

A question of historiography: the “new historians” of Israel

E T OTTMAN *

Abstract

Controversy continues to surround the so-called “Revisionist Historians” of Israel, whose retellings in the late 1980s of the “true” origins of their State were to cause profound psychic aftershocks. Their leading historian, Benny Morris, has retreated dramatically to a traditional Zionist-determinist position; scandal-mired Ilan Pappé felt compelled to quit his position as a professor at the University of Haifa and take up a post at a British university (Exeter), from where he continues with greater impunity his campaign to have Israeli universities boycotted. Avi Shlaim also criticizes from the judicious distance of the UK (St. Anthony’s College, Oxford). Despite Morris’s apparent ideological *volte-face*, accounts that have a powerful bearing on our interpretation of the Israel-Palestine conflict continues to be produced, an approach that is emphatically “subjective, often but not always standing for the defeated over the victorious” (Pappé, 2004:12¹) Yet the question remains: is this history? The author considers how the narrative that seeks to redress injustice, to “rewrite, indeed salvage, a history that was erased and forgotten” (Pappé, 2004:xx)² increases historical understanding.

Introduction

How can we ever know what really happened? How can we know why we are as we are now? History *should* tell us; but often, it does not. For one thing, unless it is in the recent past, it is intangible, unobservable; what remains is located in archives, monuments and fragments. We simply cannot grasp history without the

* Associate Professor, School of Government, Kyoto University

1. Pappé, I. (2004) *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Pappé, I. (2004) Op. cit.

services of a medium, the one who constructs (not reconstructs, for the past cannot be resurrected) the “bridge” of inquiry between ourselves and the past (White, 1999): the historian³. And since history is written by humans, it is inevitably *shaped*. Even setting aside Hayden White’s notion that all historians operate from “metahistories” (their own perceptions of what history ought to be) there is the simple proposition that from the moment that the historian is interposed between ourselves and the past—the moment of interpretation—we have “noise” or “spin”. There are facts, to be sure—dates and events—but it takes narration to bring them together, to order them in a comprehensible fashion, to “emplot” them (in Whitean parlance). No amount of rigorous pseudo-*wissenschaftlich* methodology can transform history into hard science⁴:

History or rather historical studies remains the least scientific--in both its achievements and its aspirations--of all the disciplines comprising the human and social sciences. Ever so often, there is a move to make historical studies more scientific, either by providing it a theoretical basis such as positivism or dialectical materialism or by importing into it a methodology from one or another of the "social sciences." But these efforts seldom succeed, largely because of the way that the principal object of historical study--the event--is defined. Historical events are considered to be time and place specific, unique and unrepeatable, not reproducible under laboratory conditions, and only mimimally describable in algorithms and statistical series. (White, 1999)

Moreover, if there can be no end to history (and even Francis Fukuyama allegedly did a *volte-face* on his own position) it is equally likely that that what we can know about the past is not finite. Our knowledge will never be perfect.

White conceptualized historical narratives as a form of literary genre, a “discursive turn” in which the attention focuses on the product (the text itself) rather than on rendering an objective account of the past⁵: Thus historical narratives are not neutral, but involve “ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications” (White, 1987: ix). The role of the historiographer is a consciously constructed one, collapsing the

3. Hayden White (1999) History as Fulfillment (Keynote Address) [online]. Available at <http://www.tulane.edu/~isn/hwkeynote.htm>

4. White, op. cit.

5. P. Sutermeister (2005), Hayden White or history as narrative: A constructive approach to historiography [online]. Available at <http://www.grin.com/en/fulltext/get/25061.html>

boundaries between primary and secondary sources, for although

... historical narratives proceed from empirically validated facts or events, they necessarily require imaginative steps to place them in a coherent story; they also represent only a selection of historical events. Thus, truth is limited. (Sutermeister, 2005)

Meanwhile, others envisioned history as inevitably coloured by (or tainted with, dependent on one's perspective) ideology. "History is therefore never history, but history-for," wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss⁶ (Lévi-Strauss, 1972). For Collingwood⁷, Benedetto Croce, and even White, history has a moral purpose, and "true historical investigation was always inspired by some moral concerns" (Domanska, 1998: 176). "Enquiry into war origins, then, is inseparable from our normative concern," writes Suganami (1997) in "Stories of war origins: a narrativist theory of the causes of war".⁸ Thus, "the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological" (White, 1973: xii). And last (but by no means least) there is history by omission, where actors or perpetrators are never directly named, and the veracity of events as they actually occurred disappears down the rabbit-hole of voluntary collective amnesia, described by Milliken and Sylvan (writing on American violence in Indochina) as "a memory hole of non-existence" (Milliken and Sylvan, 1996: 321). No-one, it seems, writes history for posterity's sake.

