

Review of *Unacknowledged Kinships: Postcolonial studies and the Historiography of Zionism*, ed. By Stefan Vogt, Derek Penslar, and Arie Saposnik. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2023, pp. x, 350.

by

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Zionism and postcolonial studies (hereafter PoCo), this collection of essays claims, have an ‘unacknowledged kinship’ (2). If ‘understood as a project of self-empowerment’, Zionism could be seen as ‘a subaltern nationalism’, with ‘similarities and differences’ to other ‘anticolonial nationalist ideologies and movements across the globe’: ‘Indian nationalism, for instance, includes at least two ways to imagine a national community: one that places India in a historicist narrative and is heavily indebted to European nationalist traditions, and another that refers to non- European — in this case, Indian — spiritual practices and beliefs’ (12). But what is ‘subaltern’ or subordinated, *a priori*, about ‘spiritual practices and beliefs’ that are ‘non-European’? PoCo, in most of its by-now conventionalized renderings, operates with a nationalism-vs-colonialism binary, and a European-vs-non-European one. Recovering such a framing, which isn’t aware how banal it has become, and applying it to something else, doesn’t, even at first glance, seem a very good idea.

Here we can move to some specifics. The exception to the non-application of PoCo to Zionism is apparently Edward W Said’s concept of Orientalism. The study of ‘Orientalist ideologies and structures in and around the Zionist movement’ allegedly provides ‘important insights into the self- image and positioning of Zionist Jews between the “East” and the “West”’ (6). Another invocation is provided. ‘[Dipesh] Chakrabarty argues that European concepts of history, society, politics, and culture, while being indispensable to critically confront global structures of domination, are utterly insufficient to understand and eventually abolish them’ (11). Other writers drawn upon are Aamer Mufti on ‘the contradictions of the universalism of the European Enlightenment’; Paul Gilroy, who uses the concept of ‘diaspora’ for both Black and Jewish communities, and sees similarities between the rhetoric and aspirations of Zionism and Black nationalism; Stuart Hall, who sees identity as both a disassembling and a reassembling; and Homi Bhabha, whose invocation of ‘in-between-ness’ is apparently useful for understanding Zionism (8-10). This allegedly enables a view of ‘the colonizing and the colonized parts of the world as an integrated space and emphasizes the multiple migrations of people, power structures, commodities, and ideas between them’ (13-14). This ‘insight’ is shared by what we now call ‘global history’, and with the necessary changes for incommensurate scales, histories of the Anthropocene.

The book, according to its editors, is, like Caesar’s Gaul, divided into three main parts (15), but if you look at the contents, there is, like Goscinnny and Uderzo’s Gaul, a fourth part,

‘Conversations’ with two postcolonial scholars, which is the book’s built-in and do-it-yourself review section. These authors are effectively tasked with anointing the exercise and legitimating the book. In the Interview, Dipesh Chakrabarty is asked by Stefan Vogt to define the postcolonial and to affirm the editor-interviewer’s associative links; interviewer and interviewee mostly talk past each other, though not without Chakrabarty saying that his own work has benefitted from ‘German Jewish’ thought: Walter Benjamin and, inevitably, Hannah Arendt, who refers to Jews as ‘pariahs’, which is a Tamil word (279). And in the Afterword, Ato Quayson, an Africanist, recounts his own encounters with Jewish history, asking rather less than profound questions and drawing banal parallels as he goes along: ‘Are the Uyghurs China’s Palestinians, and if so, how are Palestinian (and Arab) provocations against Israel to be compared to the life-and-death protests of the Uyghurs in China?’ (292); or ‘After a while I discovered that Jewish storytelling bore some uncanny resemblances to African storytelling and that they shared many features of orality between them’ (294).

The essays that appear in the other three parts, ‘Conceptualizations’, ‘Looking West, Looking East’, and ‘Palestine and Israel Between Empire and Decolonization’ respectively, can be of some interest to a dilettante or a non-specialist. In the first essay of the first part, Manja Hermann disputes the idea that ‘the authentic Jew’ in German-Jewish thought was situated somewhere in ‘the East’. Instead, she argues, ‘the Jewish nationalist and Zionist discourse of authenticity’ or ‘authenticities’ were ‘constructed by means of counter-narratives’. If by this she means, to quote her, that it was impossible to construct the idea of the Jew without directing an argument ‘against a majority culture, or against a “master narrative” or a “dominant discourse”’ (30), then she acknowledges the trap of a ‘counter-narrative’ that contains, and reproduces, the ‘dominant discourse’, which is of course what PoCo does too: there is no escape, and no possibility of critique, because much of it is a theorization of authenticity. And if that’s what we’re saying, how is the PoCo framing useful? Later (31-32), she cites Charles Taylor citing Johann Gottfried von Herder, and that’s more to the point: a Zionist idea that only Zionism can render the authentic Jew, the others being rendered fake by assimilation-and-inauthenticity, borrows from a dominant Germanic-völkisch argument. Which, of course, is common to all romantic nationalisms that have to define themselves: it’s an amnesia-and-recovery model, a ‘return’ to a pre-lapsarian past in the future. Unsurprisingly, it is also ‘highly gendered’ (45). One suspects that one has heard this story already, and that one didn’t need PoCo to understand it.

