

# Realities of Zionism

Sunday 26 May 2013, by [FINKEL David](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2013).

***Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict and Resolution.* By Moshe Machover  
Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012, 302 pages + notes and index, \$24 paperback.**

***False Prophets of Peace Liberal Zionism and the Struggle for Palestine.* By Tikva Honig-Parnass. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011, 212 pages + notes and index, \$20 paperback.**

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THE POWER OF Marxist analysis lies not so much in sweeping generalizations, but in the application of basic principles to an understanding of concrete social formations and the struggles to transform them. Since few issues have been as vexing to the left as the Palestine-Zionist conflict, Moshe Machover's collection *Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict and Resolution* is of particular interest — both for its specific focus on Zionism and for cogent expositions of basic Marxist method regarding national liberation and the problem of colonial-settler states.

*False Prophets of Peace. Liberal Zionism and the Struggle for Palestine*, by veteran revolutionary activist Tikva Honig-Parnass, covers some of the same ground but with a closer focus on the Zionist "left," as a dead end for an authentic left and an obstacle to peace insofar as it has any remaining influence.

Both authors come from the background of the Israeli Socialist Organization formed in the 1960s. Best known by the name of its newspaper, *Matzpen*, the group at the outset of the June, 1967 war published a joint statement with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, calling for the "abolition of the Zionist character of Israel, the return of the refugees [Palestinians expelled in 1947-49 — DF] to the territory of Israel; an Israeli agreement for the establishment of a Palestinian state, if the Palestinians choose it...The new non-Zionist Israel would strive to integrate the Israelis and Palestinians in a federal and socialist, non-national state, which participates in the process of the political and economic unification of the Middle East." (Quoted by Honig-Parnass, 116)

With spectacular if dry understatement, Honig-Parnass observes that "Matzpen's analysis has not been adopted by Israeli masses."

Moshe Machover's essays, written for specific purposes, at very definite points in time, hold up remarkably well years or decades later. The place for most readers to begin, however, is toward the end of *Israelis and Palestinians*, with the title essay (262-283 [[1](#)]). Here is the best concise introductory text for understanding the basic features of the crisis.

Zionism is viewed as a colonial-settler project, not a national liberation movement. Its particular aims, “based not on exploiting the labor of the indigenous people but aiming to exclude and expel them,” are more characteristic of the U.S. model than the South African one. (275) The fact that the Israeli state is not only a product of this settler project, but a force for its extension and expansion, produces the ever-present danger of new ethnic cleansing. Machover also points to the Israeli leadership’s clear consciousness of its role as a strategic outpost for imperialism.

At the same time, however, the result produced by “the specific nature of Zionist colonization is that the conflict crystallized as a national one...here the clash between oppressor and oppressed — colonists and indigenous people — has assumed the form of a national conflict between two discrete and quite well-defined national groups, of roughly equal size.”

It’s of cardinal importance then to understand — against the toxic Zionist mythology of Israel as “the state of the Jewish people,” but also against the counter-illusion that Israeli Jews have no meaningful national identity — that colonization indeed created “a new nation: the Israeli Jews, or modern Hebrews.” (275, 276, all emphasis original)

Both nations as a matter of principle have the right of self-determination, which includes (if so desired) independent statehood, but this is inconceivable on the basis of Zionist supremacy embodied in Israel-as-it-presently-exists.

Several important conclusions follow, one of which is that the never-ending “one versus two-state solution” debate in the present situation is useless and diversionary (as I think a growing number of activists already know). While abstractly either one can be envisioned, “in fact none of this is feasible at present. Indeed, no genuine resolution is possible in the short or medium term, because of the enormous disparity in the balance of power.”

Because “(n)o balance of power lasts forever” — in particular, because of the decline in U.S. global and regional imperial dominance — longer-term transformation is possible. Yet “(i)t is pretty pointless to discuss the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as though it would take place in an isolated Palestinian box — whether partitioned or one piece — while ignoring the rest of the region, and failing to factor in its transformation, without which that resolution is in any case impossible.” (279, 280)

The answer then must lie in a regional socialist federation, with whatever internal borders correspond to the democratic desires of the peoples involved. The fact that these basic conclusions have stood the test of time from pre-1967 through the fall of pan-Arab nationalism and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, through the disasters of the Israeli invasions of Lebanon, two Palestinian intifadas, the horrific Israeli assaults on Gaza and so much more, is tremendously impressive politically — while at the same time deeply depressing in that all the fundamental problems remain unresolved, with all the attendant social damage and human misery.

