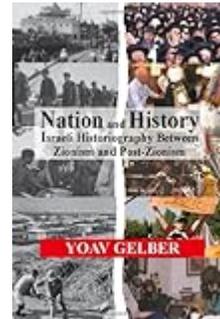


Yoav Gelber. *Nation and History: Israeli Historiography between Zionism and Post-Zionism.* London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011. 352 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-85303-933-4.



Reviewed by Ilan Fuchs (University of Calgary)

Published on H-Judaic (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Old v. New? On Historiography and Israeli History

Students of Israeli history are well aware of the conflicting narratives about the origins of the Israeli state. Yoav Gelber's book, *Nation and History*, reviews Israeli historiography and offers a critical examination of the post-Zionist, new historical school of thought. While so-called new historians introduced a radically new national genesis narrative, one of their most stinging claims was that the Israeli historical establishment had distorted historical research in an effort to serve the needs of Zionism. In *Nation and History* Gelber—a veteran Israeli historian—attacks, offering an especially harsh appraisal of the new historians.

Gelber argues that the work done by the new historians can be simply written off as poor scholarship. It mainly employs the postmodernist theories of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida coupled with sociological theories, at the expense of historical erudition and serious archival work. His goal is not to challenge the particular interpretation of sources but the methodology employed by these historians. Gelber almost entirely rejects postmodern criticism, but here and there he acknowl-

edges that this or that criticism has some merit. He maintains, however, that postmodernism as criticism for the sake of criticism and using pseudo-intellectual language flattens the historical debate by using ambiguous terms; he attributes a good deal of this to the influence of Hayden White, who claimed that all narratives are equal and there is no way to determine which is true. Foucault is described as either a genius or a charlatan and postmodernism is rejected through and through.

The book's generalizations about postmodernist criticism are a mirror image of the opponent's point of view, with both sides in the methodological debate attacking with an all-or-nothing attitude. By drawing such blanket conclusions, Gelber misses some interesting and worthy points. Some philosophical work on hermeneutics such as that of Hans-Georg Gadamer offers important practical solutions to hermeneutical questions. One such example in this book is micro history; this approach has much to offer in light of postmodern critique, but it receives only a page describing its use by both sides in the debate.

The Israeli new historians are addressed starting in the fifth chapter. A major difficulty with the discussion, which Gelber mentions several times, is that they are not all of the same skin. The term "Postzionism" itself is unclear and while some of the members of this group are identified as having been influenced by literary and sociological/culture theories others are identified by their political affiliation. Gelber asserts that Postzionism is joined at the hip to postmodernist and postcolonial theories that simply result in bad scholarship legitimized by a political agenda.

But is this dismissal credible? The connection between poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and the work of the new historians is a matter for a scholar of the history of ideas. It overshadows the stronger point that the book tries to make having to do with methodology. The tools of the historian are not easily defined, but Gelber suggests that there is a "tool box" (pp. 20-28) and that it enables the historian to evaluate historical evidence. The book deals with many questions that have to do with historical tools and their value. For example, there is an in-depth discussion of the use of oral history, its problems, and its value to historians (pp. 63-96), a discussion that adds greatly to training of future historians. The book also gives many good examples of historical work that is inadequate because of a political agenda or analysis of historical material from a prism of a theory that superimposes itself on the sources. In Gelber's words: "Israeli historiography was also pulled into the spin. It lost the capacity to discern between professionalism and charlatanism, integrity and opportunism, discourse and reality; between conformism to political correctness and adherence to principles. Historians fluctuate between the requisites of scientific study of the past and their ambition to influence the present in public debates and media controversies; between sounding the depths and brushing the surface. Often, the surrender to media dictates and lowers the level of historical debate and adapts it to the framework, language, time, and scope of talk shows and op-ed columns" (p. 247).

Gelber gives many examples of scholarship subjugated to theoretical definition that causes historians to artificially interpret primary sources in order to fit a specific mold. One such example is Eric Hobsbawm and his work on tradition and the cultivation of national myths. Gelber, quoting frequently from Hobsbawm, aptly shows how the latter's theory of nationalism led to historical descriptions unsupported by evidence and sometimes contrary to primary sources. He accuses the new historians of flattening history in the name of politics and re-

placing historical debates with ideological explanations. His delineation of many historians as "Zionist historians" or "establishment historians" is far from true. He mentions of course the work done by Michael Keren asserting that in the central part of the Zionist-Labor era the intellectual establishment was opposed to David Ben-Gurion during the Lavon crisis. There is more to the intellectual than his politics. Gelber does not hide his Zionism but says there is more to his work than his political affiliation. I would add that it is self-defeating to reduce a person to one political rubric, denying any possibility for dialogue. It serves as an easy way to reject other opinions; there is no need to listen since everything falls under the title of cultural and political bias. It's true that it is a natural inclination and all historians are in danger of falling into this trap, as even Gelber does sometimes: "Another aspect of the cultural differences worth exploring relates to values and concepts such as truth, honor, freedom, war, peace, rights, obligations, ownership, or tenure. There are distinctions between a culture based on the Ten Commandments including "you shall not bear false witness" and a culture that glorifies Muhammad's Hudaiba agreement—and a cynical violation of it—with the Jews of that town; between Christian confession and Jewish self-recrimination and the Arab attitude that "everybody else is to blame for my lot"; between a culture that sanctifies life and a culture that adores shahids" (p. 61).

The book is not written in a manner accessible to a reader without a significant background in the field. The first three chapters deal with basic questions of historiography and are very dense. These chapters address topics such as historical methodology, literary theories like poststructuralism, micro history, Foucault, and many more topics that require prior knowledge. Many of those topics are mentioned in a short, almost telegraphic, manner and will say little to a reader encountering them for the first time. These chapters also cite few examples from literature written by the new historians.

Most of the remaining chapters can be read independently from one another and can be used by juxtaposing them with texts by the new historians. For example, Ilan Pappé, who is mentioned numerous times by Gelber, is very clear in his books about his methodological framework. In a textbook published recently he opens with the following statement: "My dear friend and mentor, the late Albert Hourani, was the first to introduce me to the concept of writing "a history", rather "the history" of a place, a person or a society. It seems by now all of us who are engaged in writing text books are aware,

as many readers are, of the need to stress that each description and analysis is only one possible scholarly way among many to look back at such a long stretch of time as the last hundred years.â[1] On the same page he makes a clear statement that some narratives are false. Pappé, by using quotation marks, challenges the description of Israel as a "democratic" state; elsewhere describes it as "western" and the Jews as "European settlers who visualized Palestine as their national home land" (p. 32); mentions Zionism as a colonial movement numerous times in the book; and offers no hint of an alternate approach to the issue. In describing the 1990s he makes no mention of Yasser Arafat or his role in the end of the peace process. As far as Pappé is concerned the only reason for the failure was the oppressive policies of inflexible Is-

raeli governments since 2000. There are many more examples in this book that show how the political agenda of a historian can turn his historical work into an ideological pamphlet. With Gelber's book we have a valuable tool that can be used both for those interested in historiography and also for courses about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even though Gelber's book will not be accessible to most general readers, it is a valuable contribution which highlights the danger of research that is more concerned with serving political agendas than academic inquiry.

Note

[1]. Ilan Pappé, *The Modern Middle-East*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), xiii.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Ilan Fuchs. Review of Gelber, Yoav, *Nation and History: Israeli Historiography between Zionism and Post-Zionism*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32715>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.