Levisohn (2002) finds this deeply troubling: What of historical truth, where does it lie? What or how should we teach our students?

... the popular easy solution of teaching both sides of controversial issues—both stories—is hardly more defensible, since there is no readily available criterion to determine when to teach the story and when to teach the conflict about the story, or even which conflicting narratives deserve space in the curriculum. Moreover, if one believes that students ought to learn how to engage in the practice of history, then presumably one also believes that doing history entails something other than

6. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée sauvage)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) 257.

7. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History: With Lectures 1926-1928*, (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1994) 10.

8. H. Suganami. Stories of war origins: a narrativist theory of the causes of war. *Review of International Studies* (1997), 23: 418.

imposing a narrative on the past. Can this intuition be defended? (Levisohn, 2002: 466)

The “New Historians” of Israel

Thus we come to the compelling conundrum of the so-called “New Historians” of Israel (also known as the Revisionist or Postzionist Historians), whose retelling in the late 1980s of the “true” and less than heroic history of the origins of the State of Israel, stripped of ideological myths, were to cause profound aftershocks in the Israeli (but not the Palestinian) psyche, hitting the headlines abroad, well beyond academic journals and the Israeli media. “Writing about Zionist and Israeli history will never be the same, thanks to scholars such as Avi Shlaim, Benny Morris, and Ilan Pappé,” comments Neil Caplan (Caplan, 1995: 96).

These days the historians are perhaps no longer so New (and indeed one of them, Benny Morris, has fallen dramatically off the wagon and retreated to a traditional Zionist position, but more of that later). However, controversy continues to surround them with the publication of each new work, every new pronouncement in the media adding to a snowstorm of letters to the editor, to such a degree that one of their number, scandal-mired Ilan Pappé (Stein, 2002: 43), felt compelled to quit his position as a professor at the University of Haifa and take up a post at a British university (Exeter, where he is chair of the Department of History, and co-director of the Exeter Centre for Ethno-Political Studies) from where he continues with limited impunity⁹ his campaign to have Israeli universities boycotted (Lappin, 2007). Avi Shlaim also criticizes from the judicious distance of the UK (as a Fellow of St. Anthony’s College, Oxford, and a professor of international relations at the University of Oxford). As Yoav Gelber observes, “Present post-Zionism ... is mainly “blue and white”[the colours of the Israeli national flag]—an Israeli product produced by people who were born and/or

9. Y. Lappin.(2007) writes in “Israeli academic lashes out at 'Jewish student lobby,' students reject allegations” [online at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3385189,00.html>] “an article in the British Times Higher Education Supplement (THES), entitled 'Historian hits out at Jewish student lobby,' extensively quoted Pappé as complaining that UK Jewish students have formed a "lobby" aimed at quashing open debate on the Middle East. "...Professor Pappé may find that Britain is not the haven of peace and tolerance he seeks. Jewish students' groups have already complained about his appointment, saying he is anti-Zionist," the article said. "Jewish student organizations have ceased to care for the interests and concerns of Jewish students but have become a front for the Zionist point of view. They act as an arm of the Israeli embassy," Pappé was quoted as saying.”

educated in Israel though now some of them may live abroad" (Gelber, 2007).

What enabled this "new" history to emerge, and why was it a tale untold before? In his introduction to *The Israel/Palestine Question: Rewriting Histories*, Ilan Pappé attributes the revision of traditional Zionist historiography to the influences of "recent historiographical debates taking place around the academic world at large", a general trend towards interdisciplinarity, and the desire to "inject a more skeptical view towards historical narratives written under the powerful hand of nationalist elites and ideologies" (Pappé, 1999: 1). But the origins of the "new history" were somewhat more mechanistic; indeed, nothing could better illustrate that what we know about the past may be always incomplete. Modelled on the British Public Records Act with its "30 year rule", Israel also regulates the release of information from its national archives for an identical period of time. Archival documents written during the period of the creation of the Israeli state thus became accessible from the late 1970s, and by 1987, the first and most celebrated work of the "New Historians" emerged, Benny Morris's *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949*.

