



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

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Article first published online

June 2016

HOW TO CITE

Scotto, G. (2016). The Image of Palestine and the Palestinians in Israeli Textbooks [Review of the book *Palestine in Israeli school books: Ideology and propaganda in education*, by N. Peled-Elhanan]. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 8(2), 225-236. doi: 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2016-2-11



PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Image of Palestine and the Palestinians in Israeli Textbooks

*Giovanni Scotto**

[Review of the Book *Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology and Propaganda in Education* by Nurit Peled-Elhanan. IB Tauris, London, New York, 2012. ISBN: 978-1845118136].

Introduction

Education and schoolbooks have been an instrument of primary importance in shaping public narratives and collective national identities – a sense of the “We”, often reinforced by a juxtaposition against an enemy “Other”. In contexts dominated by social and ethnopolitical conflicts, education becomes a contentious policy issue of primary importance. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict makes no exception in this regard, and in the last two decades Palestinian and - to a lesser extent - Israeli textbooks have become a subject of investigation and, at times, of heated national and international political controversy. Schools and schoolbooks in contemporary Israel can therefore be analysed in comparison with other OECD countries (as in OECD, 2016), or within the conceptual framework of protracted ethnopolitical conflict.

Nurit Peled-Elhanan has written a compelling analysis of the image of Palestine and the Palestinians conveyed in Israeli schoolbooks, making the case for their critical appraisal in the context of the conflict. The book, published in the UK and USA in 2012, is partly based on articles written between 2009 and 2010, and has been recently translated into Italian

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(Peled-Elhanan, 2012, 2015).

The author is a Language Education lecturer at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and is also a prominent human rights and political activist in Israel: she was awarded the prestigious Sacharov Prize for Human Rights and Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament in 2001. A vocal opponent of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, Peled-Elhanan denounces the corruption that 50 years of occupation have produced in Israeli culture and politics, and the marginalising character of many of its laws and regulations against Palestinians, both Israeli citizens and subjects of its military occupation.

A semiologist by training, Peled-Elhanan has devoted much attention to the Israeli school system and its textbooks. In *Palestine*, she performs an in-depth semiological analysis, with important interdisciplinary implications. Her methodological toolbox is based in semiology, and specifically in critical discourse analysis and multimodal text analysis. It also intersects sociology and social psychology – particularly when she highlights the dynamics of ingroup-outgroup relationships, stereotypes and prejudice, and links her findings to research on racism and its communicative practices.

The main thesis of the book is that the image of Palestine and the Palestinians reflected in contemporary Israeli schoolbooks is characterised by widespread prejudice, functional to the construction of a collective enemy, and often permeated by racist discourse. Moreover, this basic feature can be found in texts with different political orientations.

The sample on which the author has performed her analysis is constituted by a number of Israeli school books, chosen among the most popular – widely sold and chosen by Israeli teachers – covering history, geography and civics.

Schoolbooks serve a multiplicity of purposes: first and foremost, they complement the educational interaction taking place in the classroom, and are an essential support for information that has to be conveyed to pupils according to the curriculum: as such they have an important socialization function. Due to the fact that schoolbooks are placed under the supervision or directly authored by public authorities, their content is related directly with current narratives of identity, ideologies, and dominant discourse in a given society in a given historical period. As Peled states (making reference to Kress, 2003), schoolbooks are *intertexts*, since they always refer to other texts of different genres, mediate their content and meaning and submit

these mediated messages to their specific audiences – pupils, teachers, and families.

Peled-Elhanan's book addresses different aspects of the theme in four chapters: "Representation of Palestinians in Israeli textbooks", "Geography of hostility and exclusion – a multimodal analysis", "Legitimation of massacres in Israeli school books", "Layout as vector for meaning: explicit and implicit messages". A long introduction contextualises and shapes the volume.

