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The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland

Shlomo Sand

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The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza

Eyal Weizman

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In Search of Collectivity: Contemporary Israeli Leftist Critique

Oded Nir

The work of the Israeli "New Historians" — Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, and others — in the late 1980s marked a paradigm shift in Israeli critical thought. Enabled by access to formerly secret state archives, their reexamination of historical material pertaining to the establishment of the state of Israel and the critique of established national ideology which it entailed came under heavy fire, in both academic and non-academic circles. In hindsight, their critique can be said to have paved the way to the full articulation of what is usually called "post-Zionism" — the Israeli version of post-nationalism. The explosion of critical research in all disciplines that followed bears the marks of the shifts in Israeli political consciousness throughout the 1990s — from the heyday of liberal peacemaking during the Oslo so-called peace process years (during which the two-state solution seemed achievable to most), and the great disillusionment of many on the left following the failure of this process to lay to rest the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — a disillusionment expressed in Benjamin Netanyahu's notorious political slogan "there is no partner for peace." Even if the political agenda that the initial studies seem to have supported has dissolved in the post-Oslo years,

not to be replaced by any other unified political program on the Left, the two books under review here, Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland* and Eyal Weizman's *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (which we will read in light of Verso's republication of his 2007 book, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*) — should be viewed as part of the critical tradition inaugurated by the New Historians, which by now encompasses academic studies in a variety of fields and disciplines. The material uncovered by that tradition, and the effort of synthesizing the facts into more totalizing narratives, provide an indispensable resource for any critique of the Zionist project, particularly in providing insight into Zionist-planned deportation and mass killing of Palestinians, in the 1948 war and after. We will return to the historical forces underpinning the historical emergence of the New Historians later in this essay.

As Sand writes in his introduction, this new book can be seen as a sequel to his *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2009). Both books operate wholly in the mode of historical myth-busting — contrasting widely accepted ideological beliefs and narratives to historical truth, the latter conceived as a direct result of empirical study. (This approach is central to the New Historians themselves. See for instance Ilan Pappé's writing on the 1948 war.)¹ If Sand's former book attempts to dispel the belief in the existence of a unified Jewish ethnos, the current book sets itself to the task of deconstructing the process by which that ethnos came to imagine it can lay historical claim to a territory, the mythological "land of Israel," as its property (29). The controversy sparked by Sand's books revolves precisely around the claim to truth of Sand's alternative narrative.²

Thus, each chapter of Sand's new book attempts to reveal the constructed nature of a seemingly natural, ahistorical belief on which the myth depends. The first chapter traces historical transformations undergone by European conceptions of "homeland," showing them to be anything but eternal. Central to Sand's argument is the difference between "homeland" as a localized place of birth and familial belonging (as in the ancient Greek usage of the term), which does not imply any collective ownership over territory and the modern nationalist one — originating in the French Revolution and subsequent events according to Sand — in which "homeland" is imbued with a strong territorial imaginary to produce national identity as we know it today (53-57). It is at the end of the first chapter and its general discussion of the territorialization of the homeland that Sand's critical viewpoint reveals itself to be a secular, ethical critique of nationalism itself, deemed a way of "killing and being killed" employed as a useful myth to persuade the deluded masses to engage in violence (63-65).

Ethical stances, however, are just as susceptible to becoming ahistorical beliefs as any other ideological construction — thus taking the place of the myths that the ideology-buster has set out to fight in the first place. Even if the work of the New Historians can be seen, in its initial moment, to contain promising political potential, one has to consider whether this is still the case today, after its failure to produce a

revolutionary political project. The ethical rejection of violence in the name of the nation, of dying for a collective cause (which we might share with Sand on some basic level), quickly slips into a rejection of any libidinal investment in what Sand ahistorically terms “myth” or “theology,” contrasted with the empirical truth (63). This familiar equation of truth with vague anti-nationalist humanism — common among the Israeli New Historians of the late 1980s — can now help us begin to align Sand’s critique with the assault on the nation-state typical of post-nationalist ideology, which of course easily feeds into neoliberalism’s assault on the nation-state in the service of global capitalism. In that respect, it makes perfect sense that the emergence of the New Historians coincides with Israel’s joining the neoliberal “Washington Consensus,” with all its ideological and material implications.³

The post-national knee-jerk rejection of nationalism should not be confused, of course, with a Marxian dialectical critique of nationalism — that of Lenin and others — in which the state and its myths (or, in fact, any hegemonic ideology) are to be appropriated (rather than debunked theoretically) and mobilized in the service of the revolutionary cause in order to bring about the state’s “withering away.” While both approaches recognize the imaginary dimension of nationalism (which is the focus of most academic discussions of nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s, most notably Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm’s work), this imaginary dimension is taken by Sand — who is well-versed in the literature — to mean nothing but a useful lie or myth to be exorcized at will.⁴

