Introduction

Beyond National Narratives

> Histories are written from fundamentally different – indeed irreconcilable – perspectives or viewpoints, none of which is complete or completely "true." Joan Wallach Scott (1991:776)

This book explores the ways through which anthropological data and analysis contribute to the understanding of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and its formative year, 1948. Anthropology can shed new light in three different ways. First, it endorses a closeup perspective, with the intent of uncovering the microhistorical setting of memories. It attends to details, some which have been obscured by overarching narratives, usually political in character. Second, it gives access to changes over time and the fluidity of narratives; it is attentive to these transformations. Third, in contrast to history, it favors alternative versions and their juxtaposition; versions are often understood as complementary rather than competing or invalidating one another. It should be noted, though, that historians such as Joan Wallach Scott have begun to adopt a postpositivistic point of view.

Once we open the framework to incorporate multiple understandings of a conflict, we can recognize that nationalism is part of the story, but not the whole. This was true in 1948, and it remains true today. It is through personal narratives that I follow changing perceptions of the Israel–Palestine conflict. These narratives bear all the traces of the interviewees' social origins, generational belonging, gender, social class, and local affiliations. Sticking to the national level reveals little of these multiple identities and the ways they shape the stories people tell about what happened to them in 1948.

There have been some promising ways in which a subnational understanding of the conflict has been noted in the literature.[1] Salim Tamari and André Mazzawi (Tamari 2009) had different populations in mind when dealing with the portrayal of the city of Jaffa; their social composition differed. While the former was more attentive to the middle-class refugees who were forced to leave in 1948, the latter focused on those Palestinians who stayed on after Israel's conquest. An oral history study conducted

in Jaffa among its elderly population, both Arab and Jewish, further revealed inconsistencies between personal narratives and formulations using national categories alone (Hazan and Monterescu 2005). These studies of Jaffa illustrate the impossibility of achieving a uniform portrayal even within a local setting, and demonstrate the existence of collective pasts and the pasts of different collectivities.

The study of generations is another significant marker in the move away from an overarching national identity. The Palestinians who lived through 1948 have popularly been defined within Palestinian society as *jil al-Nakba*, meaning the Nakba generation. Studies have followed this classification, contrasting it with other generations (Sayigh 1979; Rosenfeld 2004; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod [eds.] 2007; Ghanim 2009). The term *jil al-Nakba* embodies innocence, the virtues of village life, attachment to the land, and victimhood. It is a nostalgic evocation of a lost world. There is an idiom for the parallel Israeli generation of 1948, *dor tashah*, used both in popular speech and in the literature. *Dor tashah* means the 1948 generation, drawing the name from the Hebrew calendar. Its image is different from that of *jil al-Nakba*, and embedded in it is the romantic story of the young heroes who fought and brought about the rebirth of the Jewish people in Palestine (Sivan 1991). The Israeli 1948 generation is composed of elements of purity, courage, and self-sacrifice.[2]

Both generational terms have become emblematic in the subsequent history of the two sides. In the Israeli case, *dor tashah* dominated the literary and political life of Israel for at least three decades. *Jil al-Nakba*, in contrast, was silenced and silent in terms of reaching a wide audience. Until the late 1980s the narratives of the latter circulated primarily among family and friends.[3] Yet from that point onward Palestinians, their families, and their communities felt a sense of urgency in gathering the 1948 stories and publishing them. The younger generations measure themselves against *jil al-Nakba* and participate in this move toward oral recording and written documentation of what happened sixty years ago, before this generation dies out.[4] In both cases there were, and still are, attempts to mobilize the two generations in support of the national version. At the same time, *jil al-Nakba* and *dor tashah* preserve their unique voices.[5]

A second set of developments that bypasses the national framework is the move toward microhistory. Anthropologists have always tended to focus on the small scale and the local, but this pursuit is now spreading to other disciplines. Historian Bishara Doumani edited a volume on Palestinian social biographies and family histories. He noted that his goal was to expose "the complexity of daily life and the multiple historical trajectories, both of which are masked by nationalist constructions of

the past" (2007:6). Yet Doumani was also hesitant, fearing that his approach might "subvert the political language of a people who have not yet achieved the right of self determination" (2007:5). He argued that such a move is less threatening to Israelis, who live in a well-established state.

