
Book Review

Out of the Frame: the struggle for academic freedom in Israel

ILAN PAPPE, 2010

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Ilan Pappé writes with commitment. Clearly his inspiration is his many Palestinian friends who refuse to be written out of history. From the Palestinians, Pappé has learned resistance. He resists the negative framing of Zionist history that says who can and who cannot be allowed into important narratives. Since 1948, Israel has denied a presence for the Palestinians. The Palestinians have been chased from the past to deny them any possibility of a future. Pappé responds to this problem by writing another history; he places the Palestinians in the centre of his story. For an academic brought up and working in Israel, of course, writing this sort of history has come at a cost. Essentially, this is the substance of *Out of the Frame: the struggle for academic freedom in Israel*, which will be of particular interest to all those working in adult and community education who have found themselves battling for people marginalised in modern history. The real lesson here, however, is that Palestinians always resist, and it is that resistance which gives *gravitas* to this book.

Pappé underlines the fact that Israel is not an ordinary state. Israel has exercised silencing powers at home and abroad that are unlike anything else encountered in modern history. Professor Pappé writes as one who has experienced this whilst living and teaching in Israel. He is now based at the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies and is Director of the European Centre for Palestine Studies, both at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. Before moving to Exeter, he was founder and Head of the Institute for Peace Studies in Givat Haviva, and Chair of the Emil Touma Institute for Palestinian Studies in Haifa, Israel. Earlier, in the late nineties, he had made his name as one of the 'new historians', along with Avi Schlaim and Benny Morris. This term was first used by Morris to describe those historians no longer endorsing the official narrative of 1948. Pappé's contribution came in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, which since its publication in 2006 has come to be accepted as the definitive account of the ethnic cleansing of 1948. This involved the expulsion of some 750,000 Palestinians. By gaining access to military papers and a number of private documents, Pappé was able to show that Israel came into being with a false history. Having sold the lie to Israel and the world for over 60 years, the exposure of this con could hardly be marked with Pappé being awarded the Israel Prize. *Out of the Frame* is all about an Israeli society determined not to face up to its crimes so that the crimes and their denials could continue down to this day. Pappé not only describes the ideology that made the founding myths of Israel so successful, he also describes how that ideology is enforced in the work of the Israeli university. He describes what it was like to challenge those forces and what emerged as a result. He gets almost no support from fellow academics in Israel.

Pappé tells us that he heard almost nothing of the Palestinian tragedy in his early years. He hears a lot about the miracle that is Israel but he only hears the word *Nakba* from two Arab friends after starting school. Sometime later, he learns Arabic in the Orientalist class, which he says, then as now, 'prepared pupils for a career in the intelligence corps' (p. 14). In these years, it becomes clear that language and history have to be about identity and power. They run through the entire project of Israeli education that moves around servicing the military offensive on the Palestinians. So, very early on, Pappé learned that all Israeli educational institutions protect the idea of the new Israeli. Pappé has challenged this idea in every one of his books. At the end of this book, he repeats his earlier challenges by setting the record straight in 'Tantura: the evidence speaks'. The Tantura story is the story denied by academia at the University of Haifa covered in Pappé's account of the

Katz affair, showing academic freedom in Israel is protected, like the Jews-only roads that criss-cross the West Bank. Zionist history in Israel is protected and, indeed, it is ring-fenced just like Gaza. The aim once again is avoiding the Palestinian presence in what became Israel. The brutality of this is perhaps a fact not appreciated by those who oppose the academic boycott. This whole book pushes against these conditions to give a history that Pappe explains is 'a modest attempt' at deciphering 'the riddle of an ideology' (p. x), which the historian comes to see as nothing but a burden for peace in the Middle East region.

