

Ilan Pappé

To the Editor:

I write with regard to Malcolm Levitt's article on Ilan Pappé's talk (*Viewpoint*, 17 May 2006). While I do not agree with the individual who protested against the University giving Professor Pappé a public platform, I do wish to clarify why some people have strong objections to aspects of Pappé's views on the Israel/Palestine conflict. There is some truth in Pappé's charge that Israel was, so to speak, born in "original sin": Israel's independence in 1948 was, tragically, accompanied by mass population movements and in some cases expulsions designed to create a state with a Jewish majority (though there is a great deal of debate among historians about how the events of 1948 unfolded), and the current plans to set final borders for Israel are also motivated by the desire to keep Israel Jewish. But this is not racism, and as an historian of modern Jewry I must differ strongly with Pappé's claim (as summarised by Levitt) that "the status of Israel as an explicitly Jewish state [has] unavoidable racist consequences" and that any two-state solution will only bring about a "ghetto state" which will be "permanently obsessed with its racial purity".

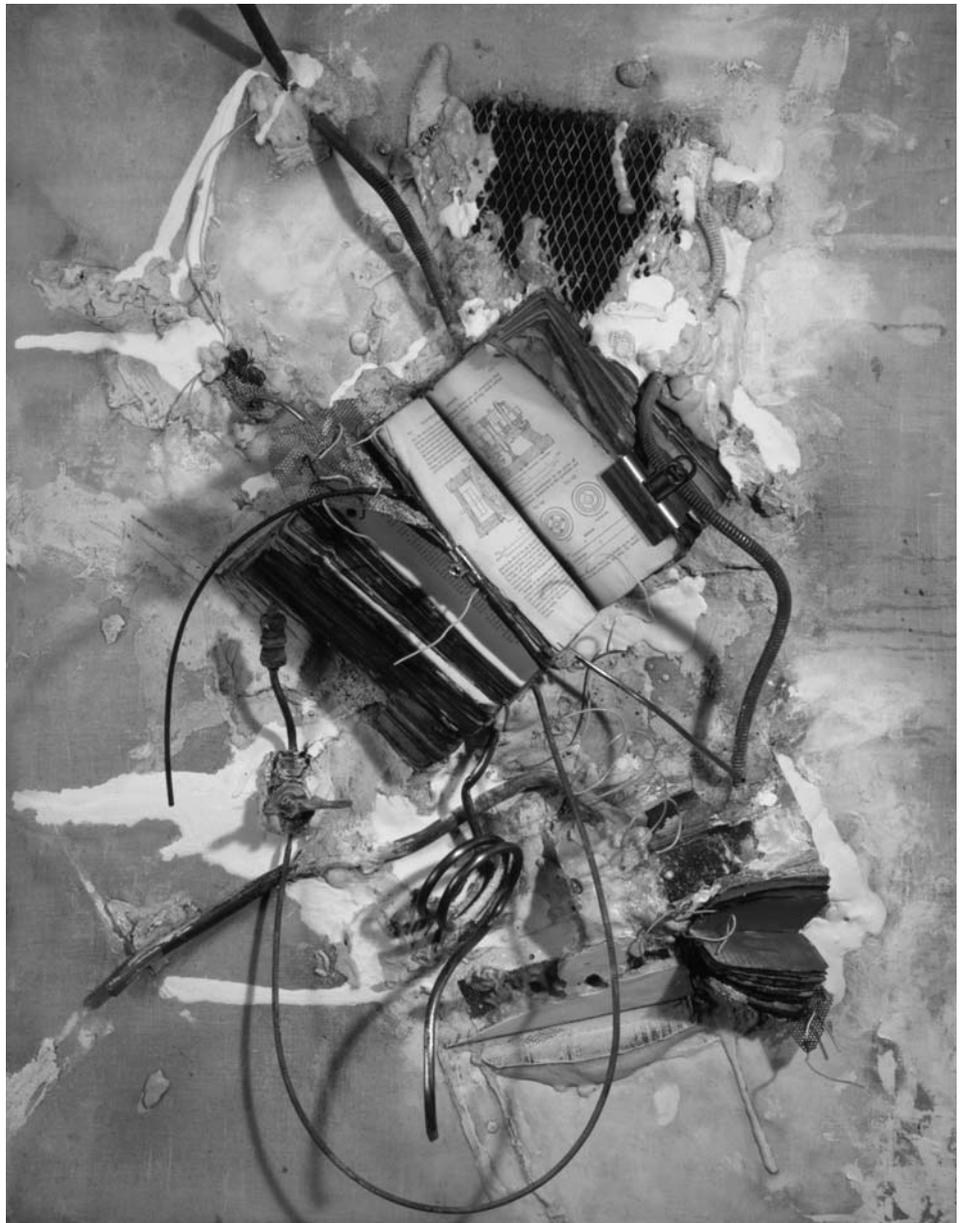
Neither the Zionist movement nor the state of Israel itself have ever held to a notion of “racial purity”, and the attempt to draw a conceptual link between Nazi ideology and that of its intended victims is truly misguided (not to mention offensive). Zionism is a national liberation movement which holds that, more than the Jewish faith, what binds Jews of all lands together is the concept of a Jewish nation, whose historic homeland is Erets Yisrael, the Land of Israel. Seeing as Jews live on many continents and their skin colour comes in almost every shade from white to black, Zionism could hardly have espoused a racist ideology — indeed, if there is any racism in Israel, it is that which has plagued Jewish society within the state (Jews of European heritage held the reins of power in the early years of the state and official institutions often discriminated openly against Jews from Middle Eastern countries). The metaphor of “racial purity” is a red herring; Israel seeks a Jewish majority because (1) Zionism dictates that the Jewish people can only be fully free in a state of its own and (2) history has shown that Jews are only fully secure in a state of their own. Simply put, this is a matter of a national/ethnic group desiring sovereignty in its own country, surely not a foreign idea to Europe or European history. One need only acquaint oneself slightly with the contours of the last two thousand years of Jewish history — and especially the last hundred — to understand why Israeli Jews feel that agreeing to minority status is tantamount to signing their own death warrant. I offer these observations to bring some historical accuracy to a debate in which it is so often lacking.