Doumani may have been underestimating the corrosive effects of subnational conversations about 1948 among Israelis. If one probes beneath the surface, one realizes that on both sides there are those who speak of their history without locating it consciously within the needs and clichés of their political leaders and national movements. The fact that the Israeli state exists does not diminish the parallel between practices of remembrance on both sides. Some of these practices are national, especially in the Israeli case, but even then, storytelling of various kinds goes on at the subnational level among Palestinians and Israelis alike.[6] Listening to these voices is remote from the scholarship of advocacy.

Memory

This book cannot and should not establish the veracity of one or another account of events in 1948. Rather, it aspires to revisit 1948 in the footsteps of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and expose diverging narrative strands. It is essential to state that each narrative, in and of itself, is dynamic; people constantly reconstruct their past. The narrators do not use memory as a snapshot, but as a prism. Memory is far from being a camera that can supposedly reproduce eyewitnessing. Walter Benjamin likened it to a theater, writing that "he who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside" (1979:296). The process of remembrance, an ongoing excavation, is the heart of the matter and is crucial for any understanding of current circumstances.

Concentrating on small groups enables us to see how remembrance happens and how it is reinforced by the social exchanges that span decades. The work of Winter (1995) and later Winter and Sivan (1999) reintroduced Benjamin's emphasis on the process of remembrance. Moreover, their work demonstrated how social remembrance is something one can follow as it evolves within civil society; in particular, in the fictive kinship of small groups. Their work, as does this book, contrasts with much of the literature on social memory, which has dedicated its attention to more hegemonic manifestations of collective memory,

primarily national memory and its change over time (Schwartz 1991; Confino 1997; Sturken 1997; Schwartz 2000).

This book examines settings that are even more intimate than those described by Winter and Sivan. It enters a space where it is appropriate to employ the term "microsocial remembrance." Both Palestinians and Israelis get together with kin and friends, and each time they do they deepen the affective bonds they share. When members of a small army unit continue to meet year after year, long after they ended their military service, they form a tightly knit group of people who tell the story of their past together. The same is true for displaced Palestinian families and friends. When they meet in homes, on pilgrimage to the village site, or to view a video cassette of such a visit, they retell their story and their fate. Social remembrance and its rituals are embedded in the calendar and in special spaces, but also in the vernacular.

Here we enter into the domain of what Halbwachs (1992 ed.) termed the social frameworks of memory, "les cadres sociaux de la mémoire." These groups continue over generations to construct memory as a joint enterprise of people who go through life-framing experiences together. And it is together that they narrate the shared story of their common past. Remembrance, argues Halbwachs, is meaningless outside a social network. We are told who we are by parents, relatives, and neighbors, and learn about the past in collectives such as village folk or veterans. Social groups, often small ones, circulate memories and thereby give meaning to them.

Remembrance needs tight social groups, but it also needs interactions located in space. What is crucial in the cases examined is that remembrance is a social practice; it is a practice defined both by how the people who come together treat each other and by how they relate to the landscape and their material environment. Scholars have long followed the lead of Marcel Proust, and dwelled on the material and embodied nature of memory. Halbwachs demonstrated the entrenchment of the past in the landscape when writing on the "legendary topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land." He noted that "a group in a sense takes with it the form of the places where it has lived" (1992:203). At the same time, the landscape adapts to the images that the group wishes to construct and preserve.

Roger Bastide ([1960] 2007) elaborated on the embodiment of memory in his study of the African religions of Brazil. Bastide argued that while myths tend to change and mutate, rituals are more enduring. The act of narrating the past should be understood as a practice of remembrance. The ritualized practices of remembrance in this book are often pilgrimages: those held by Palestinian refugees to their demolished

villages, by Jewish Palmach soldiers to their battlefields, and by British policemen to Palestine. Practices also include the embodiment of what came to be seen as symbolic acts: preparing and serving Palestinian food from one's village, giving it to those who appreciate the origin of that food, and exchanging objects that are imbued with sacred characteristics, such as soil from the village.[7]

