

Snapshot of an Emerging University Discipline: The Ben-Gurion School of Israel Studies

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Israel studies has been defined as the study of modern Israel and the Zionist movement in the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine (Association of Israel Studies 2008). This definition illuminates the importance of cultural/intellectual history in the absence of the demarcation of clear physical boundaries/borders. The teaching of Israel studies at the university level reflects this definition in terms of the importance of the historical lens and intellectual history, particularly through the focus on the life of David Ben-Gurion as subject matter in the emerging discipline.

An academic discipline has been described as consisting of both a social and an intellectual dimension (Metzger 1987). While comparing structural differences between an academic subject, topic and discipline, it is the social component which emerges as the factor that turns a subject into a discipline. Central to this process is a community of “practitioners” within and outside the academy who derive their occupational identity from it and who try to improve its efficacy and reputation. Surveys involving how academics view territorial boundaries and separations between disciplines also point to the social aspect of a discipline as a defining element (Becher 1989; Becher and Parry 2005).

When the Association of Israel studies was formed in 1985 it provided the social component for an emerging discipline. Scholarly organizations such as the American Studies Association and the establishment of the *American Quarterly* in 1949 have been linked to the growth of such fields as American studies (Hollinger 2007). However, such an organization was particularly incubational for the field of Israel studies, which al-

though omnipresent as a media-based field of inquiry, had been “twice orphaned” as an academic unit in that it was not really welcomed in either of its natural homes, Middle Eastern studies and Jewish studies (Dowty 2006). With the aid of the Association of Israel Studies in terms of unprecedented access to their archives, I used a combination of curricular material, letters, conference programs and memos together with a survey of Israel studies chair holders to form case studies of public and private universities which illustrate an emerging discipline.

An analysis of the social and intellectual development of Israel studies involves shifts in what is considered legitimate knowledge in terms of status and authority (Kook 2003). Even within Israel, it was not easy to create an academic program in Israel studies. The impetus came after the death of the first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion in the early 1970s. Parliamentary (Knesset) legislation to memorialize him included the setting aside of funds for both a physical space to house archival material as well as research positions. This legislation led to the establishment of the *Moreshet Ben-Gurion facility* in *Sdeh Boker*. Ben-Gurion had called for the development of the Negev region of Israel and had made it his home during retirement. The establishment of a significant archival base together with research positions created a precedent in terms of academic focus and facilitated the creation years later of an Israel studies academic program at the nearby Ben-Gurion University. This program was to serve as a prototype in terms of interdisciplinary focus on modern Israel.

An academic school of thought can describe groups of individuals working in the same environment or a distinct approach to a scholarly endeavor (Fine 1995). While analyzing Israel studies scholarship, a Ben-

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Gurion school of thought can be seen. His life and decisions serve as a constant reference and focal point for scholars. Combing the archives for minutes of meetings, diaries, and speeches is characteristic of the historians, old and new, who battle over new interpretations of the past in Israel studies. Even political scientists mine the archives for nuances until now overlooked in his speeches and diaries. One scholar used the first Prime Minister's decisions regarding territorial withdrawal to frame a theoretical construct regarding how states contract (Lustick 1996) while another focused on Ben-Gurion's reaction to the Peel partition plan of 1937 and the acceptance of Transjordan as a separate entity as part of a theoretical construct regarding the mechanisms of border changes (Shelef 2007).

The academic focal point of Ben-Gurion's leadership as a core of Israel studies scholarship is ironic as it continues the complicated relationship Ben-Gurion had with the intellectual establishment during his lifetime. Although often engaged in correspondence and in debates with leading poets and academics, Ben-Gurion's ultimate fall from grace and political office has been connected to criticism from the intellectual sector who resented his political realism (Keren 1983). He was attacked for the weakening of socialist revolutionary universal ideology, as well as for the strengthening of the national defense forces. Ben-Gurion's policy of *mamlachtiut* ("statism") or the strengthening of bureaucratic control over functions previously performed by voluntary, partisan associations (including pre-state militias) was considered to have been facilitated at first by his "towering personality" (Eisenstadt 1967). However, when Ben-Gurion incorporated citizenship courses into the defense forces, which he viewed as an educational vehicle to aid in the absorption of immigrants into Israeli society, he was attacked for blurring the distinction between force and ideology. The recruiting slogan "the good ones to the air force" developed during his leadership was critiqued by a leading philosopher who replaced it with "the good ones to do *good*, the pilots to the air force" (Keren 1983).

Ben-Gurion was the product of diverse educational experiences, such as a traditional East European religious school attended in his youth in the late nineteenth

century, as well as a law degree pursued in 1911 when Turkey/the Ottoman Empire ruled Palestine (which he could not complete due to political circumstances). He viewed education as a bridge between the present and past, particularly important in connecting Jewish history in the land of Israel to the fate of Jews around the world. However, he was attacked for his merging of the fate of Zionism with that of the Jewish people as a whole (to the exclusion of the potential non-Jewish participants in a global Marxist revolution). When Ben-Gurion combined universalist socialist goals with those pertaining to Jewish history/Zionism he was critiqued for the creation of a *shaatnez* type mixture, from the Biblical prohibition of wool and linen (Cohen 2003).

This is most evident in the language of the 1953 Basic Education Law in which he attempted to combine socialist ideals with Jewish history. For Socialist Zionism, the teachers were those responsible for the future. They were expected to act both as avant garde revolutionaries as well as societal partners in the forming of a new type of Jew. The Teachers Federation established in 1903 was one of the first societal pre-state institutions. The ideal socialist educator reflected a Rousseau like image of a child of nature, with education acquired not through books or instruction, but through what the person had decided for him or herself. This concept of informal training was directly opposed to that of the traditional Biblical scholar who had been valued for skills such as textual interpretation and memorization. The 1953 Basic Education Law mandated that the educational process in Israel be based on the foundations of Jewish culture and on the achievements of science, on love of the homeland and loyalty to the state and to the Jewish people. The law also mandated that the educational system promote freedom, equality, tolerance, mutual assistance and love of mankind, as well as socialist training in agriculture and crafts. The wide ranging ideological goals of the legislation made implementation next to impossible (Keren 1983). However the Education law and the concurrent Law of Return (regarding the "ingathering of exiles") were the two pieces of legislation viewed as most indicative of Ben-Gurion's vision of a model state.

Israel studies as an emerging discipline has continued to reflect an impossible educational agenda. While Israel studies relies on a traditional curriculum such as classical languages and interpretations of religious texts to present the history of Zionism, it also relies on complicated political theoretical constructs to understand the Israeli-Arab wars. In addition to classical languages and texts, thousands of years of Diaspora history underpin an understanding of Israeli society. However, the “elephant” in the room has been the continuing Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict. Originally coined regarding curricular battles taking place in the humanities, “teach the conflicts” has referred to the addition of multicultural narratives to a European canon (Graff 1993). In the context of Israel studies however, “teaching the conflicts” has reflected a critical theory-based concept of the active role of the intellectual in enacting change regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, “teaching the conflicts” has been complicated by what has been termed “essentially contested concepts” or concepts which do not validate any part of the other’s history or narrative so that there is a complete lack of consensus (Voll 1996). This has made the presentation of multiple narratives regarding the conflict and solutions to the conflict very difficult.

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