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Ilan Pappé, *The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge*, Verso, 2014, 346 pp., \$26.95 US (hbk), ISBN: 9781844678563.

In December 2014, when news of a possible deal between Israel and the Palestinians was circulating, Israeli Economy Minister Naftali Bennett said, amid heckling at a conference in the Institute for National Security Studies in Herzliya, “I won’t give territory in the Land of Israel to Arabs. We have to stop apologizing to the world. There was never a Palestinian state here... There was a State of Israel, 2170 years ago; we celebrate it on Hanukka. It existed 3000 years ago, too.” As Lahav Harkov reports, “According to Bennett, all the Palestinians did in recent years was prove that they are not worthy of their own state, because ‘murder, terrorism and blood do not build a state... rockets and terrorist tunnels built under our kibbutzim after we evacuated Gaza do not build a state.’”<sup>1</sup>

Bennett, a key member in Benjamin Netanyahu’s cabinet, epitomizes the latest turn of what Ilan Pappé’s most recent book dubs “the idea of Israel,” the Jewish settler colonial state contentiously situated in the midst of the Muslim Middle East. Bennett’s statement serves as an example of the length to which the state of Israel goes to defend and consolidate Zionist ideology and prevent any possibility of Palestinian self-determination.

There are two main theoretical camps in the scholarly debate on the birth of nations. One believes in the ethnic origins of nations that have primordial roots going to the dawn of time. The other, represented by theorists such as Benedict Anderson, argues that nations are a modern invention. A pathological ideology, Anderson insists in opposition to the primordialists, *invents* nations where they do not exist.<sup>2</sup>

Zionism is a poignant example of a nationalist ideology, born, according to its proponents such as Bennett, in the dawn of biblical times, and invented, its critics argue, so that “the (Jewish) people without land” could colonize “the land (of Israel) without people,” a land in effect ethnically cleansed of its indigenous Palestinian people for the benefit of the Jewish settler-colonizers.

Israel and Palestine are the subjects of countless learned and journalistic books and articles and seem to never go off the boil, due to what is regarded as the unending,

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<sup>1</sup> Lahav Harkov, “Bennett rails against Palestinian statehood amid heckling,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 18, 2014, <<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Bennett-rails-against-Palestinian-statehood-amid-heckling-385073>>.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

irresolvable conflict. Israel has variously been theorized as settler colony, racial state, ethnocracy, and state of exception—my theoretical preference. Though Pappé has criticized my theorization of Israel as Agamben’s “state of exception,”<sup>3</sup> where the sovereign excludes people constructed as “bare life,” whose life and death depend on the sovereign’s mercy,<sup>4</sup> I continue to theorize Israel and Palestine as exceptions, despite my reservations regarding Agamben’s Eurocentrism and lack of attention to colonialism and decoloniality.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, *The Idea of Israel*, while not engaging in the above theoretical debates, posits “the idea of Israel” as an extreme example of the nation as an idea that must be marketed and commodified by, inter alia, scholarly consolidation, and is a tour de force.

Ilan Pappé is a renowned Israeli historian who has written many books, using the more conventional historiographical methodology of archives and other historical data, to tell the story of what he calls the 1948 “ethnic cleansing of Palestine.”<sup>6</sup> *The Idea of Israel*, however, takes a different direction, presenting the history of Israel as an *idea* constructed by academics, politicians, public intellectuals, and artists. Conceptualizing Israel as a constructed idea stands in opposition, firstly, to scholars who believe that “Israel” as both state and idea has deep biblical roots and is therefore based on the Jews’ God-given right to occupy the land promised to Abraham, and secondly, to scholars who see Israel as a successful implementation of European modernization in a disputed land in the Middle East.

Despite Israel’s might—its army is the second most technological in the world—scholars, journalists, artists and the state itself feel obliged to engage in an ongoing campaign to “prove” it as “the only democracy in the Middle East,” as both Jewish and democratic—surely a contradiction in terms—and to justify its excesses in dealing with its minorities (Palestinian citizens and Mizrahi, or Arab Jews) and with occupied Palestinian subjects. For many years the state’s campaign—supported by academics, the media, and the cultural community—was successfully upheld by the erroneous myths of the (Jewish) few being attacked by the (Arab) many, by the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, and by nurturing a sense of existential threat. By contrast, *The Idea of Israel* documents the ongoing struggle for legitimization by providing an original approach to understanding Zionism and Jewish Israel as a campaign. The tireless Zionist campaign is aimed not merely at gaining as much Palestinian territory with as few Palestinian people as possible—as has been done in Israel’s wars from 1948 onwards and in countless military attacks—but also at constructing in Israel a Europe away from Europe. Validated by Israeli modernization theorists who juxtapose progressive, modern Jewish society with so-called primitive Palestinian society, the Orientalist, Eurocentric Zionist ideology has sustained European Ashkenazy Israel in dominating not merely the Palestinians but also, as Pappé shows, “Arab Jews” and more recently Jews from Ethiopia, proving, if proof was needed, David Theo Goldberg’s theorization of Israel as a racial state par excellence.<sup>7</sup>