Practices of remembrance are inseparable from the landscape. In the course of the last sixty years Palestine's landscape has changed dramatically. The changes are due to the rapid pace of development as well as a systematic obliteration of many Palestinian sites. This may have been anticipated by the veterans of the Palmach; less so by British ex-policemen and by Palestinian refugees. In both latter cases the encounter with the old land in its new form was often disappointing, to say the least. The scale of change was astounding. Some Palestinians developed practices of reappropriating the village by retracing the map they have in their heads about where the village well was, where there was a flight of steps, or a cave, where the old café stood, where the graveyard was, where the fields were that their fathers had tilled. These fields had individual names, and their evocation brought them to life. Despite vast changes, the landscape is still dotted with pre-1948 remains. Those who come back to survey the site of their memories can find them.

While Israel obliterated or neglected Arab-Palestinian remains, it preserved many of the British governmental buildings. In fact, the Israeli authorities often used them for their original administrative purpose. This is still the situation today (2010) with respect to some of the court buildings and government offices, as well as police stations and army bases. Many Tegart police stations built in the 1930s still serve as police and army outposts, while a few have been turned into historical museums.[8] The Survey of Israel (Merkaz Mipui Yisrael) is located in a building that once served as the Mandate's Department of Surveys (in Tel Aviv). The Israeli Department of Antiquities is located inside the Rockefeller Museum of archeology in Jerusalem, which was established during the Mandate period for the very same purposes. Despite the salient presence of these buildings throughout the country, they go unnoticed as institutions of British origin. They are sites of neither pilgrimage nor of memory (other than for the small number of British ex-policemen and soldiers who come for visits), and there are no political struggles surrounding them.

Yet the presence of these institutions throughout the country is a reminder of the British impact on Palestine's governmental infrastructure as well as its urban and rural outlay. By incorporating into the analysis some of the Mandate government's fundamentals, I hope to

further break down false dichotomies between a global category called the Palestinian Arabs and another called the Israeli Jews. The British voices are not merely another, external, component, but rather allow a vertical gaze. Although this was a Mandate, as opposed to colonies elsewhere, the British managed Palestine with a similar rationale and manner to that which pertained elsewhere. The same issues of control and policing applied to Palestine as in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, or nearby Cyprus. Moreover, what transpired was the unintentional convergence between British and Jewish interests. Upon the British departure, and even before that, Israeli Jews were trying to step into their shoes and establish themselves as a hegemonic power, dominating a subject population, which they did – first in 1948 and again in 1967.

Methodological choices

This research is based on qualitative methods. The period of research spanned ten years (from 1996 to 2006) and incorporated participant observation, interviews and casual chats, and the analysis of sources such as archival matter, films, memoirs, prose, poetry, and material objects; ethnography consists of these varied elements. However, this study places the voices of the people at its heart. Many meetings were not a one-time occasion but rather ongoing relationships; trust was acquired, usually after multiple visits. The Palestinian families with whom I spoke were well aware of the danger of meeting an Israeli intelligence agent or journalist posing as an anthropologist. These fears were mitigated by repeated visits, but suspicion always lingered. The veterans of the Palmach I interviewed were also wary, since many of them did not want to reopen the story of 1948. There were secrets there, and they were often hesitant to talk about them. This hesitation intensified when the Palmachniks learned that their stories would be juxtaposed with those of Palestinians. However, fieldwork was made possible through the belief shared with many interlocutors that their stories need to be told. The time has come. However, due to the sensitivity of the topic, I have used pseudonyms for most of the interviewees and most of the place names. The two exceptions are the interviews with cartographers (who are far less sensitive) and the British policemen (whose interviews are open to the general public).[9]

In fieldwork, anthropologists recognize the danger of identifying or empathizing uncritically with interviewees. Such a danger exists in the current political context, since I am an Israeli and some of my conversations were with Palestinian refugees. Empathy is unavoidable, and at times necessary, but I have tried not to sanitize stories which show

kindness and courage alongside frailties and faults. Such contradictions are built into the subject positions of the researcher and of the individuals who spoke to me about their lives and their memories (Abu-Lughod 1993; Bornstein 2001).

