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Compte rendu d'ouvrage

Pirinoli, Christine. 2009. *Jeux et enjeux de mémoire à Gaza*. Lausanne: Antipodes. 383pp. Pb.: € 26.00. ISBN: 978 2940 146 956.

The events of 1948 referred to as the War of Independence by the State of Israel are remembered by Palestinians as the Nakba, the disaster that led to the flight and mass expulsion of about 90% of Palestinians from their lands and properties, and the destruction of hundreds of villages. After decades of Palestinian exile, the Middle East Peace Process provided a framework for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, excluding the majority of Palestinians from the state-building process. In that context, the 50th anniversary of the Nakba triggered confrontation between competing narratives on Palestinian past.

The book under review explores various processes of memory construction in 1998 among Gazawis originating from Barbara, a Palestinian village destroyed by Israel in 1948, and Palestinian institutions. Pirinoli argues that the Palestinian Authority's instrumentalisation of memory challenges its unifying function. In order to validate her argument, she draws on Halbwachs' notion of collective memory and examines Barbarawi narratives of the past, the Palestinian official national rhetoric and institutions of the new state. Yet a thorough examination of the social processes involved in collective remembering is lacking. The way the central theme of the book is dealt with is also problematic. Defined in a footnote as 'the war of 1948 and the official beginning of Palestinian exile' (p. 14), the significance of the Nakba for the understanding of Palestinian collective memory is overlooked. This problem seems partly due to Pirinoli's hazy epistemological posture outlined in sketchy discussions on identity, mobility and intersubjectivity. Especially, her attempt to represent her interlocutors' point of view leads to confusion between anthropological truth and emic representations of truth. Reproducing Barbarawi narrative structure opposing before and after the Nakba but never reflecting on the catastrophe itself, Pirinoli only refers to the Nakba as a temporal marker.

Part One addresses the links between Palestinians' constructions of memory and Zionist dominant rhetoric. Drawing on mainstream scholarship on Palestine, Pirinoli seeks to demonstrate how the presence of Palestinians has been depoliticised and erased from history. While she ambiguously claims at the outset of her research that she 'partially considered' her 'interlocutors' narratives as oral archives' (p. 11), she omits a discussion on academic and grassroots extensive use of oral history in the construction of a subaltern Palestinian history (see the works of Nazzal, Sayigh, Kanaana, Swedenburg and Masalha).

Part Two analyses factors structuring Barbarawis' interviews: a romanticised vision of the past, competitiveness with the Zionist narrative, social norms and present priorities. Pirinoli then reviews literature on the Zionist rhetoric of 'a land without people' and Palestinian representations of nationhood since the confrontation with the Zionist project. Surprisingly

enough, the conditions of the exodus and the nature of the Nakba are ignored. Pirinoli fails to address the centrality of the Nakba in the conflict in relation to the failure of Israel to acknowledge the uprooting and dispossession of Palestinians from their lands in 1948. Also surprising is the author's emphasis on Israeli forestation programmes, while little is said about policies of transfer, colonisation and dispossession implemented since the Nakba to remove Palestinians from their lands. Yet, the analysis of Palestinian counter-narratives would have gained in clarity if considered in light of the history of dispossession and its current forms.

Part Three deals with the 1998 commemoration. Drawing on the description of official sponsorship and private initiatives, Pirinoli analyses how the PA worked towards the construction of a coherent narrative based on remembrance of the land and political redemption through state-building, partly opposed by private narratives of memory. Describing political institutions claimed as traditional by the PA, Pirinoli finally examines how the official rhetoric of tradition contributes to legitimise the centralisation of power and the patrimonialisation of society.

This volume, although not innovative in its approach to memory, provides an insight into how the prospect of a future state has impacted on the Palestinian conception of memory. However, Pirinoli's outline of already well-documented topics in the field of Palestine studies (e.g. Palestinian nationalism, Zionism), mainly based on the use of secondary sources, compromises the originality of her contribution. Finally, her interpretation of the fragmentation of Palestinians in terms of an opposition to an official rhetoric seems oversimplified. Rather, Palestinian political elites face a legitimacy crisis involving the complex interplay of internal and external political and economical factors. Far from being weakened, the memory of the Nakba and pre-1948 Palestine has been re-invigorated ever since the Oslo Agreements. Grassroots activism has flourished globally outside the control of the PA, particularly in relation to the right of return. Acknowledging these recent political developments would have added more strength to this research.