

REVIEW ARTICLE

Critical Studies of Ethnic Nationalism in Israel

Uri Ram
Ben Gurion University

Ilan Pappé. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2006. xviii + 313 pages + 16 unnumbered pages with photos. Cloth. ISBN-13: 978-1-85168-467-0.

Oren Yiftachel. *Ethnocracy – Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. xi+350 pages. Cloth. ISBN-13: 978-0-8122-3927-0.

The current decade has been especially rich with books about Israel by Israeli scholars who are associated with what may be termed “critical studies of Israel.” These books seem to bring to fruition, and to the attention of English language readers (as these books are frequently published in English even before they are published in Hebrew, as is the case here) a whole wave of Israeli critical studies that has evolved since the 1990s. While the “new historians” have broken to the surface of public discussions about Israel, a lesser-known but no less thorough critical examination of Israel has been carried out by sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, geographers and others. The two books covered in this review article represent the work of two of the most conspicuous writers in this critical wave – historian Ilan Pappé of Haifa University and political geographer Oren Yiftachel of Ben Gurion University in Be'er-Sheva.

The books, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* by Pappé and *Ethnocracy* by Yiftachel, have a common denominator that appears in their titles: the analysis of the “ethnic” nature of Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, and its consequences. Pappé directs his attention mainly to the historical trajectory of what he terms “ethnic cleansing,” while Yiftachel directs his attention to the functional mechanisms of what he terms the “ethnocratic regime.” The concept of ethnicity plays a key role in both accounts, yet it may mislead English readers, as in this case ethnicity does not refer simply to communities of descent, tradition or culture (e.g. Polish Jews or Yemenite Jews), but rather to the form of ascriptive nationalism which is usually contrasted with “civic” or territorial nationalism; or if one wishes, the “German” versus the “French” models of nationalism (see Brubaker 1998).

In critical studies of Israel, one school of thought has for quite some time discerned a tension between these two types of nationalism. For instance, Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled (2002) point to a mounting tension between the ethnic and liberal discourses of citizenship (or incorporation

regimes), that results from the decline of a third such discourse, that of republicanism. I have proposed (Ram 2007) in this regard that new global conditions contribute to the bifurcation of Israeli political culture into a liberal “McWorld” versus an ethno-religious “Jihad.” *Ethnic Cleansing and Ethnocracy* epitomize a contrary critical school of thought, highlighting the consistency, continuance, and even escalation of the inherent ethno-national logic of Zionism in Israel, or even of Israel.

Pappé is a major protagonist in the historians’ debate in Israel (Ram 2007b). His current book is a benchmark in Israeli historiography. It is published some twenty years after another benchmark book on the very same issue by Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1987). Pappé aims to rectify the weaknesses he finds in Morris’s approach by outlining two paradigms regarding the expulsion/evacuation of the Palestinians in 1948-9: Morris’s “war paradigm” versus Pappé’s own “ethnic cleansing paradigm.” The author defines the difference between the two paradigms as follows: “When it created its nation-state, the Zionist movement did not wage a war that ‘tragically but inevitably’ led to the expulsion of ‘parts’ of their indigenous population, but the other way round: the main goal was the ethnic cleansing of all of Palestine which the movement coveted for its new state” (p. xvi).

The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, then, is about the responsibility for the expulsion of the Palestinians and the destruction of their villages and neighborhoods, and the book’s novelty is in putting the whole onus of it on Israel. Morris’s book was received at the time as sensational for making the claim that Israel is responsible for part of the problem. In Morris’s famous conclusion to his study, the uprooting of 650,000 to 700,000 Palestinians and the destruction of 431 of their villages was in part a result of local decisions of military officers in the circumstances of war – with no evidence found of an overall policy of expulsion or an explicit order to such an effect – and in part a result of decisions taken by the Palestinians themselves out of fear and/or with the hopes of a quick return as victors. Pappé rejects this equity in responsibility and also proposes different numbers. For him the expulsion was of 800,000 people and the destruction was of 531 villages (p. xiii) and this was not a by-product of the war but rather the inevitable result of the Zionist logic and of a master plan that was issued by Israel’s supreme political leadership and executed summarily by its military forces.

The main claim made in the book is that in 1948 Israel perpetrated against the Palestinians what is now termed “ethnic cleansing,” which is considered by international law as a crime against humanity. Pappé is adamant that what happened in Palestine in 1948 forms “a clear-cut case” of ethnic cleansing, which he defines as follows:

ethnic cleansing is an effort to render an ethnically mixed country homogeneous by expelling a particular group of people and turning them into refugees while demolishing the homes they were driven out from. There may well be a master plan, but most of the troops engaged in ethnic cleansing do not need direct orders: they know beforehand what is expected of them. Massacres accompany the operations, but where they occur they are not part of a genocidal plan: they are a key tactic to accelerate the flight of the population earmarked for expulsion (p. 3).

The book opens with a building labeled the “Red House” and it ends with another building labeled the “Green House,” both located in Tel Aviv. The Red House had been the site of the headquarters of

the Histadrut (Hebrew federation of Labor) and later the Hagana (the Israeli military underground), where a "Consultancy" of 11 people mastered Israel's war, and on March 10th 1948 decided upon "Plan D." In Pappé's view this plan (known in Hebrew as *Tochnit Dalet*) "called for the systematic and total expulsion [of the Palestinians] from their homeland" (p. 28). The plan provided the actual means whereby the Zionist leadership would obtain its largest strategic goal of "obtaining as much of Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians" (p. 42).