Past historiography claims that in 1947, Palestinian Arabs voluntarily left their homes following the Arab leaders' orders of temporary evacuation. Morris, however, was the first to offer a very different explanation, one which tallies with Palestinians' account of *Nakba* (catastrophe). He revealed that many Palestinians fled in terror from the Zionist militias' invasion of certain Palestinian Arab villages, and also how some Palestinians were compulsorily expelled from their land. In addition, he recounts that Zionist militias conducted massacres of Palestinians. An extended version of this work was republished in 2004 as yet more documents became declassified.

While the validity and supposedly groundbreaking nature of these historiographies rests on their access to previously unseen national archival documents that describe "objective" facts (as opposed to the prior ideologically-tainted accounts): but this exclusive dependence on "national documents" is also the Achilles heel of certain New Historians' approach. Nevertheless Morris's account stood out in sharp relief to the accepted version of the truth of previous generations. In "The History of Zionist Historiography", Yoav Gelber (2003, online) excuses the first generation of pre-state Zionist historians, who focused on portraying the relationship of Diaspora Jews with the land of Israel and with the

Yishuv (early settlers):

The writing of history cannot be separated from the era in which it is written. Changing perspectives define scope, fields and focal points, attitudes to the objects of study, and even methodological developments. ...Within the context of its time frame, Zionist historiography itself becomes part and parcel of the history of Zionism. ... Early historians of Zionism were, on the whole, amateurs - Zionist activists who under certain circumstances became historians. (Gelber, 2003)

For the second wave of Zionist historiographers, writes Gelber, statehood changed everything, distorting perspective on accounts of the Holocaust, which for a long time was covered mainly through journalism (Gelber, 2003; Arendt, 1963, 1994):

Under the new circumstances, the writing of Zionist history lost its apologetic tone and, moving to the opposite pole, began to distribute laurels to the victors. For many years, the euphoria in the wake of the Zionist triumph blurred the central issue of modern Jewish history the Holocaust. (Gelber, 2003)

It also blurred the sharp political divisions between the ruling Labour Zionist party, Mapai, led by the first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion and first president, Chaim Weizmann, and the right-wing Revisionist Party, led by Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky.

The "New Historians" (who also included Simha Flapan, Uri Milstein, Michael Cohen, Anita Shapira, Uri Bar-Joseph, and critical sociologist Baruch Kimmerling) emerged in the wake of the dilemma of the third generation of the more academically sophisticated Zionist Historiographers, who were infected with a similar desire to European historiographers, the dedication for "objective" history, but hampered by their attachment to portraying the undivided relationship of Diaspora Jews to the land of Israel. Through revealing historical "facts" from the newly declassified archives, the new scholars moved beyond the ambiguous impulses of the third generation, although not all were successful in completely escaping their tenuous links to Zionist ideologies. (The author uses the plural form here advisedly, for the ideologies were far from monolithic, containing numerous strains, from the Political to Cultural or Spiritual Zionism, Labour, Socialist, Revisionist, Practical, Liberal, Synthetic, Religious and Radical Messianic Zionisms, to anti-Zionist Autonomists and the Neturei Karta [Ottman,

2004; JAFIa; JAFIb, both undated.]) Nur Masalha (1992:91) found that although the new histories “thoroughly demolish a variety of assumptions which formed the core of the ‘old history’”, Morris did not always “live up to his claim of using this material in a critical manner and as a result this casts doubts on his conclusions”, ignoring “recent works by non-Zionist scholars” and thus giving the impression that “these discourses are basically the outcome of a debate among Zionists which unfortunately has little to do with the Palestinians themselves.” For Norman Finklestein, too, Morris did not go far enough and was frequently inconsistent (Finklestein, 1991, 1992).

Zionist historiographers fought back in the battle for Israel’s history. Ephraim Karsh (professor of Mediterranean studies at King's College, University of London) is one of Benny Morris’s most vociferous critics:

As a general rule, every war is fought twice: first on the battlefield, then in the historiographical arena. The Arabs failed to destroy the State of Israel in 1948; in the next fifty years, they and their Western partisans waged a sustained propaganda battle to cast the birth of Israel as the source of all evil. In the late 1980s this effort received a major boost with the advent of a group of Israeli academics calling themselves the New Historians who claim to have discovered archival evidence substantiating the anti-Israeli case. (Karsh 1999, online)