As an anthropologist I sought to make the voice of the individual accessible. Individuals draw on social constructions and feed into them, yet anthropology tries to maintain the uniqueness of each voice. I aimed to minimize my interventions and maximize the time and space for every interviewee's narration. Often, when transcribing my interviews, I rebuked myself for having interrupted the flow of speech; the longer the monologues were, even when interspersed with silences, the more revealing they tended to be. Had I been eliciting life stories, I would have paid more attention to the structure of the narrative – to the way monologues began and ended, to what was incorporated into a biographical narrative and what was left out.[10] Had this study placed an emphasis on linguistic aspects, it would have been more attentive to the use of certain words and syntax, to pauses and lapses. However, the narratives of this book circled around memories of 1948 rather than life stories or linguistic choices. At times, the life course and the language did matter, and were examined. The fact that Hebrew is my mother tongue and that the final product is in English adds to the distance from the speakers' original expressions. However, at all times I have tried to preserve and present the unique voices of the interviewees.

This emphasis helped me see the gendering of narrative events. In traditional Palestinian society, history is the domain of men (Muhawi and Kanaana 1989; Slyomovics 1998; Fleischman 2003). Folk tales and the domestic sphere form the domain of women. I was usually directed to men because I defined my fieldwork as an exploration of 1948. On the few occasions when, in the company of men, women tried to add to the historical story, they were usually hushed (see Chapter 5). Yet sometimes, when I would visit with my baby son, this subject position complicated my role. When breast feeding, I was confined to the company of women, and there women tended to discuss domestic matters. Recurrent visits also enabled more contact with the women, including, at times, a few younger women who were considered knowledgeable in history. Such a division between men and women was different when interviewing the Palmachniks, as it was almost always on a one-to-one basis; I was meeting either a man or a woman. This made the women's memories more accessible. Here too, however, women's memories differed from those of the men.

This book is more about men than about women. In time of collective strife and war, men are usually at the front of the stage. Their memories are about what they were and what they are. The men of this book are

not necessarily the powerful patriarchs or independent fighters they sometimes appear to be. It is true that they have made choices, but once they were part of the social and political system, it was the system and its logic that defined the contours of their experience and their interpretation.

Representativeness

The choice to focus on two specific social groups – Palestinian rural refugees from the Carmel region and Palmach veterans of one unit – inevitably brings up the issue of representativeness. While there are similarities in the ways the Palestinian rural populations narrate 1948, my interviewees' stories evolved within specific village communities and locales. Moreover, the rural experience cannot represent urban Palestinian forms of remembrance. The same is true for Palmach veterans: units varied in their ethos; the Palmach differed from the Jewish army at large; and why consider Jewish ex-soldiers rather than civilians? These are inherent challenges to anthropologists. While the beauty of the case study is in the way it exposes the details of the specific, case studies are necessarily few. In that sense they are not, and should not be, fully representative. At the same time, I have been acutely sensitive to the need to choose cases that are neither random nor exceptional. Like the Palmach members, the Palestinian farmers became national icons.

Palmach veterans have been part and parcel of Israel's nation building. Despite some subversive narratives that they may tell, they have been close to the centers of Israeli power. They have been part of the consensus surrounding the national myth; in fact, they were its heroes.[11] Moreover, they established ongoing organizations that allowed them to keep in touch, produce and circulate books and films, as well as establish a museum and thus be present and influential at the national level. The iconization of the Palestinian *fellahin* was different. In the first years of exile the refugees did not have a clear set of national myths with which they had to conform (or negotiate their own version). The sharing of memories and the construction of myths evolved in a diffused manner, often under vulnerable conditions, with the refugees lacking economic stability and unable to sustain the old village social networks. Yet the *fellahin* gradually turned into national icons – representing village life and personifying it as a kind of paradise lost. Moreover, they were idealized for enduring the difficult conditions in camps and becoming the *fida'iyun,* the freedom fighters of the 1960s and 1970s.[12] Precisely because prominence was attributed to the Palmachniks and *fellahin*, I dwell on these groups and the way they choose to tell their histories. Although I have posed the two sets of memories one alongside the other,

they are not simply in parallel. Rather, they are outcomes of these people's different roles in the past and present; the iconic role of both groups changed, and continues to do so over time.