On the basis of her findings, the author criticises the conclusion of several scholars who have dealt with the subject in recent years came to (e.g. Bar-Gal, 1993 for geography books; Podeh, 2001 for history texts; more recently Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005), that over the decades successive "generations" of Israeli schoolbooks have gradually abandoned negative stereotypes of Palestinians and one-sided historical narrations. According to Peled-Elhanan, the "fourth generation" of Israeli textbooks published in the 2000s even shows a regression in this respect: a time in which initial hopes nurtured by the Oslo peace process were shattered by the second Intifada, terrorism and political stalemate.

Context: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the longest standing conflicts in the contemporary international system. Historical, (geo)political and cultural factors make it an extraordinary conflict, particularly because of the intricate legacies of colonialism, the Second World War and the *Shoah*, and later on the impact of Cold War in the Middle East.

The Israel-Palesine conflict can be seen as a typical ethno-political conflict, where parties with incompatible political goals and territorial claims mobilise on the basis of collective identities with diverging narratives (for an introduction see Gurr, 1993; Arielli & Scotto, 2003). As such, it demonstrates similarities with many other conflict situations in the world.

A common implicit assumption in social sciences as well as in public discourse on development is that education is an endeavour which is always valuable to undertake in principle, since it embodies progress *per se* for societies and individuals. This picture changes, however, in situations of ethno-political conflict: in these cases, identity and collective narratives

play an essential role, and education becomes a contested issue area. The production of schoolbooks is a key aspect of public education, with a number of important functions in perpetuating or reducing conflictual dynamics: producing and reinforcing a consistent image of Self and Other, establishing official narratives of history and offering an image of the world consistent with specific political claims and conflict dynamics (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000).

In the Israeli-Palestinian case, the semi-autonomous Palestinian educational system and its textbooks have received much media attention: The presence of negative stereotypes of Israel and the Jewish people has come under scrutiny and has been widely debated, for example in relation to US policies towards Israel and Palestine. As Nurit Peled-Elhanan states, Israeli textbooks have never sparked similar global media attention.

One reason for this relative lack of attention seems to be that Israel is often automatically viewed as a stable state and a liberal democracy, so its educational system should in principle be free from limitations usually related to ethno-political conflict or to authoritarian regimes where governments tightly control and manipulate public discourse and, specifically, the content of schoolbooks.

Israeli history, from the war of independence and mass expulsion of Palestinians in 1948, to the Six Days' war and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, has produced a peculiar situation in the country's self-representation – much like a coin and its two sides.

On the one side, Israel prides itself on being the “only functioning democracy” in the Middle East, with stable institutions, the rule of law, political freedom, and a thriving economy, enjoying respect and recognition within the international community. There is however, the other side of the coin: within its internationally recognized border, there are widespread claims that Israel treats non-Jews as second-class citizens. Crucially, Israel has also been an occupying power for almost five decades, unwilling or unable due to the circumstances to strike a lasting peace deal with the Palestinian leadership, and instead pursuing a policy of slow and steady settlement expansion in the occupied territories.

Nurit Peled asserts that understanding the image of Palestinians conveyed by Israeli textbooks necessarily calls into question the appearance of normality of present day educational systems, pointing at a deeply engrained exclusionary discourse. More precisely, the author links the results of her analysis to the existence of an implicit “grand Zionist

narrative” (p. 6) as a general framework for the production and validation of these texts. This general critical reference, and her explicit political stance in favour of the Palestinian people, envisioned as the oppressed in an asymmetric conflict, locates Peled-Elhanan within the critical Israeli scholarly and political tradition trying to overcome Zionist ideology (for the debate on a “post-Zionist” Israeli state and society started in the late 1990s, see e.g. Kelman, 1998; Nimni, 2003).

Main findings of the analysis

In general, both verbal and iconic dimensions of schools texts convey the message that Palestinians, the “Other”, do not possess any relevant positive quality: “none of the textbooks studied here includes, whether verbally or visually, any positive cultural or social aspect of Palestinian life-world; neither literature nor poetry, neither history nor agriculture, neither art nor architecture, neither customs nor traditions are ever mentioned.” (p. 49).

