Below are audio links and the complete transcript, originally titled “Is the U.S. Left Truly Anti-Zionist?,” of an hour-long interview with British-Israeli historian and activist Ilan Pappé. It was conducted in May by Khalil Bendib, award-winning political cartoonist and co-host of “Voices of the Middle East and North Africa,” a weekly program on KPFA radio, the Bay Area outlet of the Pacifica network. The interview originally appeared on Status Hour, a new online interview program by the Arab Studies Institute; a slightly edited version was recently broadcast on “Voices of the Middle East and North Africa” on KPFA. The Status Hour version was transcribed by Samantha Brotman.

Pappé is Professor of History and Director of the European Centre for Palestine Studies at the University of Exeter, England. Phil Weiss also interviewed him here in May, by e-mail, on the occasion of the publication of his latest book, “On Palestine,” a collection of dialogs, edited by Frank Barat, between him and Noam Chomsky. – Henry Norr
Is the U.S. Left Truly Anti-Zionist?

Khalil Bendib (KB): Welcome. For Status Hour, this is Khalil Bendib. Renowned Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, is the author of numerous books on the history of Zionism, including his seminal work, “The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine: A History of Modern Palestine and the Israel-Palestine Question.” In his new book on Palestine co-authored with Noam Chomsky, Ilan Pappé debates issues spanning from the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement to the one-state solution. I spoke with Professor Pappé about this new work.

Ilan, your most recent book, co-authored with Noam Chomsky, entitled, “On Palestine,” offers a nice contrast between the old and the new left perspectives on the question of Palestine, between two generations of thinking on this question. One of the most marked contrasts is the fundamental question of the so-called two-state solution, which much of the liberal left in this country—following in the footsteps of the revered éminence grise of the American left, Doctor Chomsky—essentially abandons the moral high ground of equal rights for all in the name of pragmatism. You speak of an old conversation versus a new conversation and talk of a paradigm shift. Tell us a little bit more about this.

Ilan Pappé (IP): The idea emanated from my thinking that whenever I go around outside of Palestine and talk to people, people hesitate about this idea of the two-state, the one-state, and say to me, “You know it is up to the people themselves to decide. It is not our role outside of Palestine or outside of the Palestinian or Israeli context, to give advice to people [about] what is the right or wrong solution.” And I usually answer, and that is the point I make in the book, that it is not a question of whether you support that or another solution only, of course it is part of it. The most important aspect of this is, do you understand the implication of the paradigm of a two-state solution? Because otherwise you are entangled in questions. “Is this feasible? Is one state feasible?” Which is not yet the debate in my mind. The main debate is what lies behind the idea of the two-state solution. What lies behind the idea of a two-state solution is: if the Jewish national movement and the Palestinian national movement arrive more or less at the same time to the same place, and were unable to settle the question of to whom the land belongs, and were unable to reconcile, and what was needed was kind of a grown-up in the form of the United States and Britain that would help these two sides to reconcile on the basis of a kind-of American, business-like approach, where you divide the land, you divide the responsibility, and so on. And that is a very wrong way of reading the whole history of Palestine since the arrival of the Zionist movement there in the late nineteenth century until today.

This is not a conflict between two national movements fighting over the same piece of land. This is a struggle between a settler-colonialist movement which arrived in the late nineteenth century in Palestine and still tries today to colonize Palestine by having most of the land with as few of the native people on it as possible. And the struggle of the native people is an anti-colonialist struggle. You have to come back to any historical case studies you remember of an anti-colonialist movement fighting a colonialist power and ask yourself, at any given moment was the idea of partitioning the land between the colonizer and the colonized portrayed as a reasonable solution? Especially by people who were on the left or saw themselves as conscientious members of the society? And the answer is a resounding no, of course you would not support the division of Algeria between the French settlers and the native Algerians. And even in places where you had settler colonialism, namely where you had white people who had nowhere to go in a way, like in South Africa, if you would suggest today as a progressive person that you should divide South Africa between the white
population and the African population, you would be regarded at best as insane, and at worst as someone who is insincere and a fascist. I think the fact that this logic—which is so clear to many people on any other place in the world—somehow fails to work in the case of Palestine. And I think that is why it was so important for me to explain that part of the problem is what I call the old orthodoxy, the old language we used, even as progressive people, even as people who supported the Palestinians on the issue of Palestine. The language of the two-states actually was a language that did not describe aptly the reality on the ground in Palestine.