Stefan Vogt’s essay on ‘positioning’ claims that it ‘reconceptualizes’ Zionist ‘identity politics’ (and as we read it, we can now see that many of the introduction’s framings come from him: Homi K Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy). Hall, according to Vogt, suggests that identity politics is both a product of colonial and postcolonial domination, and a resource against it (53); and he reads Bhabha as having ‘reject[ed] a dichotomous distinction between colonized and colonizing societies’ (51; footnote 1, p. 67). This is hardly representative of PoCo, which holds firmly on to that dichotomy. Vogt reads Martin Buber’s positive associations of Jews and the Orient as ‘self-Orientalization’ and as ‘subaltern identity politics’, rather than through Edward Said’s idea of Orientalism as a way for the West to dominate the Orient. Vogt uses the word ‘ambivalent’ quite often in describing Zionist identity politics, a word which he probably

also owes to Bhabha's usage of it. He then (61-63) points out Zionism's use of versions of *völkisch* nationalism and its 'participation' in 'the discourses and practices of German colonialism' (62). Why do we need PoCo to understand that 'Zionism was a part of the surrounding nationalist discourses' even as it 'pursued its own agenda' (64)?

By far the most insightful of the essays is Abraham Rubin's, which brings Albert Memmi into dialogue with Frantz Fanon. At issue is the question of an 'authentic' identity or identification, and Rubin plays on the contradictory nature of these trends. Fanon, a black man from Martinique who spoke no Arabic or Berber, included himself in the term 'we Algerians', and Memmi saw this as a romanticizing that caused Fanon to seek a false authenticity, as Arab and Muslim, rather than as a black West Indian. Memmi himself, according to Rubin, refused a simple identification as 'Arab Jew', which he saw as a nostalgic attempt to create a harmonious past before the decolonizing nationalisms of North Africa liquidated their Jewish communities (78). Rubin suggests that this is Memmi's 'Third World perspective' on Jewish self-determination in Israel as 'part of the postwar process of decolonization' (75), and not incompatible with his anti-colonialism. The important question raised here is when authenticity becomes an externally-imposed cliché: Fanon attacked Négritude as a form of 'nativism' that locked its protagonists in a colonial-imposed identity, and Memmi saw in Fanon's Algerian self-styling a similar false identification, acknowledging Memmi's own debt to Négritude as 'the awakening of subject people' and seeing its applicability to Jewish self-determination, even as both believed that versions of these identifications were backward-looking and imprisoning. 'What Algeria is for Fanon, Israel is for Memmi', Rubin suggests (85), which points to a fundamental problem of needing beliefs to invent and sustain a nationalism. Again, why this requires 'postcolonial studies' to be intelligible, beyond the obvious fact that Memmi and Fanon both play a role in the retrospective appropriations that that field has resorted to as self-legitimation, is unclear.

If we look beyond its misframing, the book as a whole offers a pleasant journey through different worlds of differing Zionisms. The 'east and west' section brings together Edward Blyden and Camille Pissarro's Caribbean-located Black Atlantic-influenced engagements with Zionism and black nationalism (Sarah Phillips Casteel); Eastern European Jewish views of Western European (Jewish) views of Eastern European Jews via a reversal of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which stresses the Prussian origins of the idea of the *Ostjude* and traces some of its appropriations (Malgorzata A Maksymiak); with the 'Habsburg colonial imaginary' in the origins of Central European Zionisms, read via Albert Memmi's iconic and much-miscited work *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, which the author reads as stressing the similar backgrounds from which both emerge (Scott Spector). An essay on Gerschon Scholem and 'Oriental Hebrew' by Ghilad H Shenhav focuses on Scholem's warning that the Holy Tongue should not be appropriated 'for Zionist political purposes' as was being attempted in the construction of modern Hebrew (162). This was, according to the author, Scholem's suppression of the living (Eastern) language of Hebrew in favour of a Western European, Orientalist (in a Saidian sense) view of Hebrew as fixed in an authentic liturgical context: Scholem compares modern Hebrew's inauthenticity to the artificial, constructed languages of Volapük or Esperanto (172). This is a bit facile, and I think I'd rather read more of Liora

Halperin, a writer whom the author manages not to cite at all, on the (inadequately) universalist aspirations of modern Hebrew that paralleled those of Esperanto.

The 'Palestine and Israel' section opens with a historiographical essay by Orit Bashkin on Jews in the Levant and Egypt and 'modernity', under which *nom de guerre* is a constricted and rather anodyne summary of others' writing. The essay includes a sub-theme on fascism in the Arab world, which cannot but be annoying to anyone who has expended some energy on trying to understand that subject. A summary of the author's summary of that literature (206-209) would read as follows: there was indeed some fascism present, but present-day Zionists and their post-9/11 American allies exaggerate its extent. There is an article by Johannes Becke on Israeli 'expansionism' which relates Israel to countries like Morocco and Indonesia as examples of 'Third World Colonialism' rather than 'classic forms of European settler colonialism' (215) via James Scott's depiction, in *Seeing Like a State* (1988), of 'authoritarian high modernist schemes'. This is more a set of schematic characterizations than an attempt at historical description. Rephael G Stern and Arie M Dubnov provide a narrative of Zionist perceptions of and engagements with Asia between the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in March 1947 to the aftermath of the Suez Crisis of 1956. Here again, we encounter Said's Orientalism as the presiding deity: Zionists self-Orientalised in Delhi but were rejected by the time of Bandung.

The framing of the book in terms of affinities to postcolonial studies is an act of misdirection. Very few primary sources impinged upon its writing. The essays have been overdisciplined to reproduce the rather clumsy frameworks of PoCo. The Summary of the book on the title page appears to be for a different book, one on antisemitism; and two of the editors, Derek Penslar and Arieh Saposnik, do not contribute an essay.