In chapter 1, “The representation of Palestinians in Israeli school books” - the author devotes her attention to visual and rhetorical devices reinforcing the ingroup-outgroup divide between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. Central in the discourse of Israeli school books is the construction of the dichotomy between Jews and “Non-Jews”, the latter as a marginal *out-group* within Israeli society. Never is the name “Palestine” or “Palestinian” used, whereas the appellation *pales(h)tinaiim*, with a “right-wing” undertone (rather than the “left-wing” synonym *palestinim*) – is used. Most of the school manuals use the term in conjunction with terrorism, whereas in all other instances Palestinians are usually labelled as “Arabs”.

Literature on stereotypes and racism in Israeli textbooks has represented the field in an evolution of sorts, pointing at the fact that while the first generation of school books in the 1950s and 1960s was pervaded by prejudice and negative stereotyping against Palestinians and Arabs, this type of statement almost disappears between 1967 and 1990 (Peled-Elhanan refers particularly to Firer, 2004 and Podeh, 2001).

The findings of the author point to a different result: “In the major schoolbooks from 1996-2010, including the ones Firer and Podeh praise for being more balanced, Palestinians are still represented – visually and

verbally – either in racist stereotypical ways or not at all, namely either as 'impersonalized' negative elements or as a 'blind spot', excluded from where they should have been... like a missing book on the library shelf." (58).

The depiction of Palestinians and Palestinian culture is either completely absent from text books, or it can be qualified as racist using the standards developed by scholars such as Allport (1954), Reisigl/Wodak (2000) and particularly Essed (1991): Feelings of superiority, the perception of the subordinate race as inherently inferior, perceiving certain privileges and advantages as fair, and finally the fear that the subordinate race may acquire the same prerogatives as the dominant group.

Peled-Elhanan illustrates some discursive strategies of negative representation by analysing Israeli schoolbooks through categories developed by van Dijk (1984) and particularly Van Leeuwen (2000, 2005, 2008). In his work on ethnic prejudice in discourse, Van Dijk identified seven key patterns of prevalent aims – not always conscious - in social actions against minorities, that he called "seven D's of discrimination": dominance, differentiation, distance, diffusion, diversion, depersonalization or destruction, and daily discrimination (van Dijk 1984, p. 40). Van Leeuwen stresses that discourses have almost always a legitimatory function. They are always modelled on social practices, but "discourses *transform* these practices "in ways which safeguard the interests at stake in a given social context" (van Leeuwen 2005, p. 104, italics in original).

Israeli schoolbooks almost always present Palestinians as a generic collective, particularly when history books speak of Palestinian victims of Israeli military violence (genericization). De-personalization as a discursive strategy becomes particularly disturbing when, in several instances, Palestinians become "the Palestinian demographic problem", six decades after similar ideas were spread by Anti-Semitic propaganda in Europe.

Following Van Leeuwen, Peled-Elhanan focuses on how Palestine and the Palestinians are depicted within the visual components of Israeli schoolbooks. As Van Leeuwen states, "visually communicated racism can be much more easily denied, much more easily dismissed as "in the eye of the beholder" than verbal racism... The consideration of images should have pride of place in any inquiry into racist discourse." (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 137). Van Leeuwen identifies five types of visual racism strategies: exclusion - not representing people at all in context where, in

reality, they are present; depicting people as the agents of actions which are held in low esteem or regarded as evil; showing people as homogeneous groups and thereby denying them individual characteristics; negative cultural connotations; negative racial stereotyping.

Peled-Elhanan makes the case that visual depiction of Palestinians in Israeli textbooks can be interpreted along these lines: more particularly, Palestinians are rarely shown as recognizable individuals, or they are depicted in anonymous non-places. A photo illustrating clashes during the first Intifada shows Palestinian children throwing stones “at our forces”, cutting off the jeeps and tanks depicted in the original picture.