Natan Meir

Lecturer in History; Member of the Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations

Dear Editor,

I very strongly disagree with most of the points made in the article by Malcolm Levitt on the talk of Ilan Pappé in *Viewpoint* issue 451. Levitt’s open and full support of



*John Latham, Philosophy and the Practice of, 1960.
Collection Nicholas Logsdail. Courtesy John Latham Estate and Lisson Gallery, London.*

Pappé on a (regardless of one’s standpoint) highly controversial subject would have required careful editing. This was not the case and raises questions in regard to the journalistic standards of *Viewpoint*. This is a one-sided, highly opinionated and emotional article which expresses the views of Ilan Pappé. Nothing is said about the many serious critics of Pappé in Israel and abroad.

Two points made by Levitt are particularly disturbing:

1.) On page 2 Levitt states: “The concept of a Jewish state is surely inextricable from ethnic cleansing.” This is a general comment with very grave implications. I wonder why he did put in the word “surely”. This can be interpreted as a call for

questioning Israel’s existence, a position shared by extremists and terror groups who do not hesitate to murder innocent civilians in Israel in large numbers.

2.) On page 3 Levitt states that Pappé and implicitly he himself support anti-Israel boycotts because “nothing positive will happen, if Israel is left to its own devices.” Again, I find the implications of this sentence very upsetting. One wonders what other means are justifiable beyond a boycott. This is a very sensitive matter in light of persisting calls by terrorists calling for the destruction of Israel.

I have no objections to exchanging controversial opinions in a public forum but obviously in a courteous and objective way, especially within

the context of a university. This article expresses very problematic and one-sided opinions (without any objective comment on the context), which are clearly harmful to the climate of openness and fairness at this university.

Dr Tobias Brinkmann,
Lecturer in Jewish/non-Jewish
Relations Parkes Institute for
Jewish/non-Jewish Relations

We sent the above two letters to Malcolm Levitt for comment. His response is below.

I am very glad that my article on Ilan Pappé's lecture has encouraged debate. In responding to the criticisms of my article by Drs Meir and Brinkmann, let me again emphasize that I am expressing my own personal views.

