

INTRODUCTION

Reclaiming the Past, Disrupting the Present

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The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “emergency situation” in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this.

Walter Benjamin,
*On the Concept of History*¹

The recent history and current reality of Jerusalem are characterized by an ever-increasing number of facts on the ground, from the demolition of Palestinian homes to make space for Israeli settlements, to the move of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The crushing weight of these facts creates a situation in which Palestinians “can’t breathe” anymore, which is why the last words of George Floyd, murdered by racist U.S. police officers in Minneapolis in 2020, resonated so powerfully among them.

But knees on necks and facts on the ground are not the only constitutive elements of history, and we would indeed be well advised not to focus solely on cement blocks, checkpoints, and walls. As the historian Reinhart Koselleck pointed out, history may be made by the victors in the short run, but ultimately, historical gains in knowledge stem from the vanquished.² And more than that: history contains many threads of unfulfilled alternative futures that need to be uncovered and unmuted.

The analysis of interrupted futures³ proposed in this special issue is not counterfactual history that consists of imagining other outcomes. While that is also an interesting historiographic exercise, the approach used here is not speculative, but rather interpretive. It is based on rigorous archival work, very

much in the spirit of philosopher Jacques Derrida's conception of the archive as a store for the future:

The word and the notion of the archive seem at first, admittedly, to point toward the past, to refer to the signs of consigned memory, to recall faithfulness to tradition. . . . As much as and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should call into question the coming of the future.⁴

Focusing on unimplemented projects entails the application of a type of historical analysis and historiographical method which has thus far not been largely employed in the study of Palestine: the exploration of past futures in the sense in which Koselleck proposed it, and the writing of a history of possibilities which "restitutes the dignity to each time-space position" and emphasizes what the philosopher Hans Blumenberg called the radical potentialities of humankind.⁵

One of the key categories developed by Koselleck is the horizon of expectation. This metahistorical category designates that which is not yet but is expected. It is the horizon for political projects, projecting the ultimate goal, but also for daily practice in times of change. This horizon of hopes and plans needs to be contemplated in the context of its time, as part of a reassessment of Palestine's past. This renewal of perspectives is opposed to the notion of a dead-end in history. It entails seizing elements of history – plans, projects, programs – and saving them from oblivion, so that new generations might base their understanding of their history on a more complete panorama of the past than that created by the victors. This impetus is a reaction to a perceived danger, as the philosopher Walter Benjamin asserted so poignantly in his unfinished theses on the philosophy of history:

To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize "how it really was."
It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.
. . . The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious.⁶

In this issue, the authors take hold of threads of unfinished schemes conceived just before or during important moments of rupture: the end of the Ottoman Empire (Campos), the termination of the British Mandate (Wallach and Cirujano; Ford; Gökatalay; and Pappé), the abrupt close of the Jordanian administration of Jerusalem (Lemire and Rioli; and Dukhgan and Naïli). The plans and projects presented in several of these articles were the result of governmental initiatives at various levels. Some plans, such as the British Mandate scheme to build a parliamentary building in the city, point to the vivid contradictions of the colonial political structure. By contrast, it is important to remember that in the case of the Ottoman and the Jordanian administrations of the city, Palestinians were key political actors on the local level, something that was less the case during the Mandate period.

Michelle Campos emphasizes in her article comparing the Ottoman tramway

scheme to the existing Israeli light rail that the plan for a tramway in the early twentieth century was intimately linked to the particular form of Ottoman urban citizenship existing in Jerusalem during that period, including a “modernist discourse that underscored Jerusalem as a city of all its residents.” By contrast, today’s Israeli light rail “signals the limits of Jerusalem as a shared city in both practice and imagination.”

In a similar vein, Yair Wallach and Julio Moreno Cirujano analyze several British plans to build a parliamentary building in Jerusalem in the context of evolving approaches to representative government in Palestine, including the 1939 White Paper, which charted a way towards a binational state. None of these plans had materialized by the time the Mandate ended, and so: “The absence of central government headquarters, and even more so, the absence of a legislative assembly building, made it much easier to pretend that a unitary Palestine never existed, that partition was always the natural and inevitable outcome of the Mandate, and that representative politics had always been impossible.” This is precisely where writing the history of past futures shows its importance, because it attests to the fact that the eventual outcome was neither natural nor inevitable, and that alternatives have always existed.

Harris Ford in his article explores the origins and dimensions of another alternative that began to circulate in the final days of the Mandate – the plan for an internationalization of Jerusalem under the umbrella of the UN: “This plan would have seen Jerusalem become a distinct enclave outside of any Palestinian, Arab, or Zionist governmental sovereignty. Also known as *corpus separatum* (separate entity), the internationalization of Jerusalem was championed by various religious figures around the world, especially Christians, and ultimately came to represent the larger imperial position of the United Nations and the members comprising its General Assembly.”

