



***JPS* “Hidden Gems” and “Greatest Hits”: Colonial History; Invoked, Denied, Embodied**

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ABSTRACT

Tasked with selecting two documents specifically related to Israel and the Israeli settler-colonial enterprise from the fifty-year *JPS* archive, author Gadi Algazi settles on “History’s Verdict: The Cherokee Case” (1995) by Norman Finkelstein and “The Palestinians Seen through the Israeli Cultural Paradigm” (1987) coauthored by Aziz Haidar and Elia Zreik. While the former points to the historical affinities between the Zionist colonization of Palestine and the settlement of North America (including early Zionists’ unabashed identification with the “white” colonizers of the continent), the latter elucidates Israel’s “culturalist account” of Palestinians, which views the main problem with Palestinians in Israel as their “culture,” and not the colonization, repression, and exclusion they experienced historically and continue to endure.

KEYWORDS

culturalism; dynamics of colonization; historical experience; images and uses of history; social processes; Oslo

A RICH DIVERSITY OF VIEWPOINTS, genres, and materials is one of the qualities that make the *Journal of Palestine Studies* unique. Besides providing analysis of major events, it has featured personal testimonies, debates within the Palestinian national movement, sociology, history, memoirs, extensive reviews, and—one of my personal favorites—a carefully selected collection of documents. Having to choose but two pieces about Israel, I picked out, somewhat arbitrarily, two texts—one historical, the other sociological. Both deal with images of history and the political uses to which they can be put.

Settler Mythology

The summer 1995 issue of *JPS* carried a short, sharp piece by Norman Finkelstein, titled “History’s Verdict: The Cherokee Case.”¹ It can be read with benefit as an early contribution—in the North American context, but not in the Palestinian one—to the discussion of settler colonialism;² but rather than taking a theoretical approach, it relies on a quick-paced narrative and a host of telling quotes. Its focus is not the history of the Cherokees, but of U.S. policies dispossessing and displacing Native Americans as a distant mirror to Zionist ones: not a full-scale historical comparison, but an invitation to notice uncanny parallels and reflect on the long-term dynamics of colonization. It is a sparse, skeletal historical narrative, mostly focusing on colonizers’ actions, interests, and intentions, where the Cherokee feature mainly as reacting to their dispossession and displacement with petitions and protests. This would not suffice to comprehend colonization as a social process, but the force of Finkelstein’s essay lies elsewhere. By invoking the U.S. past, it bespeaks its own historical moment: that of the Oslo years, and hence Finkelstein’s spotlight on endless “interim agreements,” on settlers’ repeated promises

to make peace and cease expansion, on the contradictions of “self-rule,” and on the way external pressures combined with false hopes intensify divisions among the colonized.

Historical comparisons assume shape and meaning from the ways they are used. The affinities between the Zionist colonization of Palestine and the settlement of North America by Europeans might shake official certainties in present-day Israel, but earlier generations of Zionists had no qualms pointing them out. Having to cope with the growing delegitimation of colonial rule after World War I, Zionists invoked a broad range of historical examples to justify and think through their own project while simultaneously making Herculean efforts to distinguish what they saw as their brand of beneficial, productive colonization from exploitative colonialism. The range of historical experiences, real and imagined, they drew upon still awaits analysis.³ One need not look long to find North American colonization cited as a lesson for Zionist politics, featuring most prominently in a key text—Ze'ev Jabotinsky's famed article, “The Iron Wall.” Zionists, Jabotinsky memorably argued in 1923, were deluding themselves when pursuing peace with the Arabs of Palestine or seeking to elicit their consent with promises of future development, for there were no known historical precedents of colonization undertaken “with the consent of the native population.” Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro and their followers—and “our own ancestors at the time of Joshua ben Nun,” Jabotinsky added—“behaved like brigands,” but even “good settlers” would not escape confrontation with the native people. “The Pilgrim Fathers, the first true pioneers in North America,” he wrote, were people “of the highest morality” who would not hurt a fly. They “honestly believed that there was room enough in the prairies both for whites and reds.” But, as he pointed out, “the native population fought with the same ferocity against the good colonists as against the bad,” even though no one could have imagined at the time that one day the newcomers would drive away the natives. To shield settlers in Palestine until they gained in numbers and power, one needed an “Iron Wall” in the form of British imperial protection, Jabotinsky concluded.⁴

