

To be a National Minority in an Ethnic Jewish State: The Palestinian as the Other in Israel

USUKI Akira

Japan Center for Area Studies,
National Museum of Ethnology, Japan

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I. Introduction

"The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; and it will be faithful to the principle of the Charter of the United Nations." Cited from *the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel*, May 14, 1948.

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel expressly guaranteed complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants regardless of religion, race or sex, and at the same time the State allowed every Jew *in exile* to immigrate to Israel. In this context the Declaration of Independence sought to reconcile the particularistic national character of the Jewish state with universalistic civil equality. The Declaration, however, omitted any statement about nationality. The omission points to the ambivalence of Israel's Founding Fathers, especially David Ben Gurion (1886-1973), the first Israeli prime minister, as to the problem of the national status of Arab citizens in a Jewish state. [Cohen 1995 p.294]

In this paper I will discuss how an Arab minority was formed or constructed and even fabricated as the Other in a dominant ethnic Jewish state, that is, Israel. Recently some younger Israeli researchers have begun to say that the formation of Israeli culture and national identity cannot be understood without acknowledging the contribution of "Palestinian Arabs" in Israel/ Palestine¹ and outside. These researchers, labeled often as

"post-Zionists" or "Revisionists," are challenging Orthodox Zionist discourse in changing political circumstances in the Middle East.

First, I will briefly describe how the debate on post-Zionism is going on in Israel. Second, I will explain what 'Others' means in terms of ethnicity, religion, and nation in a hegemonic Zionist context. I define 'Other' as religious and ethnic "internals" as well as national "externals" even though cultural borders between the "internal" and "external" are expected to be within the geographical territories of Israel/Palestine. I present the latter, that is, a national "external" 'Other,' as the Palestinians. Finally, I discuss how the Palestinian Arab minority is positioned and constituted in the Jewish dominant state in the light of a post-Zionist discourse.

II. A Brief Survey of Post-Zionism Debate in Israel

Post-Zionist debate began in the late 1980s as a debate over "the new historians" of the War of Independence in 1948. After books from "the new historians" were published by prominent British publishers, such historians began to claim that they were the first to have written the 'true' history of the establishment of Israel. Moreover, they proclaimed that everything previously written on the subject was no more than Zionist propaganda, intended to present the founding myth of the state in a positive light. The debate had ramifications extending beyond the events of 1948 and beyond the bounds of history as well. The dispute was taken up by sociologists and anthropologists, political scientists, and scholars of the Middle East. By association with another debate current in the Israeli press at that time concerning postmodernism, those who adopted a critical attitude toward Israel and its policies come to be called "post-Zionists."

Ilan Pappé, a Haifa University historian known as one of the most radical post-Zionists, reasons that the intellectual origin of the post-Zionism that emerged in Israeli historiography and sociology in the 1970s and 1980s was a consequence of the appearance of Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism* in 1978. Said, an Anglican Palestinian by origin, influenced several Israeli Jewish scholars who found his prism useful in the deconstruction of their society's attitude towards the Palestinians. That led a new generation of Israeli scholars to be suspect of their ideological slant toward predecessors, and to adopt a more positive position towards their Palestinian counterparts. Academic works began to be written from a sympathetic point of view towards the predicament of the weaker party in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Palestinians. A related consequence of this attitude was the inclusion of more

Palestinian scholars among producers of historiographical knowledge about the conflict. In the past, Israeli historians working on the conflict's history were considered by major academic centers in the Western world as professionals, while Palestinian works were branded as sheer propaganda. Pappé of Haifa University, edited such a book. [Pappé 1999 p.45.]