A geography school book offers a caricature of a Palestinian: a man with *kefia*, wide trousers, sun glasses, and accompanied by a dromedary (the picture can be seen at: <https://theibtaurisblog.com/2011/11/30/palestine-in-israeli-schoolbooks/>). Pupils who have likely never met a Palestinian in their life, and will probably only do so while serving in the Israeli Defence Force after school, are thus confronted with a grotesque picture of an abstract Other, portrayed following European stereotypes of the late XIX century.

With regard to the *Naqba*, the “catastrophe” of the expulsion of Palestinians contextual to the founding of Israel in 1948, with mass expulsions and massacres, the history manuals have progressively acknowledged the events. However, Peled states, “the Zionist hypotext has remained unaltered” (p. 79): while acknowledging there were expulsions in 1948, none of the manuals refers to the fact that “an ethnic cleansing plan existed” beforehand among Israeli leadership (p. 79).

In the fourth chapter, the author analyses a specific instance of historic events, namely massacres of Palestinian civilians perpetrated by Israeli armed forces: she takes note of the fact that these events are described although they have the potential unsettling effects of a narrative defending the legitimacy of the “Self” group, but she also highlights a number of rhetorical devices that implicitly belittle or legitimise the massacres. (e.g. calling a massacre of civilians a “catastrophe”, thus implicitly referring to an unescapable fate, while avoiding to name political responsibilities), or presenting two different versions of the same event thereby generating the impression of a possible debate between symmetric positions.

Similar rhetorical devices are used to connote the fact that several hundred thousands Palestinians fled their villages and cities in the wake of the 1948 war, using terms like “abandoned”, “deserted”, and justifying

implicitly the takeover of land and housing by the Jewish state from 1950 on. When Palestinian narrative on national identity and the conflict is depicted, it is done so through what Genette (1982) calls *transposition*, i.e. reframing the desire for return of Palestinian refugees within concepts that pertain to the narrative of Zionism: according to Peled-Elhanan, this makes the political claim for return and Palestinian nationhood in general an artificial construct rather than a real political and cultural phenomenon.

As for the more recent past, most textbooks do not offer a description of life under Israeli military control in Palestinian occupied territories; therefore, the few schoolbooks mentioning the 1987 Intifada present it as a sudden, inexplicable outburst of violence, against the Israeli Defence Force usually pictured as a guarantor for stability and order (p. 96).

Chapter II deals with geography textbooks published between 1995 (after the Oslo agreements establishing a Palestinian National Authority), and 2006. These are typically “multimodal” texts in which maps and iconography play an essential role in conveying information to the reader. Here, the implicit message of the text is to promote “a Jewish territorial and national identity mainly founded on the negation of Palestinian identity.”

The author stresses that geography teaching in Israel is closely connected with Zionist ideology, particularly in terms of building an identification between the population of the Jewish state and the land. Complementary to this aim is the silence on Palestinians, their history, culture and settlements both past and present. De-personalization comes along with the construction of a series of dichotomies, paralleling the main dichotomy between Jews and non-Jews (resp. Arabs): tradition vs. modernity; development /underdevelopment, passive vs. active role in shaping individual existence.

Maps are always a powerful carrier of meaning and interpretation, and maps in Israeli textbooks make no exception: in most cases, the area depicted as “Israel” includes the occupied Palestinian territories; Jewish cities and settlements are marked, Palestinian cities and villages in Israel and the occupied territories usually are usually not. Other instances of “cartographic malpractice” are described as well.

Color and quality of photos are an additional element by means of which distance with Palestinians and proximity / familiarity with Jewish Israeli population is consolidated.

Within the general architecture of the book, chapter III strikes a distinctly different tone. It gives a detailed insight on a specific semiotic

analysis approach analysing layout elements as carriers of meaning, particularly within multimodal texts. In interacting with visual and verbal elements, layout can either confirm or contradict verbal and visual texts it presents. Nurit Peled-Elhanan explores a number of examples in Israeli textbooks whose layout seems to invite to a different reading of the information carried by the textual elements.