What is really remarkable in this book is the way the young Pappe comes to change in the process of his research. In uncovering the history of 1948, he is transformed. What he first sees in Israel as 'the ultimate expression of pristine humanity', he later sees as just 'a racist and quite evil philosophy of morality and life' (p. x). So, *Out of the Frame* turns on the change in the historian's politics that comes out of his involvement as a researcher employed in higher education. Pappe lives and learns from history, which he sees being denied all around him. Change really kicks in, however, when he first leaves Israel to go to Oxford for doctoral work and is supervised by Albert Hourani and Roger Owen. Returning to Israel in the eighties, Pappe encounters Israel in a different way, as he opposes the whole outlook of Zionism. This he gleans from his work in history. In telling the story of ethnic cleansing in 1948, Pappe discovers that Israel has built itself in complete denial. His political position in the Jews-only state moves closer to that of the Palestinian story, as all around him settlements expand from around 21,000 in 1982 to 76,000 in 1990. Pappe's research work takes him in one direction whilst the ideology around him pushes in another. The result is that he sides with the real victims of 1948. So, *Out of the Frame* lays out the transformation as Pappe first lets go and then distances himself from Zionism, which for someone brought up in a German/Jewish/Israeli household, with all that that must have implied, could never have been easy. No doubt this task would have been made less difficult by episodes like the 'Terror against Terror', which involved 27 Israelis (including men who had held high ranks in the Israel Defense Forces) being arrested and charged with several 1980 bombings of West Bank mayors and the 1982 shooting and hand-grenade attack on Palestinians in Hebron. But in this book, it is research that produces a different aspect on the world. Knowledge does generate different angles on the world, which then inspires resistance. This kind of process – perhaps in less extreme conditions – would not have been unfamiliar to many early practitioners in adult and community education.

All this means that reading *Out of the Frame* is very much like reading the account of a mind being opened up to a world that has been physically silenced. Historic accounts of what had only been suspected in stories of dispossession and killing emerge in relation to the *Nakba* that throw light on subsequent events like the occupation of Lebanon. The disapproval of permanent war in Israel at that time might have made a new approach to the history of 1948 far more possible. Pappe developed an approach to history that was very similar to that of Heidegger's (1992) philosophy in *Parmenides*. Research or inquiry becomes a way of peeling away factors of concealment. Truth becomes that which is allowed to speak for itself in a different voice once the cover has been removed. Such approaches can rarely be popular – especially in times of economic difficulty. In the case of Israel in the eighties, a space was opened up for the Palestinian narrative, but that narrative existed mainly in oral forms. Palestinian memory had never really been chased from the field. Palestinian oral history constituted a very solid basis for a new approach to doing history. Like the Palestinian people, *Nakba* memory has always held its ground. It has always been there, deep in the soil that is the Palestinian people. So, Pappe's work has encouraged new generations of broader historiographies that move around memory expressed in these oral practices. In denying these stories, Pappe shows that Israelis are held back by the concealments of their own culture. Other historians, like Benny Morris, get nowhere near to something of the same. For Morris, new history is old wine in new bottles. It makes no demands on the Israeli sense of a past that ultimately has to shape contemporary notions of justice. Facts still service Zionist arguments. In Pappe's work, history does something different. It does not remain silent in confronting present distortions in political reality. Pappe's work is very much a force of now.

Tracing out the difficulties encountered in telling the story of the Zionist state, and narrating the isolation that he suffered as result of writing about the *Nakba* allows Pappe to expose the formidable 'strategic culture' of Israel in its denials and misrepresentations of that crime. *Nakba* history confronts popular positivist historiography in challenging the historic fallacies of Israel.

Zionist ideology does more than keep people in refugee camps. It forces historiography into a cul-de-sac, denying possibilities of reconciliation and truth. This is demonstrated in Pappe's support for one student by the name of Teddy Katz, who drew almost exclusively on Israeli and Palestinian oral narratives in writing his Master's dissertation in 2000. The result is an incredible episode. A true account of the *Nakba* is Israel's worst nightmare, even in a Master's thesis. The thesis of Katz caused a panic in the Zionist state that must have hit this mature student like lightning. With very few exceptions, it is Pappe who speaks out in support of Katz and his methodology.

The central chapters of *Out of the Frame* follow events around Katz after the Israeli daily newspaper *Ma'ariv* picked up his thesis on 21 January 2001. Some of the thesis went out to the Israeli public in the form of an article by Amir Gilat, who focused on the massacre at Tantura. A legal case follows where the Alexandroni veterans (the original military men involved) pursue Katz and Haifa University. The court fiasco culminates in the removal of the dissertation from all library shelves after Katz is persuaded to issue an apology (seen to conclude the legal case), which is also published in the press. Katz's offence was taking taped testimonies of Arab and Jewish witnesses as truth about the massacre of Palestinians at Tantura in late May 1948. (One wonders what his fate might have been had he only interviewed Arabs!) Katz never uses the term 'massacre', but the Gilat article does. It is interesting how this term disturbs the discourse. The Israeli state swings into action to protect its good name. 'Massacre' clearly makes Israel very nervous after the collapse of Camp David and the election slogan 'The Palestinians Do Not Want Peace' emerging to announce the reappearance of Sharon and the catalogue of war crimes he personified. The year 2002, however, was not like 1982, and there were few of the same protests. The Palestinians were seen as a people of suicide bombers. No one talked about massive settlement expansion and the offence of the apartheid wall. The Israeli public saw itself as the victim and considered itself as having no choice in both the punishment of Katz and then the Palestinian people.

