

## Book Review: *The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge* by Ilan Pappé

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*This book review examines *The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge* by Ilan Pappé. As a “new historian” Pappé challenges traditional versions of Israeli history. He illustrates Israel’s creation as a colonial conquest rather than the prevailing national liberation movement. In particular, he examines the role that Zionism has played in shaping dominant political ideology in Israel. Pappé critically evaluates the evolution of Zionism narratives from classical, post-Zionism to neo-Zionism. He successfully illustrates the importance Zionism has played throughout the genesis of Israel by highlighting examples such as the 1947 UN partition resolution, the Holocaust, its role in furthering cultural tensions between Israelis and Arabs inhabitants, and presence in the media.*

*The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge* by Ilan Pappé, critically analyzes the multiple narratives and ideas present throughout the existence of Israel. Ilan Pappé is a “new historian”, a group of Israeli historians that challenge traditional versions of Israel’s creation and Arab-Israeli relations, specifically during the 1948 Palestine War. In this book, Pappé examines the evolution of hegemonic Zionism by first introducing the state-sponsored “objective” Zionist interpretation of Israeli history and policy. In part two, he explains the emergence of the post-Zionism movement and the subsequent development of neo-Zionism. As a historian, Pappé places significant importance on the historiographers role in this evolution, he also examines how these movements gained prominence through cultural movements and their effect on academia and the politics of power.

In the first part of the book, Pappé is very critical of the Zionist interpretation of history that is presented by the state as objective and factual. Zionist historiographers attempted to reinterpret history in order to validate the existence of the state of Israel, to provide unity, sense of loyalty and superiority amongst Israelis. Therefore, a historian’s “aim was to provide scholarly proof for a narrative already told and known, there was little room for revelation of any kind- only confirmations were wanted” (Pappé 21). For instance, a 1970 encyclopedia on the history of Israel incorrectly presented the pre-1882 land as “The Empty Land”, the ideal setting for the first *Aliyah* (Pappé 18). One argument espouses the Zionist commitment to embrace diaspora Jews and modernize them into a collective Jewish identity as a

successful example of modernization. However, one must consider that the Zionist conception of modernization is to “de-Arabize” Arab Jews or *Mizrachi* Jews to become more like the European or *Ashkenazi* Jews. This discourse, according to Pappe, also advocates Arabs, specifically Palestinians, as primitive, barbarians and “a cancer in the heart of the nation” as found in the diaries of Jewish immigrants after the second *Aliyah* (Pappe 33). Zionist discourse fails to explain logic or reasoning behind Palestinian aggression or ‘terrorism’ thus dehumanizing the Arab enemy as irrational and incomprehensible to the Jewish community. This clash of cultures is reminiscent of Edward Said’s version of Orientalism, which is a common theme amongst the Zionist perspective. Further illustrated when the former Prime Minister of Israel, Gold Meir, victim blames Arabs: “we will never forgive the Arab for what they forced us to do to them” (Pappe 34). Her supremacist attitude emphasizes the clash of civilization theory and also introduces elements of Joseph Rudyard Kipling’s “the white man’s burden”. With a broad brush, Pappe paints Zionism as narrow-minded, cruel and a generalization of Arabs and threats against the collective identity of the Jewish state. However, Pappe’s writings are also susceptible to the same generalizations when he pools all Zionists under the same heading, and portrays Arabs as mostly well intentioned.

In the *Idea of Israel*, Pappe visits the war of 1948 in two chapters, first under a Zionist and then post-Zionist lens. Zionist terminology refers to this event as the War of Independence, while Palestinians name it *al-Nakba*, the Catastrophe. Often times, the Palestinian role in the 1948 war was completely ignored; instead, Zionists propagated this war as an anti-colonialist and liberating struggle against Great Britain. Moreover, cinema is also important in its interpretation of the Zionist perspective of the war. The heroic deeds of the Israeli soldier were emphasized, while the Arab identity is often either under represented or stereotyped as primitive, one-dimensional villain in war films. Zionist hegemony also holds against new Jewish immigrants, who were depicted as the lazy, cowardly, overweight “anti-hero” and “anti-Sabra” with a heavy accent. These misrepresentations are important since it is indicative of popular sentiment amongst Israeli Jews.

Pappe challenges this Zionist discourse on the war by referring to Simha Flapan’s *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (Pappe 110). The first myth Flapan critiques is the Israeli acceptance of the 1947 UN partition resolution that would recognize the creation of Palestine. Flapan argues the Israeli acceptance was a “tactical” move, where David Ben-Gurion mainly viewed it as international recognition of the Israeli state. The second myth was that the Arab collective identity was poised to destroy the Jewish State in 1948. Flapan asserts this is an unreasonable postulate since the Arab world was, and to an extent still is, divided on the dispute of Palestine. Moreover, the Zionist narrative explains that Palestinians voluntarily left their homes, which Flapan remarks as illogical. In fact, Pappe goes into great detail regarding this issue in his work *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Finally, Flapan criticizes the Zionist narrative that depicts Israel as a David that defeated an Arab Goliath (Pappe 112). Israeli forces always had the greater advantage, as revealed by the works of new historians.