## **National and Racist Oppression**

It was a distinctive and important contribution of the Matzpen group from its inception — before the 1967 war and occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem — to insist that the oppression of Palestinians by the “Jewish state” is not only a denial of civil rights, the position of the Israeli Communist Party, but also a denial of national rights.

In an important chapter on “Zionism, National Oppression, and Racism” Machover discusses the distinctive features of racism as a denial of individual rights of equal citizenship, and of national

oppression as a suppression of a people's collective rights of self-determination (political, cultural, etc.). While both forms of oppression operate inside Israel as well as in the Occupied Territories, their distinctive dynamics are important for understanding the full social reality. (It's interesting to think about how these forms of oppression interact, in the context of U.S. society, regarding African Americans, Native Americans and others).

The formative thinking of Matzpen was profoundly influenced by the Arab Marxist Jabra Nicola (1912-74), who joined the group in 1963 and is remembered in Machover's second chapter. According to Machover, Nicola's distinctive contributions included "the unity of the Arab East" as a powerful force for democratic and socialist transformation, and "staunch support for the right of the Israeli-Jewish people to self-determination," as well as "a vigorous struggle of ideas against the reactionary influence of religion and for women's liberation." (9)

While there's much more in the book than can be summarized here, one central essay, "The Class Nature of Israeli Society" (first published 1971), co-authored with Haim Hanegbi and Akiva Orr (who has recently died), is particularly important. It lays out the historic role of the Zionist labor movement in "a pattern of joint rule in which the labor bureaucracy played the senior role and the bourgeoisie the junior one, combining to form a new embryonic ruling class," an arrangement that "constitutes a unique feature of Israeli society." (87)

This phenomenon is critical to understanding the distinctive dynamics of Zionism in relation to its own population as "a society of immigrants" and "a society of settlers" marked by great ethnic diversity, to the indigenous people it displaced, and to foreign capital and imperialism.

Zionist labor's once dominant position has been superseded over the past three decades by a truly savage neoliberal capitalism, but it was of historic importance in the formation of Israeli society and the mythology surrounding "socialist" Zionism (which retains some residual role in attracting idealistic-minded Jewish youth to an imagined progressive Israel).

Also important is Ehud Ein-Gil and Machover's discussion of the "dialectic of exploitation and co-optation" of Israel's non-European (so-called "Oriental") Jewish population, which addresses a number of misunderstandings and illusions, especially regarding the identities of "Arab Jews" and their supposedly revolutionary potential on the basis of their ethnicity alone.

A number of the chapters consist of old and new critiques and reviews. One of these, "A Peace Activist on the Border," discusses Michel Warschawski's autobiographical *On the Border*, and readers who are interested in the history and unfortunate fragmentation of Matzpen will find Machover's take on it here. Briefly stated, Machover's view is that Warschawski's gravitation to the Fourth International produced a disastrous split in the Israeli organization, reducing it below "the critical mass that enabled it to make a significant mark on the Israeli political scene." (255)

The failure of that project was followed by what Machover regards as Warschawski's own retreat from socialist internationalism to "ethnic identity-based peace activism." (251) Although the splits in Matzpen into ideological fractions (there were more than one, I believe) were tragic, this last judgment seems overly harsh to me.

I think the difference in perspective partly reflects Warschawski's choice to remain rooted in Israeli society, and the necessity for the Alternative Information Center, which he helped found, to engage with more conservative as well as radical elements of the Palestinian leadership. In *On the Border*, Warschawski reflects on the twofold responsibility to pry open the Israeli side of the border while simultaneously to defend the Palestinian side.

## **On False Prophets of Peace**

Machover cites Warschawski's critical commentary on an unnamed "Israeli woman militant" arguing in 1993 to a Palestinian militant "that accepting a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was pure and simple treason" to the liberation struggle (Warschawski quoted by Machover, 251). While Warschawski views this position as arrogance, in Machover's view the Israeli militant was closer to the mark in understanding "that the Oslo Accords were indeed a monumental monstrous confidence trick played by the Israeli government on a politically submissive or at best gullible Palestinian petty-bourgeois leadership."

