

Shlomo Sand, *Matai ve'ech humtza ha'am hayehudi?* [*When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?*]

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CONVERTS TO COLONIZERS?

The foundational myths of the state of Israel rest on the notion that, throughout history, the Jews have been descended from a single ethno-biological core of Judean exiles who had been removed from their ancestral lands in the first two centuries CE. Shlomo Sand's *When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?* sets out to refute such claims of organic ethnic continuity, arguing that the idea that the Jews had been exiled across the Mediterranean world was a creation of the Christian Church—mass displacement as punishment and constant reminder of who is *Israel Veritas*—which was conveniently embraced by 19th-century Jewish scholars. Their narratives of a centuries-long *Galut*, 'exile', and by extension the Zionist project of 'returning' to reclaim ancient territories, are based on historical fictions.

Against these, Sand offers an alternative history in which the striking demographic growth of the Jews in the Hellenistic Mediterranean was the product not of mass exile, but of an energetic drive of proselytism and conversion that had begun under the Hasmonean Kingdom in the second century BCE and lasted till the fourth century CE. Conversions were also, Sand holds, the source of the large Jewish populations at the margins of the Hellenistic world—Arabia, North Africa and the area between the Black and Caspian Seas—as Judaizing currents met repression in Christian territories and fanned out into the largely pagan lands beyond. Sand offers a cautious endorsement to the thesis, earlier popularized by Arthur Koestler, that East European Jewry—what he and others call the Yiddish Nation—originated not from any eastward migration of 'German' Jews, themselves supposedly descended from pure Judean exiles, but from the Khazars, Jewish converts whose empire on the Volga–Don steppe disappears from the historical record

in the 13th century. This contention has far-reaching implications, for it is the Yiddish Nation that is in many ways the real foundation for the two largest and most vociferous Jewish communities of the past half-century—the Israeli and the American.

The genre of Sand's book might be termed the 'counter-hegemonic text'. He seeks to deconstruct Zionism's mythical past, to expose the oppressive present hidden behind the screen of ideological manipulation and deceit, and to offer a counter-interpretation and an alternative vision of the future. Like the better examples of the genre, it combines serious scholarly argumentation with an explicit political edge: for both political and moral reasons, Sand urges, Israel must become its citizens' state rather than one of and for the Jewish People. Based in Tel Aviv, where he teaches history, Sand was born in Austria in 1946, and spent the first two years of his life in a displaced persons camp near Munich—his parents were Polish Jewish Communists who had survived the Holocaust. He and his family arrived in Jaffa in 1948; in a 2004 interview, Sand commented: 'I wouldn't say that the bed was still warm, but it is by now obvious that that flat had been left, or that it had been forcefully left, by Palestinian refugees who most probably live in Gaza today'. After fighting in the 1967 war, he left the Moscow-oriented Israeli Communist Party and joined Matzpen (Compass), an anti-Zionist Marxist group. In the mid-70s he went to Paris, earning his PhD, on Georges Sorel and Marx, from the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*. But though his formation and early publications focused on modern French intellectual history, in the past decade Sand has shifted to writing mostly on his own society, and on the nexus between culture, knowledge and politics

He is no stranger to controversy and confrontation. In 1983 he took part in a heated exchange over Zeev Sternhell's *Ni droite, ni gauche: l'idéologie fasciste en France*, and later drew the ire of Claude Lanzmann with his 2002 book in Hebrew, *Film as History*, in which he not only passed scathing judgement on Lanzmann's *Shoah*, but also revealed that the film had been secretly funded by the Israeli government. *When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?* too has attracted agitated commentary, as well as gaining considerable commercial success: its Hebrew edition was on the bestseller list for several months, and the French translation has been through three editions, selling over 25,000 copies and winning the Aujourd'hui Award. Its appearance in English from Verso later this year is sure to stir further debate.