Even though *The Idea of Israel* is not straightforward history, Pappé remains ever the historian, employing Israeli academic, media, and artistic sources and discourses to divide the journey travelled by the idea of Israel into three main eras. The first was the Zionist era that lasted until after the 1967 war, when academia, the media, and the arts upheld the Zionist

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Ronit Lentin, ed., *Thinking Palestine* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> See Marcelo Svirsky and Simone Bignall, eds., *Agamben and Colonialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> David Theo Goldberg, “Targets of opportunity (On racial Palestinianization)” in *The Threat of Race* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 106-150.

ideology. The second, the post-Zionist era, began in the 1980s when academics, journalists, and artists departed from the Zionist comfort zone, having explored the archives and listened to the victims of Zionism with particular reference to the 1948 Nakba. Although several books exploring post-Zionism have been published before his,<sup>8</sup> *The Idea of Israel* provides the most trenchant post-mortem of post-Zionism, of which he was a key proponent together with a group of “new historians” and sociologists.

If the Zionist era was characterized by a positivistic history of the victors, written by the very victors and their court historians, the post-Zionist era employed the postmodern methodological tools of deconstruction and positionality to critique Zionism and pose new questions about accepted truisms such as nationalism, state policies, and hegemonic cultural positions. For a while the post-Zionist decade that enabled the historiographical debates about what really happened in 1948 seemed irreversible, peaking in the 1990s with the hopes generated by the 1993 Oslo Accords. However, the failure of the Camp David talks (when Israelis believed that the Palestinians rejected what they saw as a most “generous” offer by the then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak) and the outbreak of the Second Intifada, both in 2000, put an end to the post-Zionist euphoria. If the post-Zionist era was characterized by fragmentation and probing questions and contentions as to the nature of the Jewish state, the third era, which Pappé calls the neo-Zionist era, is characterized by the return of a broad consensus, represented by right wing political parties and rising Jewish religiosity (143-144).

Terms such as post-, anti-, or neo-Zionism may seem limited in making sense of the idea of Israel. In particular, the term “post-Zionism” has been widely debated: is it mostly a chronological appellation, describing what came “after” Zionism? Is it a deconstructive approach to the certainties of Zionism? Pappé posits a broad post-Zionist church, and like Shlomo Sand, whose books explore the invention of “the Jewish people” and “the land of Israel,”<sup>9</sup> he knows that post-Zionist interrogation and deconstruction must and do continue. However, as evidenced by present day political developments, current mainstream Israeli academia, feeling the need to navigate between its self-styled independence and its wish to remain part of the emerging political consensus, is allowing itself, like during the Zionist era, to be recruited by the state—this time to a campaign called “Brand Israel.”

Pappé is not merely one of the foremost historians of the 1948 Nakba and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general but also a prolific activist immersed in the history of the present and, consequently, he has been forced out of Haifa University due to his work on the Nakba and his support for a postgraduate student who researched one of the many 1948 massacres.<sup>10</sup> Apart from his deep knowledge of the Israeli scene, he is also knowledgeable about the Palestinian side, and unlike some of his Israeli historian colleagues, speaks and reads Arabic and relies on Palestinian sources as well as Israeli ones. Thus his discussion of the neo-Zionist era resonates with many media and social media analyses of the ongoing evils of Zionism. And I say this with some pain: like Pappé I was born in a Zionist family and it took the 1967 war for me to begin to doubt the certainties we were brought up on, and like him I feel the need to expose the injustices of “the idea of Israel.” I am particularly sympathetic to his discussion of the manipulation of the Holocaust by the Israeli state and

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<sup>8</sup> For example Ephraim Nimni, ed., *The Challenges of Post-Zionism: Alternatives to Israeli Fundamental Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (London: Verso, 2009); and *The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland* (London: Verso, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> See Ilan Pappé, *Out of the Frame: The Struggle for Academic Freedom in Israel* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

the contribution by post-Zionist scholars such as Tom Segev, who condemned the previous generation of historians for ignoring such manipulations.<sup>11</sup>

In clear opposition to the fragmentation and doubts of the post-Zionist era, neo-Zionism's newly found confidence and unity do not negate the *facts* of the Nakba that Pappé and his colleagues exposed when the Israeli archives were opened in the 1980s, but rather reinterpret them, as the Bennett quote above illustrates, in reasserting Israel's exclusive right to the disputed land. Pappé shows for instance how Benny Morris, the best known of the Israeli "new historians" of the post-Zionist era, whose books provided the first systematic evidence, based on IDF archives, of widespread expulsions during the 1948 Nakba, became a poster boy for neo-Zionism, providing post facto justifications for the 1948-49 expulsions. In a well publicized interview Morris gave to *Haaretz* in 2004,<sup>12</sup> he criticized Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion for not going far enough, describing the ethnic cleansing of Palestine as an unfinished act of self-defense, and suggesting that the excesses were the inevitable result of the 1948 war dubbed by the Israelis as their "independence war" and by the Palestinians as their Nakba, or "catastrophe" (281-282).