KB: One fundamental problem that you raise is that, unlike in the fight against Apartheid where opponents of Apartheid had no qualms about being against the actual ideology of Apartheid, a lot of the solidarity movement with Palestine dare not denounce the nature of Zionism. And whenever that happens it is considered or called anti-Semitism in Europe and the United States. Tell us more why that is a fundamental flaw of the movement.

IP: Yes definitely. This is an important example. It is connected to another term—maybe we will come back to it in the conversation—that I suggest instead of just talking about one-state solution, I suggest talking about the regime change.

KB: Yes, yes. We have talked about that.

IP: The two are connected in the sense that when we analyze the situation in Palestine, when we ask ourselves why were Palestinian expelled massively in 1948? Why were the Palestinians in Israel put under military rule between 1948 and 1967? Why was this military rules transferred from inside Israel to the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967? Why are the Bedouins in the south of Israel and the Palestinian villages in the north of Israel today subject, like those who live in Jerusalem, to a policy of, namely of expropriation of land and strict regulation in their own places of habitation? Then of course we get to this question of why does Israel refuse to allow the refugees to return and imposes such an inhumane siege on Gaza? When we ask all of these questions and we look for the reason why they are done, we know now better than we ever knew before that the reason for this is ideological. It is a Zionist ideology.

All of these policies are tactics which attempt to keep the land of Palestine as part of Israel without calculating demographically the Palestinians as part of the citizenship of that land. And this idea of segregating the rights of the people is familiar to us. Now this is an ideology. This is not a tactical response to a problem. This is not just a policy. It is not even a strategy. This is a Zionist vision shared by all the Zionist parties. Now, this is the main, almost the exclusive, obstacle to peace and reconciliation in Israel and Palestine. Not addressing it, but only addressing the Israeli policy here or there, would be similar to addressing certain policies of South Africa during the heyday of Apartheid without touching Apartheid at all. And this of course is complicated even further. Not only do politicians and mainstream media and academia people refuse to acknowledge that the main reason for the inhumanity that rages in Palestine in the last century is the Zionist ideology. Not only do they ignore it, they accuse anyone who doesn’t of being anti-Semitic. As if if you attacked Apartheid as the ideology during the heyday of this dark regime, you would be accused of being an anti-Christian. There would be a similar reality. As you probably noticed in the book, I am even more bewildered by this because large sections of the society in the western world already understand it. They are being condemned by their own political elites for being anti-Semites—despite the fact, by the way, that many of them are Jews, anyway.

KB: Well, then they are self-hating Jews.
IP: [laughs]

KP: So there is no escaping the stigma.

IP: No. In fact, it is a case that if you sort of look at it with cold, sober eyes, it is insane. It is really insane to accuse for example, progressive Jewish activists in the United States—who stood in the forefront of the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s, who initiated the solidarity movement against Apartheid in South Africa, were vocal in the opposition to imperialism in Vietnam, in Chile, in other places—to accuse these people when they apply the same human rights universal yardstick to Israel, to accuse them of being self-hating Jews for instance, shows you that this is just an abnormality. And it can only probably be produced by intimidation, lobbying, and pressure, and probably quite a high share of Islamophobia. Otherwise, it is very difficult logically to explain why this very humane and normal way of looking at the situation is treated in such a way.

“On Palestine,” from Haymarket Books

KB: In your book, “On Palestine,” co-authored with Noam Chomsky, you speak of this term, “peace orthodoxy” which you accuse of being more of a racist than pragmatic tendency. You go as far as saying that among the pushers of a two-state solution, “the dictionary of the peace orthodoxy sprang out of an almost religious belief in the two-state solution. And that comes straight out of a temporary version of Orwell’s 1984.”
IP: Yeah. It is a newspeak. I mean, I am using Orwell here in his reference to newspeak, the kind of language that does not only disable us from calling a spade a spade, it called it exactly the opposite. Usually, a cruel reality is described as a benevolent one in newspeak of Orwell. And I think the same of true about these words, which to me are sacred. I mean, “peace,” “justice,” “reconciliation” are three of the most sacred words in our vocabulary as human beings. They really represent the highest form of human ambition to live peacefully with one another, to live in a society which is much better than any other society. Now, to use these languages in order to cover up for a process on the ground which achieves exactly the opposite—instead of reconciliation, it sows more dissent and animosity and hatred; instead of peace, it creates war; and instead of justice, it maintains an Apartheid system—when these words are used as a protective shield to describe a reality that is exactly the opposite of what they mean, this for me is even worse than racism in a way. This is a kind of the Orwellian nightmare that I have when people begin to use words in such a way.