Benny Morris coined the term “the new history of Israel”, lumping together himself, Pappe, Flapan and Avi Shalaim as historians who “challenge the accepted version of the 1948 war” (Pappe 112). Along with the emergence of new historians, the 1990s saw the rise of the post-Zionist movement: “a hybrid of anti-Zionist and postmodernist perceptions of reality” (“Post Zionist Critique” 30). Pappe specifically points out 1994 as the emergence of post-Zionism, attributing events such as the Oslo

process, the First *Intifada* and the rise of a more multicultural society for its success (133). Edward Said describes this movement as “welcome movement of self-critique on what was wrong and dangerous about Zionism” (Pappe 131). Pappe introduces many “trailblazers” responsible for initiating discourses other than Zionism. Scholars such as Baruch Kimmerling were pivotal in engaging in the new debate and reintroducing Zionism as an “immigrant settlers movement” (Pappe 101). Moreover, the settler colonial paradigm was successful thanks to the state’s use of anti-Semitism.

Perhaps one of Pappe’s most persuasive arguments is the post-Zionist and frank discussion of the use of the Holocaust memory. He reasons that the state utilized the atrocities of the Holocaust to further demonstrate the need for an Israeli state, and as justification for the treatment of Palestinians. Pappe references Yehuda Elkana’s *The Need to Forget*, an introspective analysis as a victim of the Holocaust. He claims Israelis are motivated by an existential “angst” and often play the role of a “continuous victim” (Elkana 2). Elkana emphasizes the need to stop obsessing about the Holocaust so society may move forward, and not continually threatened by the past (Pappe 157). The post-Zionist movement finally allowed for this critique of state manipulation of the Holocaust.

Post-Zionism also calls for incorporating the voice of minority groups in Israel such as Arabs, women, and the LGBT community; many of whom are underrepresented in Zionist works, novels, films, national ceremonies, emblems and museums (Pappe 146). Pappe claims “the only group in Israel that is better represented today than in the 1990s is women” (148). However, it could be said that the role of the LGBT community has also made significant advancements. When Pappe discusses the attempts of Israel to dispel its war-mongering image and rebrand itself as a progressive nation in the epilogue, he highlights the marketing tool to brand Tel Aviv as “the gay capital of the city” (228). Often times, Tel Aviv is attributed as the most LGBT friendly city in the Middle East, and a 2011 *Haaretz* article reveals it was voted the most gay friendly travel place, beating out major metropolitan cities like New York. Thus, post-Zionist discourse has had a major influence in the construction of a more modernized Israel today.

Despite the success of post-Zionism in academia, it remained largely unpopular amongst the Jewish community. Thus, after the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Second *Intifada*, post-Zionist theories were reverted as unacceptable and even treasonous in Israel. Pappe, as a strong advocate of the post-Zionist movement, is disappointed with this “U- turn” (255). From post-Zionism, evolves the neo-Zionist perspective, and the need to define classical Zionism. The two discourses, while similar in their goals regarding the need for Palestinian oppression and the creation of a Jewish state, disagree on the role of religion. Neo-Zionism also shares similarities with post-Zionism when it comes to factual histories; whereas, classical Zionism was often criticized for being factually incorrect, as seen in the second paragraph of this essay. These fallacies paved the way for new historians and post-Zionism to emerge – for no one could dispute facts, especially once the Israeli Defense Forces archives were opened in the 1980s. Perhaps neo-Zionists become popular since they embraced the facts that classical Zionism distorted. However, Pappe argues they sacrifice their morality in return:

What the new historians saw as human and civil rights abuses or even as atrocities and war crimes are treated in the new research as normal and sometimes even commendable actions by the Israeli army. (277)

Neo-Zionism has also gained a much larger influence in politics, as compared to post-Zionism. Pappe labels neo-Zionist policies geared towards excluding the Arabs from the public spheres as “legalizing apartheid” (271). For instance, a 2011 law legalized the existing practice that allowed Jewish majority

communities to reject Palestinian requests to live amongst them (273). Perhaps, what is most baffling, is that this law was allowed only a few years ago. Moreover, neo-Zionism was also much more successful in inserting itself into the education system than post-Zionism, which Pappe regards as discouraging. The Likud government removed all textbooks with any hint of post-Zionist philosophies. Overall, neo-Zionism was much more effective in inserting itself into national political parties and their policies.

Upon the introduction of the neo-Zionist movement in the book, readers can see, Pappe's disappointment and frustration. He remarks, "post-Zionism challenge could have, but has not, taken Israel" (270). It is likely that the simplicity and clarity of neo-Zionism on Palestine appealed to the citizens of Israel. Whereas the post-Zionist movement focused more on questioning existing discourse, and failed to provide a clear alternative for the Israeli citizens, thus explaining its short-lived reign. However, others would argue post-Zionism, while not as popular in Israel, has gained major footing in academia abroad.

One side missing or perhaps is underrepresented in Pappe's analysis of the major ideas in Israel, is presented by Flapan in his work, *Zionism and Palestinians*:

"The history of Zionism demonstrates the extent to which the urge to create a new society, embodying the universal values of democracy and social justice, was inherent in the Zionist movement and responsible for its progress in adverse conditions. Israel's problem today lies in the disintegration of these values, due largely to the intoxication with military success and the belief that military superiority is a substitute for peace." (13)

Pappe could have recognized the usefulness of Zionism on the development of the Jewish state, and perhaps include an argument about the degeneration of the Zionism today versus its initial goal to create a Jewish state. While Pappe's criticism of certain strands of Zionism is clearly articulated throughout the books, he does not emphasize the underlying dissonance within Zionists schools. The intentions of early Zionism are key in understanding the movement and in preventing broad demonization of Zionism.

*The Idea of Israel* depicts the progression of classical, post and neo-Zionism in the genesis of Israel. Pappe critically analyzes these movements by incorporating the works of scholars such as Edward Said, Simha Flapan, Yehuda Elkana and other "trailblazers". He explains the clash in ideas between these movements and how they are essential in interpreting history, creating policy and understanding the heterogeneous community living in Israel today.

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