Post-Zionism, like Zionism, is in constant motion. The boundaries of post-Zionist discourse are in a constant state of flux. Comprised of "nomadic" concepts that assume different meanings in different contexts, post-Zionism lacks a distinct structure or organization, and its boundaries are often blurred. However, Uri Ram, a critical sociologist considered to be part of a "post-Zionist School," summarized the critical tasks of post-Zionist sociology versus those of "Zionist sociology" in Israel as follows:

"Critical sociology should shun the mainstream's complacency towards cultural homogeneity based on ethnic superiority, towards political exclusivism based on national hierarchy, towards economic inequality based on class and gender privileges, and towards nondemocratic public life based on oligarchic practice. It ought to formulate an agenda committed to democratic sharing of power, full constitutional citizenship rights, common control of resources and enhanced social rights, and cultural heterogeneity. *Zionist sociology promoted the idea of an identity among unequals and the exclusion of the others; post-Zionist sociology should promote the idea of an equality among nonidenticals and the inclusion of the others*". [Ram 1995 pp.207] (italic emphasis by author.)

I must mention here the negative response of the mainstream Zionist camp, that is, the Labor Zionists, to the new trend. Post-Zionism was denounced as a purely ideological attempt to de-Zionize Israel, or even as a typical intellectual exercise on the part of self-hating Jews in the service of the enemy [Lissak 1996].

III. Others in the Context of Zionist Discourse

The concept of the 'Other' is basic to a revised interpretation of cultural identity. We form our sense of self, our identity, in relation to Others, over and in relation to how we define ourselves. Thus we must apply ourselves to Others over and in relation to how the self is positioned, constructed, and constituted. The Other is, therefore, the medium by which we consciously define ourselves. The identity/otherness dialectic must be brought into full consciousness [Silberstein 1995-5].

In the context of Secular Ashkenazi Zionist-dominant Israeli society, I would divide 'Others' into two groups, that is, national "external" Others, and ethnic and religious "internal" Others. The former is distinguished from the viewpoint of Jewish-

Arab relations while the letter is seen in the light of disunity and differentiation among Jews in Israel. The major "internal" Others are ethnic groups, that is, Sephardi and/or Oriental (Mizrahi) Jews from Middle Eastern countries, and religious groups, ultraorthodox Jews (Haredim) or religious Jews (Datim).

Secular Ashkenazi Jews from European countries, having achieved political, social and cultural hegemony, assimilated into the dominant Zionist Israeli culture as subject. The terminology used to refer to the cultural traditions of Ashkenazi, Sephardi and Religious Jews reveals the process whereby Ashkenazi secular culture has been privileged over Sephardi/Oriental (Sephardi/Mizrahi) and religious tradition.

For all Israeli Jews, the major national "external" Other is the Arab, including Arabs living outside Israel as well as those living as Israeli citizens. Ashkenazi, Sephardi/Mizrahi and Religious Jews alike construct their own sense of Israeliness and Jewishness at the same time over and against the Other, the Arabs. The way in which Israeli Jews view Arabs is an index of the way they view themselves (Domingues 1989-157). Therefore, the idea of being a "Arab Jew" (*yahudi 'arabi* in Arabic) has been denied in the circumstances of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.

"Arab Jews," however were, meant to be Arabic-speaking in language and believers in Judaism by religion. In other words, we have evidence that being an Arab and being an Jew at the same time was not contradictory before the establishment of Israel in 1948, because Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the second President of Israel and a renowned Orientalist, indicated that there were "Arabized Jews" (*Must'aravim* in Hebrew) as one category of Jews in Muslim lands [Ben-Zvi 1957].

The paradox of secular Ashkenazi Zionism is that while it ended a Diaspora during which all Jews presumably had their 'heart-in-the-East-feeling' encapsulated in the almost daily repetition of the ritual phrase "next year in Jerusalem!" (*ba-shana ha-ba be-Yerushalaym*), it still founded a state whose ideological and geopolitical orientation has been almost exclusively toward the West [Shohat 1989-3].