I think what happened, and I try to describe it in the introduction to the book, is that the idea for a two-state solution began as a Zionist, Israeli ploy after 1967 to reconcile a really simple problem: they have kicked millions of Palestinians in 1948, but because of their territorial appetite, they wanted to take those parts of Palestine they did not occupy in 1948—the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—but with the territory came another one million and a half Palestinians, today almost three million Palestinians. In order to reconcile the fact that you now have the whole of the land, but you are still left with a demographic nightmare as far as the Zionist movement was concerned, one of the means they have used was the peace process. The peace process was used as a kind of message to the world which says, “As you can see, we are now robbing the Palestinians in the occupied territories of any basic human rights and civil rights. As you can see, we are expropriating their land, we are building Jewish settlements on them, we are expelling the quite massively, and we imprison them even they dare just to raise the Palestinian flag.” Now, what the peace process means for the Israelis is a message to the world: “This is all temporary, of course when peace comes, all these measures will be removed.” Now, of course, you can understand why people on the western left would have succumbed to this explanation after five years of occupation, or ten years of occupation. I can still see why one could still be hopeful that the Israelis mean it, or that the world has the power to force Israel to mean it. But after almost fifty years, to still stick to this idea which is an Israeli ploy to deepen the colonization of the areas they have occupied in 1967, and to wipe out any possibility of negotiating the areas they occupied in 1948, or the return of the refugees, to do that is really to be very stagnant and dogmatic in one’s perception of the reality. You would have expected critical voices on the American and European left to be a bit more alert to the kind of trap they have found themselves in, which Israel very cleverly has put there, in a way.

KB: You say that ethnic cleansing is in the very DNA of the Jewish State, so-called, and that change cannot come from within and that it will have to come, as in South Africa before it, from outside. Thus the need for a worldwide movement to force Israel or to force a regime change, as you were saying, in Israel. Tell us more about this regime change idea. Which, out here in the United States, has got a rather negative connotation [laughs].

IP: Of course. Of course. I connect it to another kind of way that proper language is fouled by people. I think that when the masses went on demonstration in Egypt and elsewhere, in Tunisia, in the Arab world, and demanded that the regime would fall, I think most of us identified with it. We thought this was a nonviolent massive movement of people who said to their government, you are not democratic, you are authoritarian. We want your regime to change. But the only regime change that worked, as we know, was the one that was toppled by the American air force and air power together
with its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the horrific consequences of this can be seen today. On the other hand, we have seen the fall of authoritarian regimes in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Regime change there was not always a bloody attack by foreign forces against the will of the people. So, regime change is what you make it. By itself it is not a negative term. It depends which regime you change and how you change it.

KB: Yes.

IP: And I just said that if this is now a legitimate conversation among the strategists in America, among the policy makers, and they claim—although I, like you, am very doubtful of how sincere they are—that they would like to see non-democratic regimes turn into democratic regimes. Putting aside the cynicism about it in some cases, it is amazing that when, again as in the case of ideology, when you raise this possibility about Israel, you are immediately branded again as someone who wants to see the destruction of the Jewish people. But for me it is even more than that. I am aware of the balance of power. Even with the greatest help from the outside, to change the reality in Israel would not be an easy project. It would not be an easy project to convince the millions that live here today already in the third generation, to give up the privileges, the power, of what they have. Of course, international pressure on them can help do that. But even more than that, we have to realize that building international pressure from the outside, as any Palestinian living on the ground today will tell you, is a very lengthy and slow process. And while we wait for that pressure from the outside to materialize, the pace of destruction on the ground has accelerated. We are facing a danger where, even when we will succeed in recruiting that effective international pressure, there will be very little to salvage on the ground. And because of that, I think it is also important to have realistic goals for the movement that struggles from within.

