Israeli policy toward Gaza, and the labelling as terrorist behaviour of all reactions against these policies, mark an official, and internally popular, worldview that is increasingly detached from reality. Dan Illouz's piece in the *Jerusalem Post* is a clumsy effort to rationalise this way of thinking and seeing.

For a nation (and also individuals) in this state of mind, positive change can only come from the outside. The resulting pressure is never pleasant and sometimes may become severe. However, in cases where the behaviour of the offending state is criminal and often barbaric, change, be it easy or hard, must ultimately come. And, in fact, the Israelis and their supporters are in the process of learning the price of following the dictates of "Netanyahu's mind".