In Israeli mainstream historiography this plan is usually interpreted as a tactical command relating to the eventualities that might develop on the ground and the way the troops should face them. This is by and large also Morris's view. But Pappé considers this to be "the master plan for the expulsion of all the villages in rural Palestine" (p. 82), adding that obviously in the circumstances there would not have been any village in which no resistance took place, and that similar instructions were given with regard to Palestinian urban centers.

The bulk of the book dwells on the development of the Israeli policy of expulsion, its planning and finally its execution in the war of 1948-49. Pappé passes from region to region, from month to month, and documents the killing of Palestinians and the destruction of their villages, cities and neighborhoods one by one, not bypassing cases of cold-blooded massacres (thirty-one "confirmed" ones and six other probable ones in his count (p. 258), occasional cases of rape and other atrocities. The final part of the book covers in a more cursory way the period between 1949 and today. It reviews such issues as the abuses of military administration to which the Arabs remaining in Israel were subjected, the Kfar Qassim massacre of 1956, the desecration of holy sites, and the continuous confiscation of Arab lands under pretext of security. In addition, he coins the term "memoricide" to describe the physical cover-up of the remains of destroyed villages with forests and resort parks. Finally, the book emphasizes the continuation into the present of the same fundamental principles that led to the 1948 Nakba – the exclusivist ethno-nationalism that continues to propel the "peace process" and the demographic scare in Israel since the 1990s. He alludes in this regard to "Fortress Israel", which he likens to the medieval Crusader kingdoms and to apartheid South-Africa.

The book ends with the "Green House" – the faculty club building of Tel Aviv University, which is the reconstructed house of Shaykh Muwannis, the only remaining house from a village with this name that is buried under the university. Pappé rebuffs Israeli academia for disregarding and concealing the ethnic cleansing of 1948 and its continuing consequences.

The overall tone of the book is of historical realism accompanied by a moral indictment. Pappé's politics is simple – some might regard it as simplistic: if Israel would only admit its crimes and repent by letting the refugees return, everybody will be able to sit secure under their vine and fig trees. But what is the international theory or historical experience upon which such optimism may be founded? Pappé's own book, after all, is a testimony to the potential cruelty of ethnic-nationalism.

What Pappé is to the discipline of history, Yiftachel is to the discipline of geography of Israel, where he has been a leading figure in the rebellion against the "elders of the tribe" (Bar Gal 1997). Like the "old historians," the "old geographers" were active participants in the nation building process, and under their pen it was not always easy to distinguish between "motherland studies" and academic

In *Ethnocracy* Yiftachel develops his conceptualization of the regime type in Israel. This ethnocratic regime is also present in other states, such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Estonia, Latvia and Serbia. The author defines ethnocracy as a state regime that facilitates the expansion, ethnicization and control of a dominant ethnic nation over contested territory and polity (p. 11). Israel belongs to the "open" version of this regime type, which is characterized by adopting several democratic mechanisms at a formal level, while preserving non-democratic control at the fundamental level. Such regimes are usually created by the intersection of three historical "logics" – the logic of colonialism, the logic of ethnic nationalism and the logic of capitalism.

The substantial parts of Yiftachel's book are devoted to the study of the development and functioning of Israeli-Jewish ethnocracy in Israel/Palestine. The geo-political unit Yiftachel analyses is bounded by the Mediterranean shores in the west and the Jordan River in the east – meaning Israel inside the "Green Line" armistice borders of 1948-1967 plus the occupied territories since 1967: the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In 2002 there were close to 10 million people living in this territory, of whom 52% were "ethnic" Jews, 46% "ethnic" Arabs and 2% others (p. 51).

Yiftachel emphasizes that the crucial aspect of the contest between Jews and Arabs is spatial rather than temporal. This fits well with his materialist approach, under which territory is considered to be the most fundamental social asset, while symbolic dimensions are relegated to an ideological super-structure. Thus the historical dimension at the core of most accounts of Israel is presented as supplying the mythic narratives of entitlement over the land. That there is a "territorial focus" to the struggle (p.83) is not breaking news, but the strength of Yiftachel's account lies in its lucid exposition and explication of the material world as including the symbolic techniques by which the "Judaization" of the land has been effected.

Yiftachel provides a diachronic account of the Judaization of the land and a synchronic account of the Israeli "land system." Against this background he turns to the nature of the political regime in Israel, and poses a radical challenge to the notion that Israel is a democracy. Special attention is devoted to debating a competing model, designed by Haifa University sociologist Sammy Smooha and others. Unsatisfied with the prevailing formalistic and naïve analysis of Israel as a "liberal democracy," a model that has long prevailed both in Israel and in the United States, Smooha suggests viewing Israel as belonging to a distinct sub-set of the democratic regimes, that he calls "ethnic democracies" (Smooha 1997). Since the 1990s students of Israel have been engaged in a controversy about the pros and cons of these three competing models – the liberal model, the ethnic-democracy model and the ethnocracy model – which has been offered and nurtured by Yiftachel.

The difference between the liberal model and the other two is crucial. The former focuses upon the prevalence of equal individual citizenship in Israel and averts its view from the question of the national categories that constitute the population. This model is blamed by critics for covering up the fact of Jewish control over the state (or for considering it a regular case of majority rule). The two other models foreground the "ethnos," yet they differ about the substance of democracy in Israel. Smooha believes that democracy should not be thought about in "either-or" terms, but rather in terms of a gray scale. He thus appreciates that even though priority is secured to a single