We have created a one-state movement, which we call TODS, The One Democratic State, all over Palestine, including in Ramallah, in Jaffa, in Haifa. We strongly believe, we Palestinians and Jews, we strongly believe that we should also achieve small steps towards a regime change. That if we cannot force the government to change its Apartheid laws, its policies of ethnic cleansing in Gaza, or genocide, we would try to create enclaves that indicate that there is an alternative way of living, that we will continue to resist these policies as a massive movement. It is not just the outside pressure here that will work. I think it is very important to set a realistic goal, and a worthy goal, for the people who struggle on the ground. If you listen to the Palestinian Authority, the only goal Palestinians should fight for is a Bantustan in Ramallah. This is not igniting anyone’s imagination as you can see. It does not terrify the Israelis, on the contrary, they are very happy with this kind of ultimate goal of the Palestinian struggle. It does not offer anything to progressive Jews who understand that they live in a settler colonialist society, but it is still their home land and they would like to live in a more just society. So I think the regime change here is not only what you expect the outside world to do. It is the kind of thing you want to do on the ground, even if you can only move very slowly towards this, or only one step at a time. It unites people. It gives them a clear target, and sways them away from false paradigms of peace, such as the two-state solution.

KB: You just mentioned the term Apartheid and the parallel between South Africa and Palestine, it is indeed both striking and inspiring for the future. But Chomsky, in this book, “On Palestine,” replies to you that things are not that simple and that in South Africa a couple of things were different: Settler colonialism was not, as it is in Palestine, accomplished in a way to replace the native population. And that in South Africa, the Cuban Military intervention in the eighties managed to help defeat
Apartheid, even militarily, and again the equivalent may not be apparent in Palestine. What do you reply to these two criticisms by Noam Chomsky?

IP: I see he is right, and there are many other differences between the two case studies. But I think where Chomsky and I differ is this dim line, that I think it was the late Edward Said who was the best person to define the dim line, much better than I would now, but there is a dim line between a scholarly analysis and the analysis of an activist. From a scholarly point of view, there are many aspects of the reality in South Africa which are different from those in Palestine. I could mention the lack of any equivalent to the Jewish lobby in the case of South Africa. I can mention also the Holocaust as a game changer in the history of Palestine, and there is nothing equivalent to this in the case of South Africa. And of course there are differences in the way the Apartheid regime manifested itself in South Africa and in the way the ethnic cleansing paradigm, or structure, in Israel was working. But these are minute issues that do not really undermine the basic comparison, which is the most important one.

There are three issues here which I think can only be understood if you see your role not just as as scholar who compares two case studies, but as an activist who wants to be inspired by a successful struggle and transfer this success to a struggle that so far has not been successful. The three points are the following: A) is the international image of Apartheid South Africa and the international image of Israel. In many cases, what Israel is doing is far worse than South Africa has done. This has been acknowledged by South African leaders, this has been acknowledged by many conscientious people around the world. So why can’t we receive the same kind of international condemnation, while Israel is a rogue state, as we could in the case with South Africa? And one of the reasons that we cannot do it, is because we have not done enough toward achieving it. It is not impossible. As the BDS movement has shown in its very short history, with its amazing achievements so far, we can do it. We can definitely do it. The second point is the inspiration that the younger generation of activists, especially in the west, received from the days of the struggle in the pro-African National Congress, the anti-Apartheid movement, in the West. Very important. The Israeli Apartheid Week has transformed the American and European campuses into spaces where Israeli official spokespersons are not welcome. This could not have been done if we would have stuck to a kind of minute academic comparison between Apartheid South Africa and Israel. This could only be done when people understood that the same energy that infuriated descent people in the West about the realities in South Africa infuriate people now about the reality in Palestine. And there was no need to invent the wheel, even if many scholars have shown the Apartheid in Israel was a bit different from the Apartheid in South Africa. Thirdly, and the most important point of view to my mind, is something to do with family names and first names. The family name is “Racism.” South African Apartheid was a racist society. Israel is a racist society. Yes, they have different first names, but they belong to the same family. And this family is an outcast, at least officially, all around the world, except in one case. And you cannot highlight this exceptionalism if you do not show the last case of exceptionalism that was successfully challenged.

And I think that is why it is so important not to stick always to the minute facts, to the scholarly, careful comparing of categories and sub-categories, and sometimes allow yourself to be swept by the energy that comes from the activists. That energy sometimes intuitively, not academically, realizes what is comparable and what is not comparable. And what is inspirational and what is not inspirational. So, I am willing, I am editing a book—which hopefully will come out very soon, it was long in the making for various technical reasons—which compares South Africa to Israel. I am the editor of the collection.
KB: Oh, perfect. Perfect.