Sand opens by recounting a series of personal episodes of Jews and Palestinians whose lives intersected with his in one way or another. This serves as a conduit for the theme of 'implanted memory'—the collective narratives that are 'assimilated' by each member of a given society. He then provides an interpretative survey of the better-known literature on nationalism, ideology and identity, and on the role intellectuals—especially historians—have

played in the creation and dissemination of nationalism. This survey, taking in the work of Anthony Smith, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Carlton Hayes and others, is neither original nor especially insightful, though it is not misguided. Its main significance lies in the fact that it announces from the outset the unexceptional comparability of the Jewish-Zionist-Israeli case. The substance of the book, however, comes in the four subsequent chapters, in which Sand deals with both historiography and history, in that order. Not content with deconstructing the modern historiography of the 'Jewish People' as ideological in nature, Sand also tries, on the basis of accounts available to him—given that this is not a primary study in pre-modern Jewish history—to provide a counter-history that would ground his counter-politics. On the whole he does both competently and convincingly, though there are, as we will see, significant omissions.

Sand's argument unfolds in four steps. First, he critically discusses the way in which the Jewish People, as a continuous, organic ethno-biological entity, was invented in a process that began in the middle of the 19th century. The focus here is on German Jewish historians, but also includes those to the east and west of the Germanic world. Sand correctly identifies the key turning point in the work of Heinrich Graetz, whose eleven-volume *History of the Jews* appeared between 1853 and 1875. (He also gives an interesting account of the public debate between Graetz and the Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke, who saw a demographic threat to German nationhood in Jewish immigration from the east—prompting a liberal intervention from the classicist Theodor Mommsen, who cautioned against ethnicized definitions of German identity.) Sand highlights the central role played in the construction of such historical accounts by the use of the Old Testament. Moving forward in time, he then relates how a younger generation of Israeli archaeologists, dispatched by the state to excavate the post-1967 Occupied Territories in order to confirm the biblical narrative, ironically ended up shattering claims for its veracity, raising doubts as to whether many of its signal events had actually occurred at all.

The second stage of Sand's argument involves demonstrating how the founding experience of the exile of the Jewish People from their ancestral land was invented by a Christian Church bent on proving the sins of its monotheist predecessors—and was then taken up by Jewish historians as one of the defining traits of a persecuted ethno-national group, whose wanderings would cease only with their 'return' to the homeland. Sand then tries to show that there was no policy or process of forced exiling of conquered communities in the ancient world. According to the numerous Jewish historians Sand cites, although the fall of the First Temple was accompanied by formidable repression, it did not result in mass deportation. The ensuing subjugation to Roman rule rather signified a loss of temporal power over

Judea, a concrete dispossession that was subsequently recast in broader, figurative terms as exile.

But if there was no mass deportation, how should the presence of large Jewish communities around the Hellenistic Mediterranean be explained? Observing that many of these existed even prior to the crushing of the Great Jewish Revolt, Sand argues that their subsequent dramatic expansion was above all the product of conversion rather than dispersion. The Judaizing drive peaked in the Hellenistic regions in the fourth century CE, after which Christianity began to prevail; but the proselytizing impetus continued, according to Sand, on the margins of that world thereafter. He discusses the Jewish kingdom of Himyar in what is today Yemen, and the spread of Judaism among the Phoenicians of Carthage and the Berbers; the latter, he suggests, may have been one of the main sources of the large Sephardic populations of North Africa and Moorish Spain.

His eventual focus, however, is the Khazar kingdom, which ruled the region between the Black and Caspian seas from around the 7th to the 12th or 13th century. There are almost no direct documentary sources from the Khazar kaganate itself. But from references in Arab chronicles and in works by medieval Jewish writers, it seems that the Khazar rulers and elite, at least, converted to Judaism during the 8th century; the most plausible motivation being that of preserving a certain geopolitical independence vis-à-vis Byzantium to the west and the Muslim caliphates to the south and east. After surveying the historical sources, Sand discusses the Khazars' fate in Zionist Israeli and other historiographies—Soviet works first and foremost—and puts forward the thesis that East European Jews are descended from remnants of the Khazar population who migrated westwards after the Mongol invasion. Though Sand cites the work of numerous historians who had arrived at the same conclusion, the empirical basis for this is rather slim, resting on a few place names and some loose temporal inferences: for example, Sand records that 'Khazaria collapsed some time before the first indications of the presence of Jews in Eastern Europe, and it is difficult not to connect the two.' Sand is right, however, to note the aversion of the Israeli historical establishment to studies of Khazaria and other convert kingdoms, especially after 1967: 'The conquest of the "City of David" had to be achieved by the direct descendants of the House of David—not, perish the thought, by the offspring of tough horsemen from the Volga–Don steppes, the deserts of southern Arabia, or the coast of North Africa.'

