



Jonathan B. Isacoff. *Writing the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Pragmatism and Historical Inquiry.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 209 pp. \$77.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-1272-4; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-1273-1.



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History, Political Science, and the Arab-Israel Conflict

In this engaging and very well written book, Jonathan Isacoff, offers a sustained critique of historical inquiry's place in political science. In order to do so, Isacoff uses diverging interpretations of two cases: the 1956 war between Egypt and the Israeli, French and British coalition; and the Vietnam war. In regard to both instances, he presents scholarly works published in English (and by people belonging to "Western" centers of academic research). Isacoff does so in order both to examine how they use historical data and to show how his examination bears relevance for a variety of methodological, epistemological, and political issues. Throughout, he carefully demonstrates the differing ways in which political science—especially in its guise as the study of international relations (IR)—uses historical cases in order to reach general conclusions. Isacoff writes clearly and in a way that is accessible to readers ranging from advanced undergraduates to that of professional historians and social scientists. In terms of teaching, the volume would suit political science courses in methodology or those in comparative historical inquiry.

Let me trace out the main thrust of the volume's nine

chapters (including an introduction and conclusion) and then focus on some of its strengths, shortcomings and wider implications. The introduction sets the frame for the volume as a whole by raising the question of how political scientists ground their claims to knowledge about the past. The wider context, as Isacoff notes, is the ongoing debate within political science about meta-theoretical problems brought about by the development of social constructivist approaches in international relations. As he observes, this kind of question bears much wider import for it lies at the base of many contemporary discussions among scholars in the humanities and the social sciences. In chapter 1, he traces out the positivist and post-positivist approaches to historical inquiry in international relations and suggests that a perspective rooted in John Dewey's philosophical pragmatism can provide a response to their divergent assumptions (a point he only returns to in the penultimate chapter). The next three chapters focus on the war in 1956 as a way to explore the analytical issues set out previously. Isacoff justifies this choice by stressing the importance of the Arab-Israeli conflicts in scholarly research and the fact that there are two clearly defined approaches to an histori-

cal understanding of this particular war. Chapter 2 thus traces out the older and newer (and more critical) historiography of the 1950s related to this conflict. Chapter 3 takes a step back from Israeli historical interpretation to ask how the 1956 war has been used within the qualitative political science scholarship on international conflicts. Chapter 4 compliments this perspective by sketching out the way the war has been utilized by a number of central quantitative IR projects. The next two chapters use the case of the Vietnam war in order to demonstrate whether Isacoff's critiques of current theoretical formulations hold for instances beyond the Israeli-Arab conflict of 1956. This move is significant because it underscores the importance of the volume for a variety of scholars and not only those interested in the Middle East.

An all too short chapter 7 attempts to offer an alternative approach based in pragmatic philosophy to comparative historical scholarship. Isacoff's conclusion's are well worth bearing in mind. He contends that political science (and again, I would add, all scholars concerned with comparative historical inquiry) should be concerned with how historical knowledge is grounded—that is, based on a selection of empirical “data.” Indeed, the view he suggests is a dynamic one in which historical understanding is not only a mix of theoretical assumptions and findings but one that is constantly open to reinterpretation. It is in this light that Isacoff makes a very strong case within political science to take historical revisionism seriously, not only because it has prompted a rethinking of the theoretical underpinnings of historical analysis, but also because it underscores very different interpretations of past conflict. In this sense, the volume is written within the intense debate taking place in contemporary political science about its scientific basis and about its aspiration to be a quantitatively based scientific discipline.

I found that the volume's title is a misnomer for two reasons: first because it is not about the Arab-Israeli conflict but about one specific round of that war that took place in the 1950s; and second, because it also includes two good chapters on the Vietnam war. The existing title may be a publisher's decision but it does not reflect the book's real strength, which is the discussion of historical inquiry. In addition, there are a number of scholars Isacoff identifies as historians who are actually sociologists—Uri Ben-Eliezer and Yagil Levy, for instance. I mention this not only to emphasize the importance of historical accuracy (and I would assume that Isacoff would agree with this point), but because the disciplinary rootedness of these two sociologists, in differing ways, is important since they are both more particular about the

theoretical underpinnings of their work than the overwhelming majority of older historians or their contemporaries, such as Benny Morris. Thus, Isacoff's discussion would (perhaps) have been enriched if he had brought into focus the disciplinarity of scholars since there are differences in terms of the theoretical preciseness in their works. While I whole-heartedly agree with his conclusions that historians are not atheoretical, I do think that there are different degrees of theoretical explicitness between disciplines.

Let me now deal with three aspects of a “writing” conflict that Isacoff alludes to in his volume and that prompted me to think about the wider implications of his analysis. The first point is related to the construction of historical, interpretivist, or quantitativist texts as texts—that is, as documents characterized by the construction of certain narrative plots or the characterization of central agents. Within some contemporary scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences there has been an awakening to the importance of textual aspects of scholarly writing. The issues that have been dealt with include the metaphors used by scholars, the language utilized to legitimate texts, or the story line of scientific treatises. As we have come to understand, these aspects are not ornamental to the texts nor are they only important in terms of the “how” of getting a (scientific or interpretivist) story across to readers. Rather, the very construction of a text carries messages. Thus, using a certain language rooted in the “harder” sciences in itself carries messages legitimizing the content of a particular argument. In this sense, *Writing the Arab-Israeli Conflict* could benefit from an analysis of the textual nature of the books and articles written about the war, and the ways in which they subtly try to convince readers of their argument. For example, it would be interesting to see if post-positivist scholars continue to use various scientific means to persuade readers in the same way that older more quantitatively oriented scholars do.

The second fascinating point raised by Isacoff's volume concerns the wider context of contemporary American scholarship. This book is written within, and for, the American scholarly community. Looking at the references section, it appears that the overwhelming majority of sources have been published in the United States, even if the authors (for instance, Israelis) are situated outside America. In this sense, the Israeli interpretations that Isacoff brings into his volume are rooted in the wider patterns of the global system of academic knowledge and reflect Israel's position as a periphery or semi-periphery, and the United States as a center. Contemporary Israeli

scholars have to publish in English (and most usually in American venues) in order to get tenure and to be promoted. This implies that the connection of Israelis with external intellectual developments has encouraged the introduction of critical approaches. Thus “radical” approaches developed in the West from the late 1960s have been readily and regularly incorporated into Israeli social sciences and applied to the analysis of the Israeli case. This incorporation, to reiterate, has been the result of the fact that Israeli academics read (and publish in) the journals of the scholarly centers—America and Europe—participate in international academic forums, and teach their students theories originating outside Israel.

Thirdly, Isacoff refers to ongoing debates with the

American metropolitan center. While reading Isacoff’s volume, I found myself time and again trying to understand the political dimensions at the base of many disputes within the discipline of political science—and perhaps other disciplines such as sociology—in present day America. Why is it that critical scholarship continues to raise such emotional reactions from mainstream scholars? An answer to this question, and Isacoff’s very good volume only hints at it, touches upon the highly politicized communities within which knowledge is produced in the United States and its academic peripheries.

I recommend this volume for its engaging style and clarity of investigation, and for the variety of important issues it raises for contemporary scholarship.

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