

The Idea of Israel - A History of Power and Knowledge

A Review of Ilan Pappé's Book

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This is a powerfully written unsettling work that relates the story of Israel from the perspective of how ideas are changed and manipulated for the benefit of the state. Unfortunately the majority of citizens of most countries are susceptible to the ideation/ideology of the mainstream of political thought as it is supported by the mainstream press. In the case of Israel, image and ideation, its narrative and ideology, are of paramount importance for the survival of the state beyond its military strength and relatively successful integration into the globalized corporate governed world.

For a brief decade, generally within the 1990s, the Israeli narrative, its foundational ideas, were challenged by a small group of academics known as the new historians. In a factual sense they brought forward many details about the story of Israel – using newly released and openly available IDF archives – that contradicted the narrative preferred by the Israeli government and its supporters.

They were successful at opening up a dialogue about the 1948 Nakba/war of independence, the post 1967 settlement plans, and for both dates, the knowledge of expulsions, massacres, and ethnic cleansing. But that success had limited reach within Israel, as the new historians were an academic minority, and only in infrequent media presentations – stage, theatre and film in particular – was there any other real arena of success. It did create some significant stirrings abroad, but the main feature in other countries, again apart from a few vocal academics, was a broad base of apathy and disinterest, cultivated by a corporate controlled media supporting – again, the corporate governed globalized world.

Nakba, 1948

This is the story that is developed within Ilan Pappé's latest work, *The Idea of Israel*. Pappé follows the historical timeline within this ideational confrontation, starting with the 1948 Nakba and its 'traditional' perspective before the age of the new historians.

In this original perspective, the 'land without people' became an insult to the Zionists by the very presence of the Palestinians. It involved the physical conflict between Palestinians and the Zionists, with the Palestinians – when they were acknowledged at all – denigrated as primitive and backwards, requiring 'modernization.' Their resistance was a surprise, with unknown rational, arising "out of the blue" and being "tantamount to terrorism."

As the discourse was written by the Israelis, the "unexplained violence was identified

academically as an essential feature of Arab culture and life.” The violence as depicted in the cinema “need not be explained, merely described,” with an “absence of logical explanation” other than that of a “meaningless and cruel assault.” The cinematic representation was a “combination of a racist superiority complex intertwined with pathological hate.”

At first, the Post Zionist movement was represented by academics reacting with “disgust at abhorrent conduct” of the Israelis towards the Palestinians” and the “intellectual rejections of paradoxes and absurdities of ideological dogma.” During the 1970s and 1980s undercurrents of criticism emerged which “exposed some basic Zionist truisms as doubtful at best and as fallacies at worst.....It became apparent...that society was ridden with tensions between various cultural and ethnic groups, and was only precariously cemented together by the lack of peace and the continual sense of crisis.”

The new historians discussed many myths concerning the 1948 Nakba. Pappe discusses the UN Partition plan, the lack of popularity of Grand Mufti al-Husayni, the desire of the Arab world to destroy Israel (in spite of their secret agreement with Jordan contradicting this), the exodus because the Palestinians were told to leave rather than being forced, the Israeli David versus the Arab Goliath, and the Israeli rejection of the offering of peace.

Later on these ideas were revitalized after the Second Intifada, the lack of success at Camp David, and the events of 9/11 and the al-Aqsa mosque. They have been revitalized with the Neo Zionist’s new discourse on Israeli history.

Post Zionism

But before getting there, Pappe examines different aspects of the presentation of the new historians and Post Zionism in the 1990s. It was “a decade in which the entire idea of Israel was questioned and serves as a “convenient term for measuring the distance that these scholars travelled out of the Zionist camp” yet were “still close enough to the tribal space to return to its warm embrace.” It was in Pappe’ view, the “only positive result of these two monumental events [the Intifada, and Oslo].”

Topics of discussion covered the obvious history but also economic realities, nationalism in relation to biblical myths, settlers, exile, socialism and class distinctions, militarism, colonialism, and feminism and gender being “most influential.”

The next topic is the holocaust and its myths wherein the Israelis “perfected such manipulation as a diplomatic tool in its struggle against Palestinians,” which was “consensual and widespread.” Critics of holocaust ideation called it “excessive and abusive preoccupation,” with “perverted moral values and judgement.” It “prevented them from seeing the Palestinians in a more realistic light and impeded a reasonable political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.”