Claiming that the new “politicized” historians had “turned the *saga* of Israel's birth upside down, with aggressors turned into hapless victims and the reverse” (author’s emphasis) Karsh (1999) accuses Morris of systematic falsification of archival source material. Morris, he said, had engaged in “five types of distortion: he misrepresents documents, resorts to partial quotes, withholds evidence, makes false assertions, and rewrites original documents”. Karsh takes Morris to task again in a systematic investigation of Morris’s version of history, *Fabricating Israeli History: The ‘New Historians’* (Karsh, 1997). Presenting a detailed knockdown of the central claims of the revisionist historians, he adds that “newness” of the facts unearthed was also at issue (Karsh, 1997:195). Later, in 2005, Karsh gave an equally harsh review to the expanded latest edition of Morris’s *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Morris, 2004):

The Birth Revisited is a misnomer. Rather than offer a reassessment of Morris's previous writings on the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, *The Birth*

Revisited is but a longer replica of its dishonest and shoddy predecessor. To downplay his failure to consult the most important archives in the preparation of *The Birth*, Morris argued that "the new materials ... tend to confirm and reinforce the major lines of description and analysis, and the conclusions, in *The Birth*."... And so, *The Birth Revisited* continues the stubborn refusal of Morris to base his arguments and conclusions on archival evidence and the historical record. Far from confirming and reinforcing his arguments, archival documents demonstrate that "the Palestinian refugee problem" was the creation of Palestinian and other Arab leaders, not of the Zionists. (Karsh 2005, online).

Morris, as alluded to earlier, recanted in spectacular fashion in the Israeli media (Shavit 2004, online). That is to say, he stood by his story, but claimed that his position was never that of anti-Zionist or Post-Zionist.

Zionism was not a mistake. The desire to establish a Jewish state here was a legitimate one, a positive one. But given the character of Islam and given the character of the Arab nation, it was a mistake to think that it would be possible to establish a tranquil state here that lives in harmony with its surroundings. (Shavit 2004, online)

Yes, there was expulsion; yes, there was rape and ethnic cleansing; yes, Ben Gurion did advocate "transfer" of Palestinians (whom Morris describes as "a time bomb. Their slide into complete Palestinization has made them an emissary of the enemy that is among us. They are a potential fifth column."). Without all of these, the fledgling state would never have come into being:

Because I investigated the conflict in depth, I was forced to cope with the in-depth questions that those people coped with. I understood the problematic character of the situation they faced and maybe I adopted part of their universe of concepts. But I do not identify with Ben-Gurion. I think he made a serious historical mistake in 1948. Even though he understood the demographic issue and the need to establish a Jewish state without a large Arab minority, he got cold feet during the war. In the end, he faltered. ... You have to put things in proportion. These are small war crimes. All told, if we take all the massacres and all the executions of 1948, we come to about 800 who were killed. In comparison to the massacres that were perpetrated in Bosnia, that's peanuts. In comparison to the massacres the Russians perpetrated against the Germans at Stalingrad, that's chicken feed. ... There are cases in which the overall,

final good justifies harsh and cruel acts that are committed in the course of history.
(Shavit 2004, op.cit.)

Asked if the historical reality of the conflict is intolerable, Morris replies that it is more so for “a people that suffered for 2,000 years, that went through the Holocaust, arrives at its patrimony but is thrust into a renewed round of bloodshed, that is perhaps the road to annihilation”. He found this “far more shocking than what happened in 1948 to a small part of the Arab nation that was then in Palestine.” Talking about his book, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict 1881-2001* (Morris, 2001) Morris indulges in relativism, describing the Jews as “the greater victims in the course of history”. They are “the weaker side ... a small minority in a large sea of hostile Arabs who want to eliminate us.” One day, says Morris, “Everyone will understand we are the true victims. But by then it will be too late” (Shavit 2004, op. cit.).

Morris’s recantation provoked a shocked response from Tel Aviv University philosopher Professor Adi Ophir (2004, online), who wrote, “If there is a sick society here, the publication of this interview is at one and the same time a symptom of the illness and that which nourishes it.”

