



PALGRAVE STUDIES ON NORBERT ELIAS

Israel's National Historiography

Between Generations,
Identity and State

Alon Helled

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Palgrave Studies on Norbert Elias

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Despite growing, widespread appreciation for Norbert Elias's theoretical approach—often called figurational or processual sociology—there exist only a few, specialized publications on Eliasian social theory, and as of yet, no academic book series.

Palgrave Studies on Norbert Elias will therefore fill a significant gap in the market, appealing to figurationalists across disciplines: Elias's social theory is used not only in Sociology, but also Sports, Psychoanalysis/Psychology and Social Psychology, Education, Criminology, International Relations, History, Humanities (Arts, Music, and Cultural Studies), Political Science, and Public Health. Respecting the multi-disciplinary Eliasian tradition, the series is open to receiving contributions from academics outside of Sociology departments, so long as the research is grounded on Elias's approach. Publications, which shall range from Palgrave Pivots to edited collections, can be expected to explore sports, habits and manners, criminology, violence, group relations, music and musicians, theory and methods, civilizing and decivilizing processes, involvement and detachment in social sciences, formation of the modern state, power relations, and the many dozens of other topics to which Eliasian theory has been applied.

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*To the generation of my late grandparents, to that of my parents, to my own
and to all others*

FOREWORD

I am writing this foreword while the Israeli Defence Forces continue their attack on the Gaza Strip, in retaliation for Hamas's murderous raid on southern Israel on 7 October 2023. Rarely can a study in historical sociology or the sociology of knowledge have been as topical as Alon Helled's *Israel's National Historiography: Between Generations, Identity and State*. Nor as potentially relevant to understanding what may prove to be a turning point in world history.

Dr Helled's book is a study of the emergence of a distinct Israeli national identity, and the part that Israeli historians and historiography have played in its development. More exactly, it deals with the development of Israeli *habitus*, a term familiar to sociologists but probably less so to many others. Norbert Elias defined it simply as "second nature". In other words, it refers to everything that we have learned from other people since birth, but which has become so deeply habituated that even to ourselves it feels not learned but innate. All social groups, from families to nations and beyond, may share traits of habitus, many of them unconsciously. These traits include not just aspects of manners and everyday behaviour, but also shared patterns of emotion and personality make-up. Not all of them, of course, are shared by every single member of the group.

So what is distinctive about Israeli habitus or, loosely, "national character"? Dr Helled has been strongly influenced by Elias, who himself wrote about the development of habitus through power struggles in his native Germany but, although himself Jewish, not about Israel. What he always did, however, was to stress the link between fears and dangers, dangers and fears.

In *On the Process of Civilisation* Elias draws a connection between the pacification of habitus and the pacification of territory: “[I]f in this or that region the power of a central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area the people are forced to live in peace with each other, the moulding of affects and the standards of [emotion management] are very gradually changed as well”. Diminished danger, diminished fears. Not that there was ever anything inevitable about this; in all too many parts of the world this potentially benevolent spiral has been spun into reverse by upsurges of violence, invasions and wars. Fears rise with rising danger and, if the dangers persist, the corresponding fears and anger may also become embedded in a group’s habitus. Moreover, fearfulness tends to inhibit the capacity for foresight and may foster impulsive aggressiveness.

Which brings us back to modern Israel. Its origins do not quite fit the model of mainly endogenous, relatively steady and gradual, processes observed in the history of Western Europe. Exogenous factors—that is, forces from outside the present national frontiers—came into play. Zionism arose in the nineteenth century in response to the persecution of Jews, especially in Eastern Europe. After the First World War Britain and France carved up the Ottoman empire, and in their own interests made promises which they perhaps never intended to keep, or, more certainly, failed to think through the means of fulfilling them. Then, above all, came the Shoah. The League of Nations’ mandate to Britain to rule Palestine (where, ironically, Jews, Christians and Muslims had for centuries lived together largely in peace under the Ottomans) collapsed in 1948 in face of (among other things) Jewish terrorism. The establishment of Israel—but not of a corresponding Palestinian Arab state—was sanctioned by the United Nations, and from the resulting war between it and the Arab states emerged the frontiers now recognized in international law. The war also resulted in the Nakba, the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Arabs from what was now the land of Israel.

For about its first two decades, Israel—as viewed from Western Europe—appeared a peaceful, idyllic, well-governed social democratic country, “the only democracy in the Middle East”. I well remember how fashionable it was for young Europeans of my generation to take themselves off to work on the kibbutzim. Appearances proved deceptive. As Israeli friends have pointed out to me, the 1948 ceasefire boundaries were militarily not easily defensible: at its nearest, the frontier is only 54

kilometres from Tel-Aviv, making the country vulnerable to bisection by a successful military incursion to the sea; there was much to fear even early on. After its victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, the temptation to hold on to its newly occupied territories proved irresistible, in spite of David Ben-Gurion's warning that most of these territories should be returned for the sake of Israel's "inner health". What has followed has included the 1973 Yom Kippur War, violent terrorism, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the First Intifada from 1988 to 1990, the Second Intifada from 2000 to 2005, Hamas taking control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and the resulting Israeli blockade of the territory, frequent rocket fire and now the appalling conflict in progress as I write. Not to forget, also, the continuing seizure by Israeli settlers of large tracts of the West Bank.