Khalil Bendib

IP: It is a collection of articles coming out with Zed Publications in London. And, you know, scholars there show the differences in much a more detailed manner than Noam describes in the book. However, I think what is common to all these scholars is an understanding that dealing in the comparative study with South Africa opened their eyes about the possibilities in Palestine, changed the way they framed the reality in Palestine. In fact it is the South African model, if you want, or case study, that enabled us to just blow away the two state solution, not just as an impossible settlement, but a very dangerous one. And I do not think you could have had this perspective unless you understood also how the settler colonialist movement worked in South Africa.

KB: Again, in opposition to the more “pragmatic” Chomsky, you place not only the right of return for Palestinians at the heart of an eventual solution to the Palestinian question, but also reparations for what happened to the Palestinians over the past sixty-plus years. Explain to us how this is not necessarily just a utopian dream, and how these two essential conditions are central to a true solution for the future of Palestine-Israel.

IP: Yes, indeed. I think my departure point on the right of return is very different from those who would assess it pragmatically. Namely, is it feasible, or even on the question—which, anyway, is debatable—does Israel have the capacity to absorb such a large number of people should all the refugees want to come back. I think this is not now the issue and that is not the reason we are now bringing it up. We all have been bringing up the issue of right of return. The right of return is a symptom of the racist nature of the Zionist regime in Israel. That is the main problem. The objection of Israel to the right of return stems from the same ideological reasoning that lies behind the Judaization policy in Galilee, the destruction of Bedouin villages in the Naqab in the south of Israel, the Bantustanization of the West Bank, and the Ghettoization of Gaza. It stems from the same reason, and as a Zionist you always wanted it from the late nineteenth century to today, you want to have as much of the land as possible with as few people as possible. And therefore, when you support the right of return, you are not only recognizing an individual right that the international community sanctions in Resolution 194 from the 11th of December, 1948. You not only adhere to all the international conventions about the refugees’ right of return. No less important, you refuse to accept as legal, as moral, and as politically acceptable, the idea that the native people have no right to be in their own homeland. And I think that is the main issue. Now, of course—and again I come to the difference between academic work and an activist perspective—academics will tell you, and rightly so, that if you do an anthropological analysis among refugees in refugee camps, among
Palestinians who live in exhibit communities in places where some of them even made it personally. You will get absolutely different interpretation of how they view the implementation of the right of return. Of course. People will have different views if they are now refugees for the second time in Lebanon from a destroyed Yarmouk refugee camp, and if they live—

KB: Syria, Yes.

IP: Yeah. They will have a different perspective. But this is not the point. The point of the right of return is not at this moment its feasibility, is it pragmatic, given the [Unclear [00:30:59] ] is against it. No. It is, what does it indicate? And we had a horrific example for that, that of course the Western media has totally ignored, and I think on purpose. I do not remember if I mentioned it in the book, but I did mention it recently in an article. The only country neighboring Syria that did not receive one refugee, the only country, was Israel. All the other neighbors of Syria, with all their internal problems, with all their poverty, with all their more negative aspects of their regimes and so on, did not reject the refugees of Syria, and gave them shelter. The only country was the richest neighbor of Syria. It did not even stretch its hand from a humanitarian point of view, forget about politics, to say to the people who live in Yarmouk, “We know that your brothers and sisters,” and I am not using it metaphorically, their real brothers and sisters, and their nephews and their cousins live in the Galilee, “are waiting for you to host you, to give you a temporary solution to the inferno which you are in.” The only thing that Israel is doing is it treats some of the most fanatic Islamic fighters in its hospitals, to mend them, and sends them back so that the conflict in Syria will continue. This shows you where the right of return is. And, as I mentioned I think in the book and other places, of a quarter of a million Palestinian internal refugees, Israel refuses to allow even one of them to return to their demolished villages. So it comes from the same place. So if you use pragmatic reasons to explain why the right of return is utopian, is not feasible, you say that to oppose Zionist racism is utopian, is not realistic. Okay, if this is your point of view, that is your point of view. I find fighting racism the most realistic, most less-utopian, mission I have taken upon myself as a grownup.

KB: So it is for you both a question of principle, of the universal values, but at the same time it is the fundamental, the basis for something that might actually work in the future.

