

History as politics by other means?

A few thoughts on the recent *forum*-interview with Ilan Pappé

Mohamed Hamdi

A consensus seems to have established itself even among trained historians that the study of the past is in and by itself a biased and therefore wholly unscientific undertaking. The past, so the anti-Realist theory goes, is invented rather than discovered. As opposed to the radical anti-Realist position, according to which historical facts simply do not exist, the more moderate and much more widespread position admits the existence of a mind-independent past while simultaneously asserting that we cannot objectively know anything about it. All we can do – and indeed all we do, according to anti-Realists – is to construct the past. Hence, an account of the past does not tell us what really happened but only what a historian wants (us) to believe has happened.

An adherent of the moderate anti-Realist position, the eminent Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has recently summed up his stance by dividing historians into two distinct camps: those like himself who „admit that history is not a science (...), and those who continue to pretend [it is] an objective, unbiased science“. He goes on to say that all historians infuse fantasy, individual preferences and moral convictions into their narrative thus creating a very subjective interpretation of history.¹ Both the radical and the moderate anti-Realist stances call into question the classical dictum as famously formulated by the Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke, that a historian should reproduce the past *as it really happened* [„so wie es eigentlich gewesen“²]. Most importantly, they both have serious implications on our understanding of history and the role of historians in our society. I shall herein address some of the issues and contradictions which result from the

views defended by Pappé and many other historians and put forward an intermediate view of what historians should strive for.

Ideological historiography

Commonplace interpretation of history is more often than not concerned with matters relating to the present rather than the past. In fact, it's hard to deny that the past has always been-and will most probably continue to be-exploited by all kinds of cultural and ideological groups for their very own purposes. What a society or a group identifies as and what it strives to be in the future is essentially derived from, and reflected in, the ways it interprets, remembers, commemorates and celebrates what it considers to be its collective past. As a result, these groups and societies not only use history to foster their *own* identity but inevitably also attribute identities to outside groups by way of demarcation. Furthermore, a group's understanding of the past will also serve as a rationale for implementing new policies within one's own group or against outsiders. In other words, history binds people together, gives them a shared identity that separates them from others and eventually also serves as an incentive for political actions.

The Zionist ideology is a case in point. Zionism has been projecting into the future the hopes and fears of a peoples defined through a common past and a common land – or lack thereof. It has inspired the first waves of Jewish migration into Palestine

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Mohamed Hamdi has studied history and philosophy at the University of Luxembourg.

(so-called „Aliyahs“) at the end of the 19th century and continues to shape and condone the policies of the State of Israel today. Furthermore, the events that have led to the creation of Israel and the history of the relatively young Jewish state have exclusively been interpreted through a Zionist prism, thus giving birth to a series of oftentimes religiously inspired myths and grand narratives that were meant to vindicate the colonization of Palestine. Those myths include the idea of a „land without people for a people without land“, the claim that the badly equipped Jewish army had to oppose a far superior Arab enemy during the 1948 war, or the belief that the approximately 700 000 Palestinians who had left their homes in the same year had done so on their own volition.

It wasn't until the 1980's that a group of Israeli historians – one of them being Ilan Pappé – started to critically assess the official narrative of their country. Basing their analyses on newly disclosed archival documents, these so-called „New Historians“ have rewritten Zionism's and Israel's past, thus openly challenging the very ideological and political foundations of their homeland. It therefore comes as no surprise that their publications have triggered off a nationwide debate about the country's history and self-concept. Just as the old generation of historians has been criticized by the new generation for its partisan scholarship so the latter was accused of being driven by anti-Zionist sentiments in their interpretation of the country's history. Indeed, several historians within both groups defended their outspoken political reading of the past and readily admitted that they endorsed an anti-Realist view-point of historiography. The rift between the two generations of Israeli historians thus also raises broader epistemological questions concerning the art of writing history and of studying the past in general. It eventually leads back to the question dividing Realists and Anti-Realists, which is, whether we can gain objective knowledge of the past or whether our historical narratives are nothing but constructions.

Implications, issues and contradictions of anti-Realism

Ilan Pappé's anti-Realist premise that historians cannot reproduce a reliable account of past events prompts the question of the purpose of history-writing. If truth is not the objective of historical inquiry, then what is? Pappé suggests that history should become politicized if it wants to have a purpose at all. To put it differently, rather than denouncing the ideological instrumentalization of the past, historians should not only admit their bias

but even brazenly and openly carry it out. Pappé seems to be saying that, since we cannot know what really happened in the past, we should just make up a narrative that best suits our moral and political outlook. The past is then only interesting if it serves a purpose in the present. Whether the narrative created by historians actually coincides with reality or not becomes – if at all – a secondary matter. Under such circumstances, history will eventually be reduced to the play field of ideologues and historians will become the primary actors in the propaganda machinery.