Such cycles of violence, propelled by danger, fear and anger, are not easily or quickly resolved.

History always plays a key part in long-term cycles of violence. The historic cycle of violence closest to home for me is that of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s until 1998, which I have often described—only half-jokingly—as the last vestige of the Wars of Religion that beset Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the late twentieth century the conflict was more about territory, after the partition of Ireland in 1921, than religion as such. But the Catholic, nationalist side traced their grievances back to the "plantation" of Protestants from England and Scotland and their seizure of "Catholic land" in earlier centuries. Meanwhile the Protestant "Unionist" side (unionist meaning defending the union with Great Britain) often harked back to the massacres of their ancestors in the Irish Rebellion of 1641. The Israeli historiography on which Dr Helled focuses is well researched but fulfils a similar function. The history of the Jews in Palestine of course can be traced back thousands of years. But then the history of Islam in the Holy Land is many centuries-long too.

The problem with the use of history in long-running conflicts is that it is a constant backdrop to a social process in which the clock is always in practice set back to zero, to begin again from the latest outrage by the other side. As I write, in the Middle East for the Israelis that means, understandably, the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023. For the Palestinians it will be, perhaps for decades to come, the Israeli attack on Gaza that followed.

Dr Helled, from a liberal Sabra family in Palestine for generations but himself a resident in Italy since his early adulthood, is exceptionally well placed to examine these issues in a relatively detached way. In drawing attention to “Israeli national historiography”, he has done us a valuable service.

University College Dublin
Dublin, Ireland

Stephen Mennell

University of Leicester
Leicester, UK
24 March 2024

PREFACE

I am a strange social scholar. I was born and raised in Tel-Aviv, Israel, in a fully Sabra family committed to the rights and duties of the republican spirit of early Israel; a liberal family whose origins are rooted in Galilee, Jerusalem, and the nascent Tel-Aviv but also in European culture stretched from central Europe to the Mediterranean Sea: a societal merger which embraced Zionism but was not its direct outcome.

It was probably my upbringing that made me attentive to the society that surrounded me. In early adulthood, I moved to Italy, where I completed my higher education, including my doctorate at University of Turin, which offered a joint programme with University of Florence. Although very much European, almost Italianized, I never ceased to study Israel from a different perspective in social sciences. My interest in historical process, theories on nationalism and identity was cultivated throughout my years as a student. The choice to foster my academic ambitions, while applying received knowledge to my own identify, has been somewhat challenging. Almost psychoanalytic self-reflection has become useful and instrumental in order to peel away taken-for-granted dispositions and thus shed some old belief systems whilst examining ingrained ideas.

The volume you are about to read is my attempt to answer to some of my personal questions, namely the relations between Judaism and statehood, the intellectual origins and mental pictures that accompanied, conditioned and chiselled my own socialization. The content is the core part of my PhD dissertation, defended on 28 November 2019, supervised by prof Marco Tarchi (University of Florence) and prof Gisèle Sapiro (École des hautes études en sciences sociales).

The empirical approach and theoretical arguments I present in the book have developed over the years through a fruitful exchange with professors, advisors, colleagues, friends and family I have been blessed to have. I am deeply grateful to Marco Tarchi, my Italian advisor and mentor, not only for guiding me in the labyrinth of doctoral reach but for reading the raw drafts of my research with no intention of denaturalize my in-progress intellectual persona. Alfio Mastropaolo has also been an inspiration during the process of transforming the dissertation into a readable book. His scholarly irony shaped my understanding of the dramas of political life to be dedramatized through work. Laura Gaffuri (University of Turin) turned my attention to the intersections and interactions between religion, identity and history, while Sara Lagi (University of Turin), Arturo Marzano (University of Pisa) and Adele Bianco (University D'Annunzio University of Chieti–Pescara) punctually and amiably kept pushing me to write the book. I express my deepest gratitude to late Maria Grazia Enardu (University of Florence), who was an exceptional mentor and friend.

The intellectual community that surrounded me during my studies between Turin, Florence and Tel-Aviv supplied academic freedom and encouraged me to follow my heart, mind and curiosity and to be interdisciplinary in my research. I thank Paolo Caraffini, my current postdoctoral trainer, for supporting me in the last years of academic disorientation.

Within this community a special place is reserved to the Eliasian friends, who embraced me into their intimate group. The exploration of Elias's sociological teaching would not have been the same without their stimuli. I thank Florence Delmotte and Marta Bucholc, who have given me the floor to present my work in different phases of the research, and, consequently, opened the way for collaboration in the following years. While showing kindness and interest, the Eliasian family became a source of inspiration.

I have presented parts of the research in workshops and conferences over the years and was generously commented by peers in the fields of political sciences, sociology and Israel studies.