Dr Meir asks us to view Zionism purely as a movement of national liberation, and to judge it according to the security a Jewish state (supposedly) offers to Jewish people both within and outside Israel. He also denies that Zionism is a racist ideology, citing the wide range of skin colour of Jewish people within Israel.

To these points I would respond that:

1. As Pappé stated in his talk, Zionism soon transformed itself from a movement of national liberation to a settler-colonial movement. It cannot be judged purely on the basis of "what's good for the Jews" but also on the impact of its policies and actions towards other people.

2. My personal opinion is that the foundation of Israel has not improved the net security of Jews at all, with the exception of the small numbers of Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe who found a refuge in Palestine before WW2. After the war, many Jewish refugees from Europe settled in Israel, but the vast majority of them were given no choice but to move there. Given a free choice, the majority of Jews would have emigrated to the USA, but the USA did not want to have them, neither before the war, nor after. (I have heard that Zionist organizations successfully lobbied the US congress not to admit the Jewish refugees to the US, but I do not

know if there is solid evidence for this). At present, the existence of Israel does not improve Jewish security at all, probably the contrary. I suspect that in the age of massive weapons, a crazed antisemite who is intent on exterminating as many Jews as possible would be happy that many of us are gathered in one place.

3. Dr Meir neglects the crucial character of Judaism as a racial or a tribal religion. As he will know full well, a Jew is not primarily defined in terms of his or her culture, beliefs, or skin colour, but by being able to defend a claim that his or her mother is a Jew. It is extraordinarily difficult for a non-Jew to be accepted as a Jewish convert, and it is completely impossible for an Israeli Arab to become Jewish. The racial exclusivity of Judaism may have been a harmless curiosity during the thousands of years of diaspora existence, but now forms an explosive combination with military and political power. Dr Meir seeks to divert attention from this essential feature of Zionism by raising the spurious issue of skin colour.

Dr Brinkmann apparently feels that the purposes of open debate are furthered if the editor of a forum meddles with a submitted article in order to introduce "balance". Articles which depart from a limited range of permissible views are branded "one-sided" and "emotional". Forums which do not submit to interference are accused of not adhering to "journalistic standards". It is worth studying these comments carefully. They provide much insight into why articles criticizing the premises of Zionism are strikingly absent in mainstream publications.

Dr Brinkmann accuses me of "questioning Israel's existence" (I presume he means "Israel's right to exist"). He is right about that. I do question the right of a Jewish state to exist, in the same way that I would question the right of any state based on a racial classification to exist — especially if that state has been founded on ethnic cleansing. I do not, however, question the right of a non-racial, inclusive state with equal rights for both Jewish and non-Jewish citizens to exist. But Israel

currently defines itself as a Jewish state, and Judaism defines itself racially (using the criterion of maternal origin). Israel's right to exist as a racially-defined Jewish state should and must be questioned. There is no getting away from it, however taboo the subject is deemed to be, and however powerful the forces are which demand that this issue is declared off-limits.

It is true that many violent and terrorist organizations also call into question Israel's right to exist. So? A valid question does not become invalid, depending on who asks it. An issue should be addressed on its own merits, not by smearing the questioner by association.

I do not understand the grave implications Dr Brinkmann finds in my use of the word "surely". It was placed there purely for emphasis and as a rhetorical flourish. I do not think the meaning is changed if it is removed.

Dr Brinkmann also finds gravely threatening implications in the sentence "nothing positive will happen, if Israel is left to its own devices." This was an attempt to paraphrase Pappé's description of the mood within Israel in the Sharon/Olmert era, the growing subservience of its intellectuals, and the feeling of isolation of dissenting voices within Israel. Pappé described how important the signs of international boycott and growing awareness are for the morale of Israeli dissidents. As he said many times, the "buds" of civil society cannot flourish in the present climate, in which all debate is being silenced under the spiral of violence. Boycott is a non-violent form of international pressure. Although it is highly imperfect, it is one of the few forms for individuals to exert an influence, given the abdication of our politicians on this very important issue. Pappé believes it to be an effective and positive tool, and I trust him on that.

Having said that, I cannot personally support the Natfhe form of the boycott, which appears to require policing the personal views of individual Israeli academics.

Yours sincerely,
Malcolm Levitt