

Dafna Hirsch, ed., *Encounters: History and Anthropology of the Israeli-Palestinian Space* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute Press-Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2019), pp. 490.

by *Tamir Sorek*

In a recently published book on academia, two Israeli scholars accused the humanities for dealing with “esoteric topics that do not contribute much to humanity.” Historians in particular, were targeted as suffering from a “hoarding disorder” because, the authors argue, everything has already been written.¹ The book sparked a heated debate in the Israeli public sphere, in which right-wing and conservative commentators enthusiastically supported it while most of the criticism came from the left side of the political map.

Reading *Encounters: History and Anthropology of the Israeli-Palestinian Space*, would probably not change the mind of anyone involved in this debate. For readers like me, though, this kind of research project is exactly the reason why we should keep studying history, as well as investigating the ever-changing and contested image of the past. Humans, historians included, carve a narrative from the infinite details of the past that reflects and supports their interests and agenda. The demand to “stop studying” is rooted in an aspiration to preserve the existing dominant narratives, as well as the prevailing balance of power/knowledge. This volume strives to do the exact opposite.

The different chapters in this volume both express and shape several emerging tendencies in the study of Palestine/Israel, and more generally, in the humanities and the social sciences. At the core of these tendencies is the narrowing gap and the interaction between anthropology and history. Since the institutional arrangements in Israeli academia blur the line between sociology and anthropology, sociologists are also represented in this volume, and even some political scientists with a humanistic orientation. While both history and the humanistic social sciences have gone through significant changes over the past

¹ Oz Almog and Tamar Almog, *Kol shikre ha-akademiah* (All of academia’s lies) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sfarim, 2020).

decades, historians have been increasingly shifting their gaze toward socio-cultural and micro history. Anthropologists and sociologists have developed growing interest in the past, focusing on its processing and representation in the present.

Therefore, many of the chapters take an anthropological look at the past, or an anthropological study of the representation of the past. Manar Hassan, for example, shows how the Palestinian city was excluded from both Zionist and Palestinian historiography and popular memories and the implications of these exclusions on the status of Palestinian women; Tom Pessah analyzes the ways Israeli soldiers have defined the battles in which they took part in 1948; Areej Sabbagh-Khuri shows how Palestinian villages, whose residents were expelled in 1948, are represented in communal texts written in the kibbutzim of ha-Shomer ha-Tza'ir, founded on the ruins of those same villages; and Smadar Sharon analyzes how agricultural planning and the organization of the work process created a relationship of dependency between Jewish immigrants from Arab countries who settled in the Negev in the 1950s and the settling institutions. All four authors are humanistic sociologists by their training, they use analytical and theoretical lenses common in their original discipline, while their methods (archival research, oral history) are usually identified with the discipline of history. Similarly, Safa Abu-Rabia studies Arab Bedouin women as active agents in the narration of the history of expulsion and Regev Nathanson analyzes how various tour guides in Haifa narrate the history of the city. While both of the last studies are anthropological in their epistemology and methodology, they correspond with the historical scholarship on 1948.

As part of a growing trend in history as a discipline, all chapters in the book are committed to study real people and real concrete practices, rather than abstract ideas. A special attention is given to various aspects of popular culture and leisure activities, emphasizing their political relevance. Three of those deal with food and power (another rapidly growing interdisciplinary field). Alma Igra analyzes the struggle of female workers at the first cooperative restaurant in Tel Aviv against the efforts of the Histadrut (the general federation of Zionist workers in Palestine) to exclude non-Kosher meat from the restaurant. Dafna Hirsh's chapter examines the history of hummus consumption in Israel and the way the identification of

hummus with Arabness has been changed over the years. In a thriller-like captivating text, the anthropologist Naor Ben-Yehoyada examines the struggle over the establishment of a fish market in the Jaffa port, which led to the murder of a fish merchant. Similarly, Boaz Lev Tov presents a thought-provoking analysis of the parallel emergence of beach swimming as a leisure activity among Jewish and Palestinian societies during the first third of the twentieth century.

Blurring disciplinary boundaries in the humanities and the social sciences has been a trademark of critical scholarship since the Frankfurt School, and it frequently co-appears with an explicit aspiration of scholars to be politically relevant. Indeed, another major common thread in the volume is the reliance on a conflict paradigm for analyzing and discussing history. The authors' interpretive lenses include a variety of neo-Marxist, Foucauldian, and feminist approaches but they all consider the struggle over resources and power as central for understanding historical dynamics. As a result, they are aware of their own position in the political matrix, and they implicitly reject the growing political pressure to be "neutral," "objective" or "unbiased," denying the existence of a politically neutral language for writing history or anthropology.

Accordingly, throughout the book the colonial character of Zionism is not in question (although not in a reductionist way that ignores other aspects of the movement), and the authors frequently have an explicit moral judgment of the dynamics they describe. Many chapters deal directly or indirectly with different aspects of the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948. In the introductory chapter, Hirsch declares an aspiration to overcome the common scholarly tendency to treat 1948 as a historical watershed and suggests considering it instead as an important milestone on a historical continuum. It seems, though, that this is an impossible task. The Nakba remains the major point of reference in most of the chapters. Beyond the above-mentioned chapters by Natanzon, Aburabia, Pessah and Sabbagh- Khuri, Benny Nurieli shows how, during the military regime imposed on Lydda (1948-1949) the struggle between state authorities and its looting soldiers influenced the surveillance of the recently occupied space and population and how the authorities implemented a policy of starving the Palestinians in order to force them to work in the occupied fields. Similarly, one cannot read Na'ama Ben

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Ze'ev's research about rural migrants in Palestinian cities during the British mandate period without thinking that both the cities and most of the villages of origin of the migrants were destroyed immediately after the point in time where the chapter ends.

Editing an academic volume is a challenging task. Keeping the balance between thematic coherence and diversity of voices, ensuring high academic standards across the board, and convincing scholars to invest their time and efforts in a work that usually does not give them much credit in their institutions, are only part of the obstacles. This volume impressively overcame these obstacles, and I would recommend it to anyone interested in a cutting-edge and politically relevant scholarship on Palestine/Israel.

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