I am very thankful to two friends, in particular, Chiara De Bernardi and Carlo Pala, for all the pep talks, useful comments and votes of confidence. The friendship they bring into my life is truly irreplaceable.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to Tatiana Landini and Elizabeth Graber, my editor, who accompanied the manuscript with faith and patience. Thanks to mutual understanding and common grounds, the doctoral research matured into a book, endorsed by the Norbert Elias Series.

In addition, I am greatly obliged to Stephen Mennell, one of the pillars of the Eliasian community, who had read the manuscript prior to its submission, and saw fit to write an insightful and attentive foreword to it, in spite of any personal difficulty and the contextual “minefield” of the book’s sensitive topic.

Last but not least, I wish to thank my family. My parents’ endless love and valuable teachings are the deepest strata of my intellectual self. I thank my older sisters for having motivated me, both directly and indirectly, to achieve excellence and realize my dreams.

On a personal note, I hope the exploration of the interconnections between state formation and history-writing in Israel, whose finishing line surely exceeds the circumscribed study before you, provides some adequate answers about the country’s national identity and the processes that have shaped it. Hopefully, the research will entice other scholars in their own research paths.

The book is divided into three parts and five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the scope of the research and discusses the literature from which the study took inspiration. It also presents the salience of the enquiry and places it as an interdisciplinary and multi-level analysis (state, academia, generations). Chapter 2 provides an analytical and conceptual overlook that will accompany our enquiry about Israeli historians and their interrelations with the national habitus who they interiorize and experience as individuals but also contribute to shape. The chapter is mostly based upon Eliasian and Bourdieusian theorizations.

After the theoretical premises, in the second part of the book, the reader plunges into three chapters which processually reconstruct the generations in Israeli national historiography in light of the phases of Israel’s state-building, as a survival unit, and the development of the country’s national habitus. It is the very core of the book. Each generation is contextualized and analysed in a distinctive category linked to Israeli statehood: *Komemiyut*, namely pre-statehood and historiographical enterprising prior to Israel’s independence; followed by *Mamlakhtiyut*, that is, the development of the state and academia in the period 1948–1977, while focusing on the weight of the first generation of Israeli historians and the autonomization of their discipline; finally, *Artziyut*: contemporary trends in Israeli historiography and society.

All these end with some conclusions and observations on the case-study and the salience of the generational perspective. The conclusions also invite scholars to further engage in the research of the historiographical,

academic and intellectual fields as lens capable of examining the sociopolitical and sociocultural features of habitus-building in relation to nationalism and collective identities.

Florence, Italy
March 2024

Alon Helled

Praise for *Israel's National Historiography*

“In a historical moment such as the period beginning with 7 October 2023, characterised by dramatic events in the Middle East and a rise in intolerance globally, a work such as Alon Helled’s, which aims to scientifically reconstruct, analyse and explain the processes and reasons underlying the formation of the Israeli collective identity, is important and welcome.”

—Prof. PhD. Adele Bianco, *Department of Philosophical, Pedagogical and Economic Quantitative Sciences, D’Annunzio University of Chieti–Pescara, Italy*

“Alon Helled not only deciphers the double-binds shaping the Israeli-Palestinian configuration: he offers us a mirror that we urgently need to turn towards all our nationalisms, if we are to develop our means of orientation and emerge from the maelstrom, in Palestine, Europe and elsewhere.”

—Florence Delmotte, *Faculty of Economics, Social and Political Sciences and Communication Saint-Louis, Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain), Belgium*

“A book for our troubled times, Alon Helled’s intriguing and analytically rigorous investigation of Israeli national identity and historiography is a compelling reading. It brings together detailed research of a very fine grained kind with an outstanding use of an Elias framework.”

—Prof Liz Stanley, *Professor Emerita of Sociology, School of Social and Political Science, The University of Edinburgh, UK*

“Rarely does an author find themselves lamenting the relevance of their work, yet for Alon Helled, the heightened international importance of the subject of Israeli national identity is far from a cause for celebration. As we witness the agonizing escalation of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, there is an urgent demand for a book that unravels the intricate threads of historical narratives that have woven the fabric of Israeli national identity and statehood. Crafted from a blend of scholarly rigor and profound personal insight, this book is firmly embedded in sociological theory while offering a wealth of informative historical detail. An indispensable guide for anyone seeking to navigate the complexities of present-day Israeli identity.”

—Marta Bucholc, *Professor of Sociology, University of Warsaw, Poland*

“Alon Helled’s ‘Israel’s National Historiography: Between Generations, Identity and State’ provides an original discussion of the interplay between national identity and individual personality structures. By deploying insights from Norbert Elias’s process sociology in a highly creative manner, he analyses with unusual depth how successive generations of Israeli historians navigated the complex interdependencies between their identity as citizens of Israel, their conception of the national character of the Israeli state and the wider geopolitical context of that state as their main survival unit. In the process, the author makes a fundamental contribution to a better understanding of not only the Israeli state, its history, contradictions and current predicaments, but also those of the wider region.”

—André Saramago, *University of Coimbra, Portugal*

“Alon Helled’s balanced account of Israeli state formation and the way historians have shaped Israel’s national identity is extremely relevant just now.”

—Helmut Kuzmics, *Institut für Soziologie, University of Graz, Austria*

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