Post-Zionists consider the key concept of early Zionism as *shelilat ha-galut* (negation of the Diaspora), which has played a central role in the subordination and marginalization of the Mizrahi (Oriental) Jews and the Palestinians. The Zionist image of the "New Hebrew," constructed by pioneering Ashkenazi labor or socialist Zionist leaders, privileged the Jews from Eastern Europe while disempowering non-European Jews. While early Zionists criticized European Jewish culture as a culture of exile, they denigrated the 'exilic' and traditional culture of the Mizrahi Jews who immigrated to Israel after the establishment of the state. Most of the Mizrahi Jews did not view the immigration to Israel as a means of abandoning distinctive patterns of life they had developed in their lands of origin. Arriving in Israel, pious Mizrahi Jews were soon

disappointed to see a 'modernized' Holy Land controlled by secular Ashkenazi Zionists. In addition to becoming victims of Zionist cultural domination, Mizrahi Jews were positioned at the bottom of the socio-economic stratum.

The primary victims of the oppressive effects of Zionist discourse were the Palestinian Arabs. In Zionist discourse, Jewish exile can only be ended through the return of Jews to their 'homeland.' Consequently, the conflict between the indigenous Palestinian population and the Jews was situated within the context of the Zionist's teleological reading of history. Contextualizing the Jewish return to the land with corollary that has been precipitated with the Palestinians in terms of European Jewish history, Zionist discourse and the historiography that it produced, decontextualized the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from its Middle Eastern setting. It thereby neutralized the role of Zionist settlement practices as a precipitating factor in the conflict. At the same time, in framing the Jewish settlement of the land within the discourse of *Galut ve Geula* (exile and redemption), Zionism had the effect of excluding Palestinians from Israeli public discourse [Silberstein 1999-179].

Rather than making distinctions, or binaries between insider/outsider, self/other, Jewish/non-Jewish as "natural," the observer would treat them as the products of ongoing discursive processes and cultural conflicts. Understandably, however, there are many who view this discursive interpretation of identity as threatening to Jewish survival. As for an alternative strategy, I would agree with Silberstein that an anti-essentialistic, constructionist approach to Jewish identity opens the way to new possibilities of Jewish discourse, to a reusage or deployment that previously had not been authorized [Silberstein 1994-27].

IV. Positioning Palestinians in Israel

"Zionists have been absorbed in a nationalist project rendering the Palestinians almost incidental. In the process, they have failed to grasp the extent to which their own society has been shaped by its ongoing encounter with the Palestinians. Perhaps doing so would involve too painful an encounter with Zionism's political counterpart--what we might call "Palestinians": the belief that the Arab population originating in the area of the Palestine mandate is distinct from other Arab groups, with a right to its own nation-state in that territory." [Kimmerling and Migdal 1993-xviii]

The above can be regarded as a most sincere manifesto on the part of post-Zionist scholars. The authors of the book confess that they joined a handful of Jewish social scientists beginning, in the wake of the 1967 War, to view the Palestinians, not as anthropological curiosities, but as a social group deeply affecting the future of the Jews.

In addition to its 2.4 million Jews, Israel then governed almost 1.5 million Arabs, including around 400,000 citizens of Israel, 665,000 in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and 356,000 in the Gaza Strip. Kimmerling and Migdal came to know many Palestinians, mostly in West Bank villages and on the campus of the Hebrew University and then became aware that mutual Jewish-Palestinian denial would disappear slowly, if at all.

Post-Zionist scholars have incorporated into their narratives the previously silenced voices of the Palestinian "Other." In their view, Jewish and Palestinian narratives are intertwined. Moving beyond the limits of Zionist discourse, these post-Zionist scholars help reveal its problematic Zionist identification of Israeli culture with Jewish culture. (Compare post-Zionist approaches to the Palestinians with the mainstream Zionists' policy-oriented approaches to the "Arab minority") [Landau 1993]. For a more critical study of Israeli policy, see [Lustick 1980]. Concerning early and harsh Palestinian criticism from the standpoint of political science, see [Zureik 1979].

Writing from the margins of the Israeli' society, Arab minority writers have problematized the notion of a famous Zionist slogan, "A land without a people for a people without a land," that is to say, the exclusion of Palestinian voices from Israeli cultural space. Mainstream Zionists rely on the continued silencing of the displacement and exclusion of the Palestinians, mostly massively during the 1948 war but more generally as a part of Zionist history. The persistence and crystallization of a Palestinian national identity is making this silencing highly problematic [Boyarin 1996-1995].