To these two sets of memories I have added a third one, that of the British policemen. In terms of representativeness, the policemen were only a small segment of a much larger British administration. They could only grasp a partial picture but, as with the ex–Palestinian villagers and the Palmach veterans, it was one at the ground level; they were witnesses to daily life in Palestine just as 1948 was about to change everything. The memories of these three groups are in no way exhaustive; they portray segments of a complex event. However, each case study allows access to a unique perspective, created over sixty years, and together they reveal the disagreements and hidden transcripts in interpreting 1948.

The structure of the book

One has to be acquainted with the national formulations of the conflict to be able to see beyond them. Chapters 1–3 provide this background for the "memories-based" chapters that will follow in Chapters 4–9. Chapter 1 begins by outlining some of the general developments that led to the 1948 war and affected its outcome. It is a very short introduction to these historical events, beginning with the British conquest of Palestine in 1917–18 and ending with the termination of the 1948 war. This is followed by a concise overview of the historiography of the 1948 war and the ways it has changed over the years.

Chapter 2 traces some of the ways Palestine's landscape was constructed by the Mandate government, using cartography as its prism. It follows the determination of Palestine's borders, the choice of place names and the different elements that appeared on the maps. The maps reveal the consolidation of a "geo-body," closely linked to the evolution of the nation-state. The salience and variety of Mandate maps demonstrate new methods of control based on extensive bureaucratization and official registration. It included parcellation and forestation, the classification of the country's populations, and the choice of place names (Arabic, Hebrew, or English). These different means shaped the emerging political entity of Palestine.

Chapter 3 considers the production and circulation of maps among Arabs and Jews during the Mandate period, dwelling on how these populations adapted to British administrative methods. It points to an evident convergence between British and Jewish cartographic practices that intensified as the Mandate progressed. This is somewhat paradoxical since, at

least at the policy level, Britain abstained from assisting the Jews, especially during the 1940s. Yet the British administration was involuntarily helpful to the Zionist establishment, and thus the latter was better prepared for the 1948 war. While this chapter still forms part of the contextual information, it begins to incorporate oral testimonies: the memories of cartographers who worked during the 1940s.

From Chapter 4 onwards the focus is on social remembrance: first Palestinian, then Israeli, and finally British. Chapter 4 focuses on a single Palestinian village during the war. It juxtaposes the memories of the villagers with army documents, demonstrating how the two sources complement one another, creating a detailed narrative at the local level. At the same time it also points to the differences between an official Jewish record (soon afterwards framed within a national logic) and a local social understanding (that of the Arab villagers). For instance, from the villagers' point of view the village began its disintegration long before it was occupied, and their retreat from home was understood as temporary long after they had left. Nationalism found little expression in the villagers' narratives.

Chapter 5 examines the memories of rural Palestinian women. These women-turned-refugees in 1948 are witnesses who tell us something about the transition from an explicit national project to the messy local and familial stories of exile. Their memories defy a simplistic chronological and coherent narrative, binding the past to the present; their willingness to speak up depends on the social context; and they give testimony not only by way of speech but also of reenactment. Reenactment is further developed in Chapter 6, which explores Palestinian refugees' return visits to their demolished villages, dwelling on practices of collecting traces of the past. Village plants, soil, and photographs are turned into a sacred substance and used in family settings, or even in shops, echoing a former life. Even when one is away from the village land, the mere naming of places is endowed with the sacred. While these practices may seem, at times, private, they are also part of a collective art of commemoration.

Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the Jewish-Israeli memories of 1948 through the voices of Palmach veterans. Chapter 7 explores how the male fighters coped with the gap between the public heroic descriptions of Israel's War of Independence and their own experiences on the battlefield. It focuses on the ways they describe comradeship, death, and their participation in the expulsion and killing of Arabs. Different silences are revealed now, sixty years on. The women of the Palmach are also voicing certain old–new matters now, and these are considered in Chapter 8. The public portrayal of Palmach women tends to emphasize an egalitarian ethos of male–female comradeship and female salience in