A materialist insistence on the very real status of ideology, or following Althusser, seeing ideology as the way individuals imagine their relation to their real conditions of existence, can help us orient our reading of Sand’s book.⁵ This does not mean countering Sand’s anti-nationalism with a celebration of violence, or with justifying Israel’s violent oppression of Palestinians. Rather, we can read every “distortion” of the truth, every instance of myth-creation as a generative moment, a moment in which available imaginary forms and contents are creatively mobilized (not in the flat, positive meaning of “creative”) in their historical context to bring about social transformation. Read this way, Sand’s book becomes instructive for revolutionary social transformation once again, as it traces the different processes of ideological selections, inventions, and elisions through which Zionism related Jewish texts and customs to a nationalist imaginary. To be clear: learning from Zionism does not equal supporting Zionism; rather, it can help us evaluate what is still ideologically alive for the Jewish-Israeli public, or what ideological constructions we should engage or “infiltrate” in order to construct a revolutionary movement. Sand himself seems to be partly aware of the generative dimension of Zionism, when in the opening of the second chapter he recognizes the talent of Zionist thinkers who succeeded in reimagining the “land of Israel” in the form of a national territory (68). In what follows, Sand explores the challenges posed by the Bible and Jewish thought to the Zionist ideologues: the anti-autochthonous kernel of many of the Old Testament’s

stories (69-72); the scientific evidence pointing at the fabricated nature of the story of the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews arriving from Egypt (a story which Zionist ideology paralleled to its own actions) (75-76); the non-territorial (but religious) imaginary of the Maccabee rebellion story, favored by the all-too-territorial Zionists (89-91); and the non-territorial meaning of “the holy land” or “the land of Israel” in the Mishna and Talmud, and in the writing of important Jewish thinkers such as Philo, the Rambam, and Yehuda Halevi.

The third and fourth chapters continue in the same vein: in the third, Sand claims that pilgrimage to the “holy land” was a rear phenomenon among Jews (as opposed to Christians), and that even when pilgrimage took place, it had nothing to do with mass immigration and settlement, or with the consecration of landscape associated with national territories (123-25, 130). Moreover, the first identification of a “chosen people” with a territorial unity, Sand claims, was not a Jewish invention at all: it only becomes an imaginative option after the emergence of proto-nationalism in Britain, based on the availability of mass printing and the Puritan revolution (143-47). It is in the Puritan imaginary and political stance that we first hear voices for the resettlement of Jews in the holy land. Sand thus shows how a convergence of historical circumstances — sympathetic British office holders, pogroms against Russian Jews, etc. — and new ideological possibilities serves as productive ground for the first Zionist appeals to the British Empire to support their colonial endeavor (161-75). In the fourth chapter, Sand repeats the same gesture, this time showing how despite almost unanimous rejection of Zionism by Judaism, Zionism’s ideological inventiveness combines with historical circumstances to move Eastern European and Russian Jews to immigrate to Palestine in order to settle it (177-96).

Neutralizing Sand’s ethical stance through the reversal described above means that we can read his book as something like an incomplete guidebook to revolutionary movement-building. Even if the movement built in this case — Zionism — has disastrously failed to produce a just society, we must admit that it has managed to produce a radically different social reality for European Jews, as Sand constantly reminds us. For, as Sand’s book reveals despite itself, Zionism’s successful negation-cum-appropriation of Judaism consisted in relating the new secular daily experience of Eastern European Jews (i.e., the rise of nationalism, the new technological mediation of identity, the pogroms, etc.) to an ideological world that could no longer reconcile the contradictions of that experience. It is precisely this process of constructing a new social narrative out of the available Israeli ideologies (including the Zionist ones!), a narrative that could bring about a new collective project rather than provide one that appeals only to the post-nationalist Left, which is arguably the Israeli Left’s most urgent task. Therefore, even if Sand provides us with important insight into the ideology of Zionism, and even if we broadly share his humanist rejection of violence, we must still consider what political project is supported by Sand’s own narrating of the material. This political project can clearly be seen today to be completely

compatible with global capital's attack on national sovereignty, which means that a Marxist appropriation of Sand's "truths" should not be immediate and uncritical.