In a fourth and final stage, Sand leaps forward to the state of Israel, bringing together past and present. In the book's most overtly political chapter, he aims to show why the ethno-biological 'Nation' constructed by Zionist Israeli culture cannot form the basis of a secular and democratic republic, since its racist presuppositions militate against the emergence of a civic society

willing to share more or less equally the polity in which it dwells. The Jewish democratic state of Zionist pretensions is nothing but an oxymoron. Sand therefore calls for Israel to be transformed into a republic of its citizens, not simply in abstract terms but as a concrete political arrangement. This is tantamount to a call for the de-Zionization of the state. Sand's presentation here is somewhat convoluted, but the point is important nonetheless. He also makes an eloquent exposé of the scientific-racist trend in Zionist thought, in which, as part of the attempt to invent a Jewish people, a succession of thinkers embraced eugenicist notions of race that emerged in Europe at the end of the 19th century. Many will find this rather shocking.

How should we situate Sand's overall argument? In its methods and political agenda it displays the influence of Matzpen on the one hand, and what might loosely be termed a post-Canaanite perspective on the other. 'Canaanism'—a pejorative term applied by its opponents—refers to a cultural-political movement active in Palestine from the 1940s to the early 1950s, which saw its mission as the revival of a primordial, pre-monotheistic Hebrew nation; a programme founded on notions of linguistic and cultural unity transferred from European organic nationalism. Emerging from the right-wing Jabotinsky school of Zionism, Canaanism sought to take Zionism to its logical conclusion by proposing an irrevocable divorce from Judaism, which would result in a secularized, territorial Hebrew state.

While the political component of Canaanism was never a serious challenge to Zionism, its critique of the latter's master-narrative was subsequently taken up by figures to the left of the Zionist consensus such as Boas Evron, to whom Sand owes an important intellectual debt. This is evident not only in Sand's political conclusions, but also in his historical interpretation: for example, when Sand identifies the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe in the 19th century as a genuine, fully developed nation, his argument is clearly informed by Evron's *National Reckoning* (1988; published in English in 1995 as *Jewish State or Israeli Nation?*). It was in this work that Evron most systematically articulated the marriage between a Matzpen vantage-point and a sort of left-leaning Canaanism. Though he eschewed Canaanism's political programme and its organic nationalist sensibilities, Evron accepted its critique of Zionism, and its attendant political conclusion—that whatever has emerged in Palestine/Israel as a result of Zionist colonization is a territorial nation that is not, and cannot be, Jewish, but is rather Israeli. He called for the de-Judaization and de-Zionization of the state of Israel, for a fundamental separation between state and church and the transformation of the state into a republic of its citizens. The demand that a modern state be a normally territorial nation-state is, of course, not at all radical or dramatic, but in the context of Israeli and American Zionism, it is heresy.

In 2008, Sand was asked by a *Haaretz* interviewer why refutation of the myth of the Jewish People as ethno-biological collective generates such deep anxieties. Sand replied that ‘since the beginning of the period of decolonization, settlers have no longer been able to say simply: “We came, we won and now we are here” the way the Americans, the whites in South Africa and the Australians said. There is a very deep fear that doubt will be cast on our right to exist’. Given his awareness that the Palestine/Israel story is one of settler colonialism, it is puzzling that Sand fails to grasp the connection between settler colonial projects and modern nationalism. It represents a major oversight, given the subject of his book and his desire to change the state that is founded on the myths he describes.