Such obvious identification with early modern colonists—superior, benign, but triumphant—could become embarrassing. The academic editors of an influential collection of documents on the history of Israel omitted from their abridged version of Jabotinsky's essay all references to “Indians,” conquistadors, and “the Pilgrim Fathers.”⁵ From the 1920s to the 1960s, however, Zionists made such comparisons time and again, identifying themselves unhesitatingly with “white” settlers and presenting Palestinians, especially Bedouins, as “Indians”: from the depiction of a fortified settlement during the Great Revolt as a pioneer compound “parked on the prairie in hostile Indian territory”;⁶ through the self-description of a prominent kibbutz member—known for intimidating his Bedouin neighbors, but also for dabbling in biblical archaeology and collecting Bedouin folklore—as “a white man coming to the Indians”;⁷ to the suggestion, as late as 1973, that to better handle the Bedouins of the Negev, an excursion needed to be organized to observe the “settlement areas of eight Indian tribes in the U.S.”⁸ The comparison was implicit in invocations of the affinities between Israel's present and the U.S. past as imagined by senior Zionist officials. In January 1950, in a strategic discussion about Israel's relationship with the United States, Abba Eban—Israel's ambassador at the United Nations, who shortly after also became ambassador to the United States—suggested that to win U.S. sympathies Israel should underline “the remarkable historical similarity between what happens in Israel now and U.S. history, to point out the War of Independence, the pioneer spirit, [our] self-sacrifice and the conquest of the wilderness.”⁹ A further distinctive advantage of uncritical identification with the white settlers of North America was the suggestion that present-day Zionist colonization embodied inexorable progress. Also, rather than engaging

with the process of colonization, such identification allowed for the compression of history into a single moment of inevitability: victory over the primitivized enemy, who is denied historical agency. For the very same reasons Palestinians quite consistently rejected the comparison that treated them “like Indians.”¹⁰ What works well to undermine the colonizer’s ideology does not necessarily serve to empower the colonized’s resistance. This applies, I suggest, to both critical portrayals of Palestinians as “the Indians” of the Zionist project and overly deterministic conceptions of settler colonialism as a smooth, unidirectional process, the inevitable instantiation of an invariant structure.¹¹

And yet, there is at least one early case in Israel’s history in which this building block of Zionist imaginary was taken up by a prominent Palestinian and turned against the regime—not to extol or lament the colonial past but to undermine present, ongoing colonization. Ironically enough, imagined “Indians” were introduced into Israeli parliamentary debates by a militant Zionist speaker, Elièzer Livne of Mapai, in the context of mounting tensions between the United States and Israel. In May 1954, Livne vehemently rejected public statements by the then assistant secretary for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African affairs, who in two widely diffused speeches had suggested that Israel should “drop the attitude of the conqueror,” begin to see itself as “as a Middle Eastern State,” and stop promoting mass Jewish immigration and thereby raising Arab fears of imminent expansion.¹² Livne reminded the rising imperial power of its settler-colonial past, which he considered analogous to Israel’s present: if in 1782, for instance, Americans had stopped absorbing immigrants, Livne claimed, “the Red Indians, the Mexicans and the British would have destroyed them.”¹³ The very next day, however, Tawfik Toubi, speaking for the Communist Party, picked up the comparison. Denouncing a wave of repression and dispossession of Palestinian citizens, he warned the government against following Livne’s advice and cautioned against adopting a policy reminiscent of that pursued against the native inhabitants of North America, the “Indians.”¹⁴ Toubi took this up more forcefully in December of the same year, when another attempt by the authorities to remove Bedouins from the northwestern Negev and take their lands was exposed in parliament. Responding to the allegations, Minister of Agriculture Peretz Naftali claimed they were absurd: “It is a bit strange,” Naftali said, “to listen to the complaint about the removal of Bedouins from their lands. The term ‘Bedouin’ actually denotes tribes that do not establish permanent settlements on the land.”¹⁵ Bedouins, Toubi countered, had in fact lived in permanent settlements before 1948. It was the Israeli government that sought to uproot them and even force them out of the country. Constant displacement, harsh living conditions, deficient health and education services, insufficient food supplies, and official abuse all converged to undermine their existence. “The government policy toward the Bedouins is precisely identical to that of American colonialists toward the Red Indians in America—total annihilation. . . . This is the truth that you don’t want to disclose,” Toubi told the Knesset.¹⁶