Despite Morris’s apparent *volte-face*, “new” history that has a powerful bearing on our interpretation of the Israel-Palestine conflict continues to be produced. For one thing, postzionists (and others) “have accepted the responsibility of speaking out against what they consider to be unjust power relations in society” notes Silberstein (1999:209). Theirs is a transformative, revolutionary role, in the struggle against “exclusion and domination”. Quoting Foucault¹⁰, Silberstein views these intellectuals as having a duty:

to speak on this subject, to force the institutionalized networks of information to listen, to produce names, to point the finger of accusations, to find targets ... [This is] the first step in the reversal of power and the initiation of new struggles against existing forms of power. (Foucault 1996:79, in Silberstein, 1999:209)

For another thing, says the Andersonian Ilan Pappé (Pappé, 2004), it is the *zeitgeist*; the timing is right for a story “told from a humanist, and not nationalist,

10. Michel Foucault, 1996. Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984, ed. Sylvère Lorringer. New York: Semiotexte.

ethnic or religious, perspective" (Pappe, 2004: xix). Students, Palestinians and Jews, wish to hear it. And in the true fashion of epic narration, Pappe will offer them "heroes" and "villains". The heroes are good, old-fashioned underdogs, "victims of these calamities: women, children, peasants, workers, ordinary city dwellers, peaceniks, human rights activists"; the villains are the "arrogant generals, the greedy politicians, the cynical statesmen and the misogynist men" (Pappe, 2004: xix).

Without a shred of irony, Pappe reminds us that first one needs to "rewrite, indeed salvage, a history that was erased and forgotten" (Pappe, 2004: xx). And this is the paradoxical question: if history has been "erased and forgotten", from where does the historian derive her primary source? Elites left behind their historical records, whether one accepts them or not; but local Palestinian "subaltern society", the "actors who were absent or totally marginalized" did not so conveniently provide documents for historical validation (Pappe, 2004:8). Clearly, there are two conflicting versions of the narrative; dualistic thinking would suggest that accepting one version makes a lie of the other (although Pappe's stated mission is rather to expand the understanding of the marginalized vector). In particular, the national historiographical approach presumes each side's tale is "synonymous with its history of nationalism" (Pappe, 2004:7), an elitist narrative that excludes the poor and specifically, women (since nationalism is taken to be a hetero-male project).

Pappe has something more organic, holistic and expansive in mind, "an alternative narrative that recognizes similarities, criticises overt falsifications" and challenges the sequential modernist paradigm that zeroes in on the "departure point for the history of modern Israel and Palestine" (Pappe, 2004: 12). He would rather tell of "ordinary' human past", writing out of "compassion for the colonized not the colonizer", siding "with the workers and not the bosses". He "feels for women in distress, and has little admiration for men in command." Nor can he feel "indifferent towards mistreated children" (Pappe, 2004:12). It is a redressive approach, one which he admits is "subjective, often but not always standing for the defeated over the victorious", a moving and a timely read, and one which is deeply pertinent for the better understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict: but the question remains: is this history?

"Historiographical text and historical context are closely bound," writes another of

the 'new historians', Uri Ram (Ram, 2003:35), recognizing the "close coupling" of the "politics of knowledge" and "the politics of identity". For Ram, there is no 'pure identity' (least of all that of the historian?) or 'objective memory'. Historians may "dispute past events" (Ram, 2003:36), but the nature of the dispute often says more about the present than about the past; in quasi-Hegelian dialectical tension, it reveals what is of more immanent sociological "significance". Or, as Nick Vaughan-Williams notes, "history has long been considered exogenous if not superfluous to IR: at best a quarry to be mined in support of theories of the present" (Vaughan-Williams, 2005:115). In the grand scheme of things, unless one can designate with surety an endpoint to the quantity of facts to be uncovered from primary sources about a historical event, there is no absolute history, whether the approach is more "scientific" or more humanist. The historical truth, or the 'problem of history'—"in other words the impossibility of getting historical interpretation one hundred percent right" (Vaughan-Williams, 2005)—remains a constant condition, residing somewhere in between the binaries of fact and narrative (while the latter, being composed of language that may change in meaning, is in itself unstable and subject to Derridean *differance*¹¹). All that we can say is that it takes many histories to get a better picture, and that we had better be aware which kind we are reading in order to make a more informed judgment. As we try to comprehend the past, historical consciousness is indispensable.

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11. David Roberts (1995: 194) in *Nothing But History: Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics* explains Derridean *differance* well: "Meaning is an endless web, each part of which depends on and refers to others, so that we never get a full, final grasp of what is being referred to. Meaning is always deferred; there is always further *differance*. When we seek the level of settled meaning or certain interpretation, we find no stopping place but only 'traces' or earlier traces, as sequences, linkages, referring us back, back, endlessly back."

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