Beyond these governmental and international schemes, the contributions of Gökatalay, Sharkawi, and Pappé point to the role various segments of Palestinian Arab society played during the Mandate years. Revisiting the two Arab Fairs of the 1930s in Jerusalem, Gökatalay asserts:

A transnational analysis of trade fairs in the post-Ottoman countries . . . suggests that Arab businesspeople in Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine could have benefited from the continuation of the Arab Fair even though it was not a financial success in the first two years. . . . Like the Arab Fair, the international scope of the Cairo, Izmir, Plovdiv, Tel Aviv, and Thessaloniki fairs was initially very limited – only after several unsuccessful attempts did they become commercially successful.

He also emphasizes the particular importance this fair could have had for Jerusalem, which could have been placed on the larger region’s economic map through a thriving national economy: “The discontinuation of the Arab Fair thus speaks to the economic future foreclosed by the British Mandate and, eventually, the Nakba.”

Maissoun Sharkawi, in her review of the recent exhibition about the Arab Fairs titled “al-Ma‘rad” (curated by Nadi Abusaada and Luzan Munayer at the Khalil

Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah), provides additional context concerning the obstacles faced by nascent Palestinian Arab efforts at small-scale industrialization and expansion of trade during the Mandate period. She points out, “The Arab and Palestinian industries including small-scale emerging industries such as textiles, souvenir industries, and agricultural products could have flourished to a much greater extent under more favorable political and economic conditions. The decline of most small-scale industries in Palestine was due to the disproportionately heavy taxes that were imposed by the British regime.”

A new attempt to create a place for Jerusalem as an economic hub – in the reduced framework of the West Bank – can be seen in the “Jerusalem Jordan Regional Planning Proposals” submitted by town planner Henry Kendall to the Jordanian government in the mid-1960s. This unrealized plan was based on a comprehensive study and urban plan produced by Brown Engineers for the Municipality of East Jerusalem in 1963, which Jawad Dukhgan and I analyze in our contribution.

In relation to education, Ilan Pappé analyzes the different attempts to create an Arab or Islamic university in British Mandate Jerusalem. While none of them succeeded, there were institutions such as al-Kulliyya al-‘Arabiyya (the Arab College) that played an important role in creating a cultural capital and a national consciousness. Pappé writes that these institutions “would contribute to the resurrection of Palestinian education, scholarship, and cultural life following the horror of the Nakba in 1948. This continuity meant that Palestinian culture was not obliterated by the Nakba and that those who survived it could build on a legacy forged during the Mandate period of continued cultural resistance along with political struggle.” Pappé thereby introduces the individual and social dimension of the history of possibilities.

Vincent Lemire and Maria Chiara Rioli compare the potential of two underexplored sets of archives: the municipal archives of Jerusalem, particularly for the Jordanian period, and the UNRWA archives. While the first highlight little-known efforts at rehabilitating and restructuring the eastern part of the city, the latter “contain the genealogical, demographic, and social history of Palestinian refugees as well as traces of their political and individual ambitions, efforts, and potentialities.”

Indeed, the history of possibilities is not an abstract approach pulled out of the historian’s toolbox; it is a lived reality. The story of all displaced Palestinians who have carved out an existence for themselves where they took refuge might reveal the future they could have had in Palestine, as an individual or as part of a collective, and the future they could have contributed to. The vast majority of people left Palestine only with the few belongings they could carry, but they were resourceful. Some had significant cultural capital – diplomas, craftsmanship, creativity, intellectual faculties – and all gained extreme force of will in the moment they lost everything. This force then helped to shape their destiny and that of their children far away from home.

Digging in archives – private and public – in order to find traces of plans and projects that were prevented by the course of history also means realizing the extent of the loss that the tragic moments of Palestinian history have produced, because it brings into focus the potential that existed before those moments, be it a cultural

project, a business plan, or a political program of action. The realization of the extent of the loss is thus simultaneously the realization of the extent of the potential that existed, and that still exists. And with this realization, the balance between victors and vanquished begins to shift.

Endnotes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected writings], vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974 [1940]), 2, VIII, trans. Dennis Redmond, online at (marxists.org) bit.ly/3NEKLBb (accessed 27 October 2022).
- 2 Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft, Zur Semantik historischer Zeit* [Past future, on the semantics of historical time] (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2015), 10.
- 3 Taking a cue here from Lena Jayyusi's edited volume titled *Jerusalem Interrupted, Modernity and Colonial Transformation, 1917–Present* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2015).
- 4 Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 25.
- 5 Hannes Bajohr, "Hans Blumenberg's History of Possibilities," *Journal of the History of Ideas* blog, 8 July 2019, online at (jhiblog.org) bit.ly/3FO9FFy (accessed 27 October 2022). One of Blumenberg's most important works is *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987). For recent publications breaking a path in this direction for Palestine studies, see Issam Nassar, Stephen Sheehi, Salim Tamari, eds., *Camera Palæstina: Photography and Displaced Histories of Palestine* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2022). See also Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019); and Gil Z. Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
- 6 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," VI.