Within that context Pappe examines early Jewish sympathy to the Nazis (anti-British, expulsion from Germany as a good, and a negation of the diaspora). He looks at the Warsaw uprising as represented as a distinctly Jewish event and not as one of several reactions to knowledge of one’s ultimate death at the hands of the Nazis. It was/is part of the “construction of a selective narrative that adapted the history of the holocaust to Israel’s strategies and ideological demands,” vis a vis the brave Jew versus the passive Jew, nationalizing the rebellion as “part of the history of modern genocide,” the survivors not

fitting the mould of the tough Jew, most of whom wished to migrate to the UK or the US rather than Israel. Finally, it universalizes genocide to accept all genocides.

Another topic of concern to the Post Zionists is the presence of the Arab Jews. As above most immigrants wanted to immigrate to the UK or the US, not to Israel. They did not see themselves as residents nor did they want to colonize the country, they retained their patriotism for their home country, and were used as cheap labour and support for the 'demographic problem.' This reflected that "life as a Jew in Arab and Islamic societies was a life of integration and co-existence." To this day they "continue to pose some sort of challenge and alternative to the idea of Israel as presented by the establishment and as understood by the vast majority of Jews within the state."

The media is given two chapters separated mainly as the written word and the spoken word. Due to self imposed restrictions, "security considerations" with a consensual approach, the press "did not deviate from the Zionist consensus." They were liberal but not unpatriotic, and did not pry into pre-1967 Israel nor the 1948 Nakba.

While there were particular efforts at revealing the true nature of Israeli society, Pappe's conclusion is that there was "no political impact" overall. Within a few movies there was a "tension between conformity and criticism," that showed the reality of a nation "that was unstable and insecure, since state and society had failed to reconcile with the people whom they expelled, whose land they took, and whose culture they destroyed."

Neo Zionism

One of the interesting aspects of Neo Zionism is that they did not deny the 'facts' as uncovered through the IDF archives and government documents, but that they incorporated them into a new paradigm. A "highly nationalistic, racist, and dogmatic version of Zionist values overrule all others in the society, and any attempt to challenge that interpretation of the idea of Israel is considered unpatriotic and in fact treasonous."

Post Zionism was considered a "corrupting method and theory," which was "gradually silenced and crushed," allowing the traditional Zionists to "reassert their historiographical interpretation." The main transition points, as indicated earlier, were the Second Intifada, the lack of success at Camp David, and the events of 9/11 and the al-Aqsa mosque.

The paradigm is one of both national and religious unity. It covers the ideation within politics, religion, and education, the latter being especially significant for its militarization role in society (IDF prep in schools). Education also plays the role of creating a racist, insular, ethnocentric perspective, a generalized "fear of the Other." Apartheid becomes legalized, its argument relating to the always present Zionist concern about demographics. The Palestinians become invisible, culturally and geographically.

Pappe revisits the 1948 Nakba where the Neo Zionists accept the 'facts' interpreting them within a new paradigm. Themes of equal combatants (as per 1948) and victimhood (holocaust, 1967 war) combine with a "divine promise" for "existential survival". Justification is provided for ethnic cleansing while the "moral defence of the war approaches messianic proportions." The war is described in terms of a "just war", "redemption," "purity of arms," an "eternal justification," and is fully unapologetic for all the newly recognized actions that in humanitarian terms are war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Currently, the media war has been successful within Israel, the academics have retreated into the comfort of their nationalistic/religious paradigm of Neo Zionism. Outside Israel is the recognition that the 'facts' are a bit disturbing, and cannot be countered with argument. The response then is a PR campaign to sell Israel as a "heaven on earth...beauty, fun, and technological achievement." Its success has been highly moderated by the awareness of current Israeli actions, the violence of its assault on Gaza and Lebanon and the nature of its apartheid system of containment/imprisonment of Palestinians.

The Idea of Israel is a complex work, and might be a difficult read without some other historical reference concerning the 'facts.' Ilan Pappé's other main works, The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine (2007) and A History of Modern Palestine – One Land, Two Peoples (2006) provide that history.

Given the nature of the topic, a reading of Israel's history from the Israeli perspective would serve equally as well, as it will provide their perspective that can then be compared and contrasted to Pappé's Post Zionist critique, and the ideas presented in this well thought out work.

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