New research on Israeli school books

The last years have been a period of renewed scholarly attention to the issue of textbooks in Israel and the Palestinian territories. *Palestine in Israeli Schoolbooks* was published shortly before some new studies on the issue.

A research carried out by Yael Teff-Seker at the *Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education* comes to a positive assessment of the development, echoing the position of authors like Firer and Podeh a decade ago. The study covers a much wider sample (149 texts) than the one used by Peled-Elhanan. Teff-Seker stresses the resilience of the positive trend towards diminishing anti-Palestinian prejudices in schoolbooks despite the political backlash: “The results of the current (2009-2012) study show that despite the deterioration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the past decade, Israeli textbooks continue to relay messages according to which peace with the Palestinians is both possible and desirable – though also ... difficult to achieve. Additionally, textbooks and segments containing material that could damage peace and tolerance education were removed from the curricula” (Teff-Seker, 2012, p. 4). This is a markedly different conclusion to the one our author presents. On specific issues (such as the depiction of maps showing the results of the Oslo accords) the two authors depict opposite facts. It is not possible here to come to a conclusion on “who is right” on this and other topics where the two analyses diverge.

At a closer look, however, the study shows a number of shortcomings. The optimistic conclusions are based on a generalisation which does not allow the reader to appreciate differences within the sample. Moreover, it is sufficient to read the quotes of Israeli textbooks in the study to come to the conclusion that its optimistic findings are probably the result of wishful (over)interpretation. Many of the criticisms Nurit Peled-Elhanan has

formulated for schoolbooks can be applied to categories, quoted sources and findings of this research as well.

A recent comparison of the respective attitudes in Israeli and Palestinian schoolbooks has been performed by Adwan, Bar-Tal and Wexler (2016). The study examined how each side portrays the Other and their own group and the narratives related to the conflict in school textbooks used by the public educational system and the ultra-orthodox community in Israel, as well as and by schools under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority. The results showed that, while dehumanizing characterizations of the Other are rare in all books; both Israeli and Palestinian books present unilateral national narratives that portray the Other as an enemy, and portray the self-community in positive terms; there is lack of information about the religions, culture, economic and everyday activities of the Other, or even of the existence of the Other on maps; finally the negative bias in portraying the Other, the positive bias in portraying the Self, and the absence of images and information about the Other are more significant in Israeli ultra-orthodox and Palestinian books. These findings seem to be similar to the conclusion that Peled-Elhanan's study reaches, albeit constructing a symmetry between the Israeli and Palestinian cases which does not exist in the political and societal reality.

Concluding remarks

Peled-Elhanan accompanies the reader in an in-depth analysis of Israeli textbooks, particularly history and geography ones. The results of her work are convincing in scientific terms, and while the author uses her specific scientific tools to craft the analysis, the results will be object of interest (and of controversy) for a much wider audience than the semiologists, and they can also be useful additional reading in order to critically assess similar research on the topic.

Nurit Peled-Elhanan has provided an important contribution not only for an increased understanding of the issue at hand, but also for a better comprehension of how the stated “Zionist grand narrative” may deeply influence textual and paratextual elements of educational material. It is little surprise that the author's theses have raised controversy and that she has even been attacked at a deep personal level. Nevertheless, hers can be regarded as an important sociological contribution towards a future, post-

Zionist educational system in Israel that by all means must be taken into account in the panorama of contemporary studies on Israeli (and Palestinian) educational systems. So far, apparently, her research has been more the target of politically and ideologically driven criticism rather than serious debate.

More generally, due to its analytical sophistication, insight, and interdisciplinary nature I would recommend this as a reference text for researchers engaging in analysis of stereotypes and prejudice against minorities embedded in school books, particularly in the context of ethnopolitical conflict and its aftermath.

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