The Israeli critiques of Sand's second book (echoing to a large degree those of his first book) engage Sand on his own terrain: claiming that he does not bring any new facts to light, and, more importantly for us, that the facts on which he relies do not plausibly support his alternative narrative.⁶ Any follower of the debate, which has been going on for several years now, must by now be convinced that it will never be settled. Thus, what the debate seems to tell us is that an empirical approach to historical narrative has its limits: "the facts" in themselves suddenly seem powerless to generate a narrative, as many controversial claims can never be fully supported or fully refuted. That does not mean, of course, that facts are unimportant. Rather, it tells us that historical truth always consists in something more than empirical fact-finding, something that makes it possible to transform isolated facts into a narrative. The powerlessness of facts "in themselves," or the failure to narrate the present historically, can therefore be seen as a symptom, marking an absence which is itself a historical development.⁷ For, as even Sand admits, nationalist historiography seems to have succeeded precisely where we fail: it managed to produce a social narrative, even if that narrative fails to fulfill its promises. We will return to the problem of narrating history later in this essay.

If Sand's main aim is dispelling popular Zionist beliefs, Eyal Weizman's *The Least of All Possible Evils* sidesteps the mythbuster's approach. It does that by limiting itself to the exploration of existing structures of power relations and modes of control and domination, active both in the Israeli colonial context and outside of it. Weizman's 2007 *Hollow Land* (republished in 2012) uses architecture both literally, designating physical built environments, and as a metaphor for the decentered and multi-layered structure of control employed by Israel in "managing" (read: controlling and oppressing) the Palestinian population.⁸ *The Least of All Possible Evils* can be seen as an extension of Weizman's overtly Foucauldian-Deleuzian approach developed in *Hollow Land* (to the degree that the diffuse system of multi-layered control still reigns supreme) (23). It can also be seen as a break from it, as his new book strongly re-centers that system around one dominant logic, that of the "lesser evil" (one could argue that *Hollow Land* performs the same re-centering, even if unconsciously, around the figure of "the occupation" itself).

The central claim of the short book is simple enough: the shocking thesis that the global North's military operations and humanitarian aid agencies have become almost indistinguishable. Both, according to Weizman, operate (and to a certain degree directly collaborate) through the same calculus of "lesser evil," or of minimizing civilian suffering in war or conflict. This logic stands in opposition to an older logic taken by humanitarian and human rights organizations, in which war and colonial violence were rejected in principle (3-6, 117). As Weizman stresses, the "lesser evil" argument has many consequences: creation of a calculus of proportionate violence; a

“pedagogical” warfare in which non-compliance on the side of the occupied justifies disproportionate retaliation; the loss of any conception of a redemptive or utopian goal to human activity, and others (19-20, 22). The global scope of Weizman’s claim about the complicity of well-intentioned NGOs in the logic of military operations and of so-called population management should be read alongside similar recent studies of the deleterious effects of NGO involvement in the global South, such as those by Mark Duffield and Lamia Karim.⁹ As in *Hollow Land*, Weizman borrows from a cross-disciplinary variety of sources: critical legal studies, philosophical and theoretical texts (from Augustine and Leibniz, who serve as the main coordinates for the development of thinking through the “lesser evil” argument in Western thought to Israeli critical theorists Adi Ophir and Ariella Azoulay), as well as primary sources such as interviews he conducted with the book’s “protagonists,” Hamas’s *Book of Destruction* (which is the source for the many pictures collected in the “Epilogue” chapter), and others (2, 7).

Even though Weizman traces many of the concrete implications of the coming into dominance of the “lesser evil” logic, his critique of it remains an ethical one. Weizman develops a strong parallel between his case studies. These are dealt with in Chapter 2, which describes the problematic involvement of humanitarian aid organizations in the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s, and in Chapter 3, focusing on the “humanitarian war” waged by Israel against the Palestinians. In each case, Weizman highlights the ethical dimension of intervention. Thus, the chief of *Médecins Sans Frontières* during the crisis in Ethiopia and the Palestinian lawyer tasked with contesting in court the proposed route of the Separation Wall are presented in the same light: both recognize their complicity in inflicting violence and suffering despite their political commitments. In the Ethiopian case, humanitarian aid is used as political tool in the crisis, while in Palestinian case, the Palestinian legal defense finds itself suggesting more humane alternatives to the Separation Wall’s route, thereby aiding in its construction. In both cases, then, Weizman develops an ethical aporia, one in which the protagonist cannot decide whether to succumb to the “lesser evil” logic of the system in trying to alleviate suffering or to refrain from intervention at all.