The younger generation of Palestinians in Israel has begun to reexamine the Zionist way of thinking in their political formula, "A land without a people"---a vacant territory waiting for settlers---from the viewpoint of 'Transfer' (*ha'avara* in Hebrew) which is a euphemism denoting the organized removal of the Arab population of Palestine to neighboring or distant countries. This concept of "more land, less Arab" is deeply rooted in Zionist discourse [Masahlha 1997].

By the way, the term "national minority" (*mi'ut le'umi*) is problematic not only in Israeli cultural space, but also in the political sphere. While the numbers of the Arab community have been formally guaranteed their personal civil rights, they have been precluded from giving political expression to their national aspirations. Moreover, even the ability of "Israeli Arabs" to realize their formally recognized civil and other rights has met with a series of roadblocks, mostly in the form of various regulations and administrative directives. In most cases, restrictions imposed upon Arab citizens have not been overtly discriminatory, but have been based on other grounds, and particularly on so-called "security considerations" (*bitahon* in Hebrew) [Cohen 1995-206]. For

details on Israeli security policy toward the "Arab minority" written by a prominent Palestinian lawyer in Israel, a former director of Institute of Palestine Studies in Nicosia, Cyprus, see [Jiryis 1977].

Generally speaking, post-Zionists agree that Israel should be a democratic state for all of its citizens. They thus reject the Zionist principal, inscribed in the Declaration of Independence, that Israel should be the state of the Jewish people, a Jewish state. They also wish Israel to become a state that belongs to all who live within it, including Palestinian Arab citizens. There is, however, no consensus among post-Zionists as to how to bring about this desired democratization. While some advocate repealing the Law of Return, which virtually grants immediate citizenship to all Jews desiring it, others, although advocating full and equal rights for the Palestinian Arab minority, continue to see the need for this law.

According to Silberstein [Silberstein 1999], Ilan Pappé, mentioned above, prefers to describe himself as a non-Zionist or an a Zionist who advocates dealing with the Law of Return as a necessary step to a genuine Western-style democracy. Baruch Kimmerling, a sociologist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, advocates the repeal of the law, even though he avoids being considered a post-Zionist.

As represented in the Declaration of Independence, the Shoah, or Holocaust, is one of the primary legitimations of a Jewish state. The Declaration says, "The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people---the massacre of million of Jews in Europe---was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of their homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel, the Jewish State."

Despite the declaration, the destruction of millions of Jews in Europe, most of whom perished without offering any resistance, was the ultimate confirmation of Zionists' negative view of the Diaspora. Only a Jewish state could protect Jewish lives, and only in a Jewish state could Jewish lives be safe, according to Zionist leaders. Some post-Zionists criticize the problematic behavior of Zionist leaders during the period of the Shoah and see it as evidence against the view of Zionism as the protector of the Jewish people [Evron 1995-157-63].

This dispute about the Shoah in Israel reminds me of a famous article "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims" written by Edward Said: "One must admit that all liberals and even most "radicals" have been unable to overcome the Zionist habit of equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism." What is going on in Israel now, however, would seem to be symptomatic of something once unacceptable to Israelis, that is beginning to be slowly accepted there.

Notes

- 1 Israel/Palestine is geographically comprised of Israel proper with a "Green Line" as an armistice line in the War of 1948-49, the Israeli Occupied Territories (Jewish settlements in the Gaza and the West Bank of Jordan, and Areas B and C in the West Bank according to the Oslo agreement in 1995), and the territories administrated by the Palestine National Authority (the Gaza Strip and the Area A in the West Bank). But I intend to use the term Israel/Palestine metaphorically as a common 'area' whose boundary would be projected as 'would-be' shared borders of complex identities beyond the historical national memories of the both peoples, that is, of both Israelis and Palestinians.

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