This is apparent in his initial survey of the literature on nationalism, in which he does not engage with the scholarship on comparative settler colonialism. He dismisses Benedict Anderson’s thesis that nationalism first appeared among the Creole colonies in the Americas because, for Sand, the foundational act of removal, or at least exclusion of the indigenes and then settlement, is somehow extrinsic to the process of nation formation. *Imagined Communities* is not the only work to have underscored the importance of creole or settler nationalism: Sand could have consulted a burgeoning field of comparative studies, from writers such as D. K. Fieldhouse, George Fredrickson, Patrick Wolfe and, a *sine qua non* for Israel/Palestine, Gershon Shafir.

Sand’s failure to discuss the question of settler colonialism ultimately leads him to adhere to Hans Kohn’s questionable distinction between East and Central European *völkisch* or organic nationalism on the one hand, and Western, especially Anglo-Saxon, civic and liberal nationalism on the other. Such a schema supposes that the nationalism of Western settler societies, whose formation was predicated on their purity vis-à-vis the indigenous peoples, was less *völkisch* than the German or Polish cases simply because the former excluded colonized natives whereas the latter excluded Jews. Moreover, by ignoring the centrality of settler nationalism to an understanding of the Zionist Israeli project, Sand misses an insight into the theme of the invented Jewish ‘nation-race’, as he terms it: the context for the increasing obsession with purity was not European nationalism in the abstract, but specific and concrete settler projects, in which constructing the impregnable purity of the settler nation relative to the indigenes—unless and until they were removed—was absolutely crucial.

A further example of the consequences of Sand’s neglect of this theme comes in his discussion of the Old Testament. The Tanakh served as the pivot for the myth of the Jewish People, Sand asserts, from Graetz’s historical magnum opus in the 19th century to Ben-Gurion’s Bible project in the 1950s. But between Graetz and Ben-Gurion stood an actual settler project, and in particular the ethnic cleansing of 1948, in which Ben-Gurion played a central

role and for which the Book of Joshua was retrospectively inspirational. This creates a rupture between Graetz's use of the Bible and Ben-Gurion's that is as significant as the continuity. To ignore this difference is a flaw not only in intellectual terms, but also ethically and politically, for from the perspective of the indigenous Arabs it is the only thing that mattered: Graetz's Bible was harmless, whilst Ben-Gurion's was eliminatory.

The political message of Sand's book—that the Jewish state should be replaced by a republic offering, at least constitutionally, universal suffrage—has gained a much wider reception in Israel itself than many other counter-hegemonic works. It has certainly not been ignored, which is the well-rehearsed way of dooming a dissenting text to oblivion. Sand has received broad media coverage and many reviews, including a mildly positive notice from the post-Zionist historian Tom Segev; and, from the non-Zionist left, a viciously sardonic attack by Yizhak Laor, who accused Sand of colluding with that which he set out to criticize—like Balaam, who had been sent to curse the Children of Israel but ended up blessing them. The book also touched a raw nerve in two notable representatives of the Zionist centre-left: Israel Bartal and Anita Shapira each wrote lengthy review essays seeking to refute Sand's main thesis as well as more specific arguments; the title of Shapira's contribution—'The Jewish People Deniers'—marking an obvious attempt to up the rhetorical stakes. Both Bartal and Shapira attempt to dismiss Sand's debunking of a systematic exiling of Judean Jews and of the idea that the Jews constitute an ethno-biological people, genetically contiguous with those exiled from Judea. They attribute to Sand himself the invention of a twofold straw man. We (the competent and rational pro-Zionist Jewish historians), Shapira and Bartal assert, have always known that the story of the exile of the Judean Jews is a complex one, and we have always said that, given their history, the Jews cannot be an ethno-biological people.

To declare so categorically that both the hegemonic myths Sand addresses are his own hallucinatory invention is not just disingenuous, it begs the lexicographical redefinition of disingenuousness. Yet for all his methodical exposure of these myths, Sand would have been on much firmer political and empirical ground if he had anchored his argument in the concrete, and comparable, context of the budding settler state's need to wrest the land away from its indigenous inhabitants and render itself pure vis-à-vis that indigenous community. After all, it was the imperatives of colonial dispossession that prompted not only the forcible removal of the Palestinian people and the destruction of their civilization, but also the creation of a history that would legitimate these erasures.