Whoever she may have been, the politics expressed by the Israeli militant correspond to the argument laid out by Tiva Honig-Parnass in *False Prophets of Peace*. Honig-Parnass is an acute analyst and co-editor with Toufic Haddad of the earlier collection *Between the Lines. Readings on Israel, the Palestinians, and the U.S. "War on Terror"* (Haymarket, 2007). Her powerful account of how the dispossessed Arabs and their Nakba (catastrophe) were invisible to her as a Palmach fighter in the 1948 war appeared in ATC 74 [2].

In the current work, she lays out a fundamental anti-Zionist critique along lines similar to Machover, but with a specific focus on the snares and delusions of the "Zionist peace camp," and (although mostly implicitly) the dominant elements of the Palestinian nationalist leadership who rely on it. The argument is sharp and clear, especially in demonstrating the hypocrisy of the supposed ideal of "the Jewish and democratic state." As she puts it at the outset:

The Zionist Left has been associated with universalistic values of humanism and democracy, which guide its approach toward Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Western progressives accept the idea that the Zionist Left has truly striven to attain civil rights between the Palestinian minority and Jewish majority in Israel... (1)

Ripping apart this mythology is an important service to an understanding of the inherent nature of political Zionism, i.e. the theory and practice of "the Jewish state" (in this regard see particularly her second chapter, "'Jewish Majority' Spells Racism"). On the other hand, given that the really-existing Zionist Left in Israeli politics has been almost completely shattered, the practical importance of the focus on liberal-left Zionism seems somewhat limited.

Honig-Parnass is also concerned with the trends in Israel loosely grouped under the label of "post-Zionism," whose adherents she claims "are considered the theoretical and ideological core critics of the Jewish state" but in reality "have failed to provide a theoretical analysis of Israel as a colonial-settler state...inherently oppressive in terms of class and nationality." (139, 141)

In her view, these shortcomings arise from these intellectuals' embrace of "postmodern disillusionment with rationalism" and rejection of "universal narratives and paradigms of modernity, such as liberal nationality and Marxism" (139 — I suspect that "nationality" should read "nationalism"). She explores this theme in chapters 6, 7 and 8, arguing that the postmodern assumptions of "post-Zionism" render its critique ineffectual and uncomprehending of Palestinian national resistance.

There are some editing glitches that make the book's language less clear than it should be. (I am grateful to Jimmy Johnson for the following observations.) "*Kibush Ha'avodah*" is transliterated as "*kibush h'avodah*" and confusingly translated as "conquering labor;" its meaning is the Zionist "conquest of labor" through the boycott of Arab goods and forcing Jewish employers to hire Jews only. (11)

The term “denial of exile” (21) should be “negation of exile” (the Hebrew term is “*shlilat ha-galut*”). This was an important concept in Zionist thinking, intimately related to the need to make the Palestinians disappear from their land, figuratively and physically. The early Zionist labor party Ahdut Ha’avodah is also rendered as Achdut Ha’avodah and weirdly, the two are indexed separately.

These books are important contributions not only for historical perspective but for present-day understanding. The Obama administration’s utter moral and political collapse on the expansion of Israeli settlements, the assault on Gaza and the Palestinian Authority’s statehood resolution at the UN General Assembly is about to be compounded by another feeble attempt to “restart the peace process” — the endless process that has become its own peace-industrial complex which never produces peace, let alone any semblance of justice, and of course isn’t intended to do so.

The fundamental insights of the formative Israeli revolutionary left remain as impressive as ever – inspiring in their clarity of vision, even if it’s distressing to see how, if anything, political discourse about Israel and Palestine has regressed as much as advanced in half a century.

Will the winds of the new Arab revolution transform the prospects in a positive direction? Will a strongly rooted and politically coherent left emerge with a principled understanding of “the unity of the Arab East” and clear recognition of the rights of national minorities (Kurds and Israeli Jews included) as well as religious and ethnic communities? It may seem a long shot, but the hope remains.

### **David Finkel**

[Postscript: A number of tributes to Akiva Orr, a founder of Matzpen, have appeared online. One of these appears at

<http://www.israeli-occupation.org/2013-02-13/akiva-orr-co-founder-of-matzpen-passes-away/>.]

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### **P.S.**

\* From Against the Current n° 164, May/June 2013. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

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### **Footnotes**

[1] also online at <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/machover/2006/11/isr-pal.html>

[2] online at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/843>