The Katz affair showed how the structures of the racist state apparatus and the freedoms of broader society in Israel have to fall in line together when it comes to the story of 1948. The *Nakba* has to be kept 'out of the frame', as the title of Pappe's book suggests. Edward Said (1992, p. xiv) made the point that 'Israel has enjoyed an astonishing dominance in matters of scholarship, political discourse, international presence, and valorization' when it comes to the founding story of the Zionist state, and in an unsuspected way, the Katz thesis disturbed this arrangement. It did so because Katz listened to those considered to be outside of history, putting their testimony alongside that of Jewish soldiers who had participated in the Tantura killings. The state then had to prove that the mature student had not recorded the latter correctly. Katz, in effect, had disturbed the idea that Israel's soldiers were the noble warriors of 'farmers, scientists, and artists' transforming an 'arid and empty land' (Said, 1992, p. xiv) into something wonderful. According to Zionist history, Israelis fought for progress, which could not avoid clearing the land.

The Katz affair showed Israel's academics had no claim to independence. Academics fell behind Operation Defensive Shield with shameful speed almost overnight. Those few who did not follow Sharon's war policies found themselves accused of betraying Jewish values and not being professional. The result was that very few stood against the military and voiced support for the Palestinians. Pappe notes:

the co-opting of the Israeli, intellectual and academic scene and the disappearance of a political and moral voice that accepted at least the Palestinian right to independence and equality, if not right of return, were twin processes that occurred at amazing speed. (p. 59)

Intellectuals reflected on little outside of the legitimacy of Israeli military power, personified in the person of Sharon. Inside the universities, even the language of a possible peace was dropped with alarming unanimity. With the exception of a few, all empathy with fellow Palestinian academics, if it had ever existed, disappeared. Originally, Katz had got a mark of 97% for his thesis. After the court hearing, however, the degree awarded to Katz was 'suspended' and the thesis re-examined by a specially appointed committee. It is helpful to quote Zalman Amit at length on what followed in Haifa:

the university never explained the legal and procedural justification for this development in accordance with a pre-existing rule-book. This is particularly relevant since it is clear that Katz's thesis was not 're-inspected' as a result of an internal academic complaint, or on the

basis of academically-based information presented formally to the faculty by a qualified and authorized academic body, or as a result of an academic scrutiny of the thesis. Instead, it appears that evaluation of the thesis was re-opened on the basis of some allegation that arose from an aborted legal case and that the action did not follow established and formal rules of academic procedure. (Zalman, 2005)

Requests were made to libraries to remove the thesis from their shelves. The thesis was removed and no one had any doubts about the process by which it was removed challenging Israel's claim to being a democracy – so accustomed had the Israeli public become to distortions of its own politics, which are embedded in the whole of Israeli culture. Compounded by education and the subservience of the media, this has produced a heady mix, giving a poisonous situation that distorts every area of civilian life. This is tragic. Denial encourages an ever deepening climate of more denials, where a phenomenon described by Sir Thomas Rapp emerges, encouraging militarism as 'a permanent threat to Middle East tranquillity' and moving 'away from the democratic way of life towards totalitarianism' (p. 57). The Berlin Wall came down and Israel's 'separation barrier' went up. Pappe's point throughout this book is that educationalists and historians of conscience have to oppose the Zionist enterprise as history and literature that challenge the founding myths get criminalised.

Those trying to defend internationalism in the academy must read this book. The traditions of adult and continuing education place many in positions that allow them to push against the prejudice of Israeli ethnic nationalism that is written into the distortions which Pappe seeks to expose. Pappe shows the academic sector of Israeli society is at one with the military forces that are still bombing refugee camps day in and day out. The academics of universities like Haifa need to face up to a past that is still denied, and US, British and European academics can help in their doing this. We can support Pappe in his endeavours as he tries to change the situation. The result of Pappe's project in *Out of the Frame* should be read and supported. Academic freedom should be supported everywhere.

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