All “Culture” and No History

In their essay published in 1987, Aziz Haidar and Elia Zureik reviewed Israeli social research on Palestinians living inside Israel.¹⁷ Here, a very different image of history emerges. Although the publications they reviewed can now be considered outdated, Haidar and Zureik’s critique remains relevant. This is not to diminish the radical changes that have taken place since. In fact, the last section of their article generously introduces readers to the work of critical Israeli sociologists, especially the group that formed around the short-lived *Notebooks for Research and Critique*.¹⁸ The target of Haidar and Zureik’s critique is a foundational Israeli paradigm—a

culturalist account of Palestinians' position within Israel that manages to ignore colonization and repression in order to uncover that the main problem with Palestinians is their "culture." Rural Palestinians' turn to wage labor in the Jewish sector, for instance, had therefore nothing to do with land confiscation because no such process was mentioned, and the low occurrence of irrigation in Palestinian agriculture bore no relation to the state's expropriation of water sources and systematic discrimination.

Haidar and Zureik make their case in sober, reserved prose. At times, their essay reads like a straight-faced satire, especially when they cite wild empirical claims or neutral-sounding arguments by Israeli scholars who had served as senior state functionaries responsible for so-called Arab affairs or worked closely with the military and security apparatus.¹⁹ Haidar and Zureik waste no time on such authors' overt political attachments and focus instead on the broader appeal of the culturalist paradigm.²⁰ In this version, Palestinian society is confined to the present but somehow always stuck in the past. When change finally occurs—from "clan" to "class," from "village" to "city," from "tradition" to "modernity"—the time is always now. Past colonization is neither celebrated nor denied: it vanishes from view altogether along with contested history. The culturalist approach is hence less overtly political, and still remains appealing today to less ideologically minded bureaucrats, neoliberal reformers, and upper-class observers.

To pick a random example: in 1995, representatives of several Israeli ministries were required to assess the situation of Bedouins living in Israel. The director general of the Ministry of Health noted that the Bedouins were (yet again) in the midst of "a transition from nomadism to permanent settlement" and hence were undergoing "a swift and dramatic cultural change." One of the repercussions of "the high level of unemployment in the permanent settlement"—a euphemism for the townships in which Israel sought to concentrate Bedouins—was a rise in drug addiction. He also noted that the infant mortality rate among Bedouins was still three times higher than among Jewish citizens.²¹

Twenty-five years later, the infant mortality rate in Israel has declined significantly, but among Palestinians it is still twice as high as among Jewish citizens (and for Palestinians of the Negev/Naqab, more than three times higher).²² As prominent Palestinian professor of public health Nihaya Daoud has shown, so-called cultural differences are still regularly invoked as an unexamined residual factor accounting for inequalities while the effects of political discrimination are ignored. To disprove this, Daoud conducted a sophisticated survey—the very first to include land ownership as one of the indicators of Palestinians' socioeconomic status. It turned out that the chances of landless Palestinians in Israel of suffering from a chronic illness or a functional impairment were twice as great in comparison to those possessing some land.²³

I know of few better examples of history embodied.

About the Author

Gadi Algazi is professor of history at Tel Aviv University. He currently works on the social history of scholarly families in the early modern period, and on microhistories of dispossession and resettlement in Israel of the 1950s.

Endnotes

1. Norman Finkelstein, "History's Verdict: The Cherokee Case," *JPS* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1995): pp. 32–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537756>.