Neo-Zionism has not merely opened new spaces for new "new historians," it also engages in monitoring academics who persist in criticizing the "idea of Israel" and the oppression of the Palestinians. Israel's current right wing government epitomizes the neo-Zionist turn, widely supported by Israeli Jews, schooled in fear and loathing, even as Israel continues to wage colonial wars against the Palestinians, be it in the territory occupied in 1967, or in the Gaza Strip, allegedly "returned" to the Palestinians in 2005 yet besieged and sporadically crushed by what neo-Zionism dubs "the most moral army in the world" despite evidence to the contrary. Pappé traces neo-Zionist research that blames the Palestinians for their own victimization, and that concentrates instead on Israeli society, fostering the myths so beloved by scholars of the Zionist era of 1948 as a "war of liberation," and recounting the facts of the 1948 war, warts and all, without a hint of moral discomfort. Narratives of "equal (Palestinian and Jewish) victimhood" prevail not only in neo-Zionist histories of 1948, which for Pappé, and for me, are the cornerstone in fathoming the "idea of Israel," but also in Israeli Jewish reactions to Palestinian resistance through, inter alia, Hamas rockets fired during the most recent Gaza assault which left more than 2,100 Palestinian victims.<sup>13</sup>

*The Idea of Israel* is unique in another sense. In historicizing the trajectory of constructing Zionist ideology Pappé uses a comprehensive trawl through history books, but also media articles and works of art—films, novels, stage plays—to show how thoroughly the state of Israel and its academic, media, and artistic communities approach the sacred task of constructing this rather fragile idea.

Zionism, as Pappé shows, is a never-ending task. And 1948 remains at the center of the task, which neo-Zionist historians and politicians keep reworking. In *Society Must Be Defended* Michel Foucault<sup>14</sup> reminds us that racism is exercised by society to defend itself against its own others. Tracing the idea of Israel, Pappé illustrates how the Israeli state exercises racism in defense of Israeli Jewish society, and traces the transition of Israel from a hopeful post-Zionist period of peace during the 1990s to the pessimism of never-ending war, imposed by

<sup>11</sup> Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Picador, 2000); see also Ronit Lentin, *Israel and the Daughters of the Shoah: Re-Occupying the Territories of Silence* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Benny Morris and Ari Shavit, "Survival of the Fittest," *Haaretz*, January 8, 2004, <<http://www.haaretz.com/survival-of-the-fittest-1.61345>>.

<sup>13</sup> BBC, "Gaza crisis: Toll of Operations in Gaza," September 1, 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28439404>>.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

the Israeli sovereign on Palestinian citizens, occupied subjects, and exiled refugees as reflected in historiographical and ideological debates within Israeli Jewish society.

Despite Pappé's critique, *The Idea of Israel* does help me to keep thinking Israel-Palestine as state of exception, where Jewish self-justification permits the victimization and objectification of Palestinian citizens, subjects, and refugees, and where, as countless reports on inequality and discrimination that permeate the state's legislative, judicial, and political realms illustrate, the Jewish sovereign enacts the law from which it exempts itself against its others. Ultimately, however, *The Idea of Israel* exposes Zionism's fragility. If the state of Israel were truly confident in the truth of its ideology, it would not feel the need to uphold it so vigorously via the education system, the appropriation of the Holocaust, academic justification, historiographical accounts, and artistic endeavours.

Interestingly, in more recent years the battle for the idea of Israel has moved abroad, with policymakers using the entire public relations arsenal at their disposal, from culture, to soft porn, to pinkwashing Israel as a gay haven, to re-construct Zionism, this time as Brand Israel. Aided by global post-2001 anti-terrorism moral panics and a campaign targeting both radical Islam and radical left, the Brand Israel team, as documented in Pappé's epilogue, continues its efforts to rebrand the re-branded even in the face of UN reports, such as the Goldstone Report, that accuse Israel of war crimes. Naturally Israeli academics are in the forefront here again, advising the government on marketing strategies, which are ultimately failing to persuade the world to absolve Israel of its continued oppression of the Palestinians.

Even trenchant critical scholars such as Pappé need hope. The book stops in 2013 with faint hopes that although "Israel is seen more and more as a colonialist state," its use for the US and its effective role in the global economy would disappear because, as he writes, "there is no longer any moral dimension for the global support" Israel is enjoying (313). However, the book ends before the summer 2014 "Protective Edge" assault on Gaza, which, I firmly believe, has turned off many of Israel's erstwhile supporters and recruited many more supporters to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel. I suppose that my own conclusion is somewhat less hopeful than Pappé's. That the BDS campaign includes an academic boycott of Israeli higher education institutions, exposed for the central role they play in researching and manufacturing not only the idea of Israel but also lethal weapons used against sitting duck populations in Gaza and Lebanon, is encouraging. However, on a more global level, Israel can continue to boast huge arms sales, even to countries that criticize it as an Apartheid state, because these weapons (such as drones, unmanned bulldozers used to demolish Palestinian houses, rifles that shoot around corners, and "iron domes") have been successfully used against Palestinian populations. Ultimately, *The Idea of Israel* exposes the making of Zionism as an unending campaign, and paves the way for further studies of the making of nationalist ideologies.

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