

PRESS RELEASE

The humanity of the enemy: scientists get together to remember Israeli scholar Daniel Amit

On 30 June a seminar at SISSA and a meeting at Caffè San Marco will look back over the activities and the ideas of one of the fathers of neural computation, whose scientific commitment was one with his socio-political commitment, in particular on the Israeli-Palestinian issue

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A symposium and a public meeting to look back over the scientific activity, but not only, of a great scientist who was also a convinced pacifist, whose political commitment and defence of human rights, in particular of his Palestinian colleagues, was one of the cornerstones of his entire existence. The double event entitled “Remembering Daniel Amit, and Beyond” organised by SISSA – Scuola Internazionale Superiore di Studi Avanzati of Trieste on 30 June will be dedicated to Daniel Amit, physicist by profession and one of the founding fathers of the approaches to the functions of the brain as a complex system.

The symposium, which will be held at SISSA from 9.30 am, will see the participation of scientists who studied and worked with Daniel Amit, who was born in Poland in 1938 and brought by his family to Mandatory Palestine – with a stopover in Trieste – in 1940, as they were fleeing the Nazis. Amit grew up in Tel Aviv and worked mainly in Israel until he moved to Rome, and became Italian citizen in 1999. It will be an occasion to illustrate current advances in the field of computational neuroscience, Amit’s research area, but also to look back at the human and scientific aspects of his life, to talk about his ideas, about the extreme determination with which he asserted the close relationship between science, power and military force, about his activity to encourage dialogue and meetings between Israelis and Palestinians. His was a strong and passionate commitment, which will be evoked during the second event, open to the public, to be held at 7:30pm on June 30, at the Antico Caffè e Libreria San Marco. Cristiana Baldazzi, who teaches Arabic literature at the University of Trieste, will talk about ‘forgotten voices’, like that of Ghassan Kanafani, a journalist, writer and Palestinian activist, killed in 1972, whom Daniel Amit, with his small publishing company, had translated into Hebrew, to help share an awareness of the humanity of the ‘enemy’ in Israel. “An attempt that failed miserably” says Alessandro Treves, organizer of these events, which are part of the summer school programme in neuroscience TEX2018 organised by SISSA. *Trieste Encounters on Cognitive Science* (TEX) is a programme organized each year by SISSA, aiming to explore frontier themes in the neurosciences. This year, the school is entitled “Under the

Surface of Memory Phenomena” and is dedicated to exploring research in the field of memory, in man and in animals, including with mathematical and computational models.

“Little seems to have changed, if not for the worst, since Amit’s battles, who died in 2007.” This is illustrated by the difficulties encountered by several Palestinians to participate in this symposium, continues Treves “For us, this is a further incentive to remember his thought, as a scientist and as a pacifist. And to look to the future.”

Professor at the Racah Institute of Physics of the Jewish University of Jerusalem and Professor of Neural Networks at the physics faculty of the University La Sapienza in Rome, during his lifetime Amit engaged in courageous and controversial activities. In the Seventies, for example, he publically protested the deportation of his Palestinian colleague, the physicist Hanna Nasser, president of the Palestinian Birzeit University, by the Israeli authority in the occupied territories. Shortly after, in Paris, he participated with Uri Avnery, General Matti Peled and other Israeli pacifists in the first clandestine meetings with PLO exponents, promoted by the Egyptian Jewish communist activist Henri Curiel (a cousin of the Resistance hero Eugenio Curiel, who was from Trieste). Meetings that entailed a degree of personal danger: the key PLO representative who took part, Dr Issam Sartawi, was assassinated in 1983, perhaps by the extremist Abu Nidal faction, while Henri Curiel had already been assassinated in 1978; not clear by whom.

A continuous engagement, with countless passionate disputes, such as the one in April 2003. As the allied troops were entering Baghdad, Daniel Amit decided to discontinue his cooperation with Physical Review, the journal of the American Physical Society, cutting off official relations with the American scientific community. He had not realised that the paper which Physical Review had asked him to review for publication had not really been written by a member of that community, but by a young Iranian student at SISSA, Yasser Roudi, who later went on to be awarded, in 2015, the Kandel Young Neuroscientist Prize. “Sometimes I act before thinking” Amit commented dryly on that occasion.

To highlight the importance of what Daniel Amit had said and done we can quote the words of Albert Aghazarian in a letter addressed to the participants of the symposium on 30 June. A Palestinian of Armenian origin, for 25 years director of Public Relations at Birzeit University, Aghazarian feels committed to acknowledge “the role of ‘righteous’ Israelis and Jews in the survival of the institution, against all attempts at demonization and at extinguishing its light. The main candidate on top of the list will be Prof Dani Amit who, incessantly, chose to choose rather than be chosen and to be promising rather than be promised. His universal perspective is most remarkable. [...] The Israeli Committee of solidarity with BZU was a beacon, combining the fragmentation of universalist tendencies in Israel and abroad. Apart from his activity at Israeli universities, Amit helped boost academic freedom issues from Brandeis to College de France and to Rehovot. I fully empathize with the step to bend down in respect at this gigantic figure and to pay him tribute.”

TEX2018 PROGRAMME

[https://indico.sissa.it/event/26/
program](https://indico.sissa.it/event/26/program)

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