A further issue with Pappé's anti-Realist point of view is that it seems to put all interpretations of the past on equal footing. If facts are less important than ideology, then anything goes. As a consequence, Pappé's own theses would be just as biased and false as the Zionist myths he so vehemently criticizes. This in turn leads to two further issues: what are the criteria for choosing one version of the past over another if truth is removed as a yardstick? And more importantly: why should we have debates and arguments on history at all if the truth about the past remains beyond reach and all interpretations are equally valid and equally wrong? After all, serious debate is only possible if a) truth and falsehood exist and b) truth and falsehoods can be discovered. Pappé appears to answer the questions in a twofold way: first he suggests that our narrative choice should be lead by our subjective preferences and that the only thing that really matters is our intellectual and moral coherence. Secondly, he seems to imply that the historian should always take a side. Interpretations of the past that have negative repercussions in the present or in the future should be called into question.

These approaches are however equally as problematic as Pappé's previously mentioned ones. To start with, whether or not a historian believes that a given narrative will have negative repercussions depends on his moral and political outlook. The debate will hence shift from an epistemological („What can we know about the past?“) to a moral or political one („How can we justify our choice of historical narrative?“). History turns into a mere side-issue, as historical truth and facts are replaced by ideological arguments. Furthermore, as Pappé himself readily admits, history is not as simple and binary. It is neither right nor always possible to divide historical groups and actors into two clearcut categories of good and bad, oppressed and oppressor. And even if it were possible, it would not imply that the oppressed have always been righteous and that history should only be interpreted in their favor. Besides, it is perfectly imaginable that the roles

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of oppressed and oppressor may change over time. Must we then also shift our interpretation of the past? How will this affect the historian's intellectual coherence? The question begs, whether Pappé would have written a Zionist interpretation of the history of European Jewry had he worked as a historian any time before 1948.

A midway alternative

So what should the purpose of history be and what are the historian's limits, roles and duties? Are historians doomed to be nothing more than the public relations managers of ideologues? Is it true that we cannot have any objective knowledge about the past and that our historical narratives are merely subjective and partisan interpretations? Even Realist historians will have to admit, that at least some part of their profession requires construction and postulation. Given that history is the study of events long gone, all a historian can rely on when studying history are material remnants of former times or repercussions of past events. Unlike other sciences, history cannot rely on repeated experimentation in order to corroborate its claims. Many of the questions that therefore arise in history cannot be answered satisfactorily but have to be hypothesized – or constructed, to use this anti-Realist term. Like scientists in any other field, the historian will have to conjecture those aspects of his research which lack proper empirical evidence. This would for instance include the motives, thoughts and feelings that prompted historical figures to act the way they did.

Leopold von Ranke, 1877 (Public Domain)



But the study of the past should not be reduced to this speculative realm. Artifacts, data and documents abound which allow us to analyze and study the past in a scientific and detached way. Interpretations about the past can, but do not necessarily *have* to be influenced by ideological or contextual biases. For clearly, some interpretations of history are closer to reality than others. The question is thus not whether it is possible to gain any objective knowledge about the past – as it obviously is – but rather, what are the limits of objective inquiry beyond which we must contend ourselves with interpretations and constructions. It is too facile to argue, that, since they cannot reproduce a flawless and faithful narrative of the past, historians should disregard standards of accuracy altogether and focus solely on subjective preference. Such an approach basically condones the abuse of history as performed by all kinds of ideologies throughout history.

Contrary to Pappé's advice, historiography should therefore become de-politicized lest it loses its epistemological value and purpose. Historians ought to focus more on evidence and less on ideological inclinations while at the same time remain aware of the limits of their trade. The study of the past can be scientific if historians adhere to the required methodology of historical investigation; that is, to study and analyze the past in an unpartisan way with the aim of understanding what really happened – irrespective of one's political or moral convictions. The role of the historian is thus twofold: on the one hand he ought to provide new insights about past events and present as faithful an account as possible. On the other hand he should call into question the veracity of politically motivated narratives, debunk them as ideological constructs that have distorted the truth for present-day purposes and offer a counter-narrative based on facts instead.

That is in essence what the New Historians were striving to do in their scathing critiques of Zionist history-writing. It would however be an egregious mistake to produce competing historical myths or to replace one ideological reading of the past by another no less ideological one. Politicizing history would do the scientific study of the past a great disfavor. All that ought to matter is the quest for truth. ♦

1 "History, narratives and storytelling", interview with Ilan Pappé. (Url: <https://www.forum.lu/2017/01/31/history-narratives-and-storytelling/>) See also: "L'art du marketing en politique", conference with Ilan Pappé co-organized by forum, CPJPO, Neimënster, ASTM and AMD in Luxembourg on the 20. January 2017. (Url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJCM-r5myi4>)

2 Ranke, Leopold von, *Geschichten der romaneischen und germanischen Völker*, 1824, S. 4.