2. The current resurgence of the concept in academic discussions often overlooks its use by political activists and engaged scholars of the 1960s. See, for instance, Fayeze Sayegh, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*, Palestine monographs 1 (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965); Maxime Rodinson, “Israël, fait colonial?” *Les Temps modernes* no. 253 (1967): pp. 17–88. For the American context, see John Mack Faragher, “Commentary: Settler Colonial Studies and the North American Frontier,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014): pp. 181–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.846389>.
3. On U.S. constructions of Palestinians, see Alex Lubin, “‘We Are All Israelis’: The Politics of Colonial Comparisons,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (Fall 2008): pp. 671–90, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2008-012>; and Robert L. MacDonald, “A Land without a People for a People without a Land’: Civilizing Mission and American Support for Zionism, 1880s–1929” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2012).
4. In this section I quote the widely used English translation: Ze’ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, “The Iron Wall: We and the Arabs,” *Jewish Herald*, 26 November 1937, p. 3 (this Johannesburg-based publication was the official organ of the Zionist Revisionist Organization of South Africa). This translation has been checked against the Russian original, published in *Rassvet* on 4 November 1923, with the friendly help of Ella Itkin. The translation published in the 1937 version omitted Jabotinsky’s statement that no person could have foreseen the eventual removal of the inhabitants of North America, which appeared in an earlier, more literal draft at the Jabotinsky Institute Archive, Tel Aviv, F-1923/204/EN. For an updated Hebrew translation, see Jabotinsky, *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (Tel Aviv: Jabotinsky Institute, 2015), pp. 192–99.
5. The editors also substituted “settlement” for “colonization,”—the term used in the South African translation into English, which they reproduced—and managed to retain “indigenous population” while omitting all references to “colonists.” See Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present*, rev. ed. (1984; repr., Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007), pp. 41–43.
6. Leonard Mosley, *Gideon Goes to War: The Story of Major-General Orde C. Wingate* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), p. 51; the book was serialized by *Yedi’ot Aharonot* starting on 1 April 1955.
7. Zeev Zivan, *Jewish-Bedouin Frontier Relationships in the Negev, 1940s–1950s* [in Hebrew] (Beersheba: The Negev Center for Regional Development, 2017), pp. 106, 141. For a relatively benign portrait of the “European Zionist cowboys” of the Negev, see Ilana Rosen, *Pioneers in Practice: An Analysis of Documentary Literature by Veteran Residents of the Israeli South* [in Hebrew] (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Center for the Study of Israel and Zionism, 2016), pp. 83–86.
8. Aryeh Efrat to Shmuel Toledano, prime minister’s advisor on Arab affairs, 31 July 1973, Israel State Archives (ISA), Jerusalem, GL-17094/6. From the early 1960s on, Efrat warned that unless urgent action was taken with respect to Bedouin claims to landed property, Israel would face something similar to that which happened in the United States, where “millions of dollars” were being paid “in compensation for lands taken a hundred or two hundred years ago.”
9. Commitment to “scientific and economic progress” crowned Eban’s list. See protocol of a consultation at the home of the minister of foreign affairs, 31 January 1950, ISA, Jerusalem, HZ-4374/1.
10. This resonates with current debates about the uses and disadvantages of anchoring Palestinian political demands on claims for Indigenous status, especially when framed within prevailing legal definitions of Indigenousness. See the thoughtful comments of Lana Tatour in “The Culturalisation of Indigeneity: The Palestinian-Bedouin of the Naqab and Indigenous Rights,” *International Journal of Human Rights* 23, no. 10 (2019): pp. 1569–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2019.1609454>; and Darryl Li, “Translator’s Preface: A Note on Settler Colonialism,” *JPS* 45, no. 1 (Autumn 2015): pp. 69–76, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2015.45.1.69>. I shall not presume to survey the longer history of Palestinian references to Native American history, culminating in Mahmoud Darwish’s justly famous poem, “Khutbat ‘al-hindi al-ahmar’—ma qabl al-akhirah—amam al-rajul al-abyad” (translated into English as “The ‘Red Indians’