It is precisely this ethical aporia through which Weizman, again, betrays his Foucauldian prejudices, even if the latter would have rejected the specifics of Weizman’s ethical framing of the problem. For it is Foucault’s notion of power that always-already includes resistance in it, thus in danger of seeing any resistance as part of the latter’s operations (in a similar fashion to the dilemmas faced by Weizman’s protagonists).¹⁰ The same approach can be detected in Weizman’s *Hollow Land*. In particular, in its discussions of rebuilding Palestinian towns and refugee camps destroyed by the IDF, and in the book’s overarching claim that both separation and non-separation of Israeli space from Palestinian have become tools in Israel’s oppressive arsenal.¹¹ This undialectical conception of power, one that blocks any way out of the aporia, does not allow Weizman to suggest a political way out from the sterility of

the ethical dilemma. Indeed, all that Weizman allows himself to suggest is a weak ethical compromise between the two poles, namely, that of minimal humanitarian intervention — one that tries to minimize the political “footprint” of its activity, and somehow refuses the management of populations with which it has become indistinguishable (61-62). Even if Weizman’s account of the collusion is valuable in terms of bringing the unholy collusion of slaughter and humanitarianism to light, the compromise he suggests is far from satisfactory for revolutionary purposes.

The difficulty in coming up with a creative ethical solution to the logic of “lesser evil” is of course not Weizman’s fault. This becomes clear as soon as we recognize that the rejection of ethics that stands in the core of the “lesser evil” logic is paradoxically a result of ethics’ incorporation into it (18). If ethics is already incorporated into it, it should come as no surprise that we cannot fight this logic on its own ethical grounds. It is here that Weizman’s analysis could have gained from a Marxist account of late capitalism, with its emphasis, on one hand, on capitalism’s new global reach and, on the other, on its invasion of all realms of life, including subjectivity and culture.¹² For the quantification that ethics undergoes when it is incorporated into military logic (described in detail in the fourth chapter of Weizman’s book) can then be considered as ethics’ commodification and reification — an operation that makes ethics commensurable and exchangeable (even with what seems to be its opposite) in the market: just as Starbucks can sell us ethical coffee, so can the military sell us ethical slaughter.

In broad terms, the Marxist way out of the ethical dilemma is a sociopolitical one: only through a collective project can we de-reify ethics, or wrest it from its status as a commodity in which it is endowed with exchange-value seemingly independent of our own activity. As Jameson argues, such collective projects depend (or at least used to depend) on historicity, or an ability to imagine the present as a space of praxis that is part of a historical trajectory, which strongly depends on the way we narrate the present historically. It is in this sense that history’s sudden reappearance at the end of Weizman’s fourth chapter betrays a strong utopian impulse. The practice that Weizman’s calls “forensic architecture” — in which ruins are made to testify to the process of their own destruction with the help of experts (an increasingly popular approach in investigations conducted by human rights organizations) — is, in the context of rebuilding, “not simply tasked with past events and the way destruction has occurred, but with the means of evaluating future works” (108, 146). Forensic architecture thus comes to provide a figure for the return of historicity in Weizman’s book, as it manages to make its objects — the ruins — the raw material for a narration of the present through past events, and determinately opens future possibilities. To be sure, it is no more than a figure: the long sequence of pictures of destroyed buildings in Gaza that concludes the book, which is supposed to provide raw material for a new historicity, is bereft of narrative (an absence for which we cannot blame Weizman). Yet, the desire for a new socio-historical narrative is still very much alive

in Weizman's book, as it poses the interpretation of the images as a challenge for any new collective project on the left.

Notes

1. Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2007).
2. See, for example, historian Israel Bartal's discussion of Sand's first book in *Haaretz* newspaper, "The Invention of Invention" (27 May 2008).
3. For a detailed account of this economic and historical transformation, see Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler's *The Global Political Economy of Israel: From War Profits to Peace Dividends* (London: Pluto, 2002).
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992).
5. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971) 162.
6. See, for example, Yoav Gelber's "The Invention of the Land of Israel: There Is a Country, So They Say" in *Ha'aretz* (27 September 2012).
7. Discussions of history and historical writing in the 1980s and 1990s focus precisely on this problem. See, for example, Hayden White's influential work on the subject in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," *Clio* 3:3 (1974) 277-303. For a Marxist response to White's conception of modes of historical "emplotment," see Fredric Jameson's "Figural Relativism, or the Poetics of Historiography," *Diacritics* 6:1 (Spring 1976) 2-9.
8. Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2012) 6.
9. Mark Duffield, *Development, Security, and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), and Lamia Karim, *Microfinance and Its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2011).
10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
11. Weizman, *Hollow Land* 201-205.
12. See, for example, Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991); David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1982).