- Penultimate Speech to the White Man” by Fady Joudah and as “Speech of the Red Indian” by Sargon Boulos).
11. Determinism and insufficient consideration of resistance and internal contradictions are not, I believe, inherent properties of the paradigm but the combined effect of the academic weakness for rigid theory and the current crisis of the Palestinian national movement.
 12. Henry A. Byroade, “The Middle East in New Perspective,” in *The Middle East* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office 1954), p. 11. Byroade’s two public speeches are also reprinted in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Vol. 9: The Near and Middle East*, ed. John P. Glennon (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), pp. 1580–83; see also, Peter L. Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945–1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 158–62.
 13. Knesset Records, 11 May 1954, https://fs.knesset.gov.il/2/Plenum/2_ptm_250809.pdf.
 14. Knesset Records, 12 May 1954, https://fs.knesset.gov.il/2/Plenum/2_ptm_250331.pdf.
 15. Knesset Records, 8 December 1954, https://fs.knesset.gov.il/2/Plenum/2_ptm_250377.pdf. The matter was raised in the Knesset by MK Rostam Bastuni (Mapam) on the basis of information provided by members of Kibbutz Shoval. The attempt, and a later one undertaken in 1956, failed.
 16. Toubi referred to half-acknowledged expulsions of Bedouins to areas controlled by Egypt and Jordan, as well as to secret military operations for displacing Bedouins within Israel. A reconstruction of the November 1951 operation, flatly denied by David Ben-Gurion in the Knesset, is included in a historical expert report I submitted to the Beersheba district court in the ‘Araqib case: Abu Mdighem and Abu Freih v. the State of Israel, Civil Appeal 1161/2007.
 17. Aziz Haidar and Elia Zureik, “The Palestinians Seen through the Israeli Cultural Paradigm,” *JPS* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1987): pp. 68–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536790> (with some blunders in references to page numbers in the footnotes). The article formed part of a critical exchange over several years. For more, see Khalil Nakhleh, “Anthropological and Sociological Studies of the Arabs in Israel: A Critique,” *JPS* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1977): pp. 41–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2535777>; and Gideon Kressel, “Palestinian Sociological Studies” [in Hebrew], *Ha-Mizrah ha-Hadash* 29 (1980): pp. 89–99.
 18. Shlomo Swirski, perhaps the most original sociologist of the group, never attained a permanent position in Israeli universities and later cofounded Adva, Israel’s only independent research center on social issues (see note 22 below). See Shlomo Swirski, *Israel, the Oriental Majority* (New York: Zed Books, 1989); *Seeds of Inequality* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Brerot, 1995).
 19. Aharon Layish, Ori Stendel, and Joseph Ginat all served in the Prime Minister’s Office for Arab Affairs.
 20. The references to culture have nothing to do with the empirical study of Palestinian culture(s). Stendel, who devoted a whole section of his book *The Arabs in Israel* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1996) to poetry, certainly had first-hand knowledge of the subject. In 1963, one of his assignments at the Prime Minister’s Office as the advisor for Arab affairs was to translate Palestinian poetry and comment on its overt or veiled political meaning. Some of those translations and interpretations found their way into his book.
 21. *Report by the Regional Health Office, Southern Region*, 11 January 1995, quoted in *Directors General Commission on Matters Concerning Israeli Arabs, Report on Government Ministries’ Activities for Promoting the Bedouin Population in the Negev and the North* [in Hebrew], November 1995, ISA, Jerusalem, G-11469/10, p. 19.
 22. See Shlomo Swirsky, Etyy Conon-Attias, and Aviv Lieberman, *Social Report 2020* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Adva Center, 2020), p. 29.
 23. Nihaya Daoud, “Culture or Socio-economic Status: Factors Contributing to Health Inequalities between Arabs and Jews in Israel,” in *Arab Society in Israel, vol. 2: Population, Society, Economy* [in Hebrew], ed. Adel Manna’ and Ramsees Gharrah (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2008), pp. 385–408. See the subsequent study on the long-term impact of internal displacement across generations: Nihaya Daoud et al., “Internal Displacement and Health among the Palestinian Minority in Israel,” *Social Science and Medicine* 74, no. 8 (2012): pp. 1163–71, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.12.041>.