IP: Absolutely. You know, there is some famous research by Salman Abu Sitta who showed that most of the refugees can be settled in their original places and not remove even one of the Jews who live there. And there are mechanisms for how to settle a return, it has been done before. And in order to heal the wounds, not only in Palestine, in order to heal the wounds in the rest of the Arab world, you will need to have closure of the Palestinian refugee problem. The only way is at least to recognize the individual right of every one of them, even if many or few, we do not know, will decide to implement it. If you begin with the problem of implementation in a country that very gladly accepted one million ex-Russian Jews without any infrastructural problem, then you are just falling into the trap of avoiding the question, “Why does Israel reject the right of return?” Not whether the right of return is possible or feasible. I think of course it is possible and it is feasible. Peace is possible, reconciliation is possible. We have seen it in South Africa. What is sometimes very difficult is to convince the people who have all the natural resources in their hands, all the privileges, all the land, to redistribute these assets in order that everyone could live in relative peace and justice.

KB: As Frederick Douglass said so well, “Power is never relinquished willingly.” Power and privilege.

IP: Absolutely.
KB: You also mentioned, and this is coming back to the parallel between Palestine and South Africa, knowing that so many people of good will, progressives, people who are not racist who fought against racism, are disappointed at the disappointed at the outcome of post-Apartheid South Africa so far, where people are just as unhappy if not worse in many ways, at least economically, and what has followed in the footsteps of Apartheid. So you mention in this book, “On Palestine,” a more just and egalitarian economic system as part of the solution in Palestine. This also may sound utopian today because we are in the throes of this incredibly fundamentalist economic neoliberal system, but again that may not last forever. You point out that this is part of the solution, that beyond just equal rights for everyone, you will also need a more egalitarian system.

IP: Exactly. Let me put it this way. There are two issues one has to say about the economic Apartheid in South Africa that continues. On the one hand it should not undermine the success of getting rid of the political Apartheid. It is not the same South Africa. As I said in my last tour in South Africa to people who kept questioning me about that. I said, “Well, you have boarded a train to end the political Apartheid, and you have reached the final station. And now you have to board the train to end the economic Apartheid. It does not mean the journey has ended.” I said, “We in Palestine are still looking for the station to begin the trip to end the political Apartheid.” So, from our perspective, things have changed in South Africa, but we are fully aware of the the road still not taken. Now, the second thing is that of course you can learn from this. You can learn and we have an example in the form of the Palestinian Authority, in the form of the international neoliberal aid to the West Bank, hundreds of millions, that help—unintentionally, I think in most cases one should say—sustain the Israeli control of the West Bank. They do not change in any fundamental or meaningful way the reality on the ground, even if some of the donors would have liked to use that money for good purposes. And that means that when you have the time to talk about what I called the regime change, and you are looking for the small station on the way to the big success, sometimes for instance, working for social justice is no less important than working for the general justice. The more the struggle integrates fully both values, the more it will become realistic. This is one very good example. I do not think you can really build a different reality in Palestine if you do not redistribute land. Because Zionism was built mainly on the expropriation of land. If there are today twelve million people between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean, and half of them are Palestinians, and half of them are Jews, the Jews have more or less 85% of the land. Six million people have 85% of the land. Now, if there ever will be good will or even a successful international campaign, this is not a basis for building anything new on the ground. Therefore, this has to be integrated into the new conversation, into the educational project that we are trying to push forward as I do and others on the ground in Israel and in Palestine, and also part of the international conversation about it. But, you know, it is quite simple in a way. The two state solution fits so well to the neoliberal paradigm, where you look at Israel and Palestine and you claim that you are using a very sensible measure called partition between two conflicting sides. But you give one side 80% of the land and one side 20% of the land, and you sell it as a fair deal. That is neoliberalism, that is exactly neoliberalism, the idea that economic balance of power determines what equality means. In reality, it is inequality in essence. But again, this new speak of neoliberalism is very, very important.

I am a bit more optimistic than you may be on this because I am an historian and I think something cracked in the capitalist system in 2008. And all the cosmetic solutions that seem now to work with everybody looking at the green screens and not on the red screen, and Wall Street, and all the other measures that you have to look at economic growth and so on. I think this is a facade. The reality is that 2008 exposed to people who have not read Marx, who have not been brought up as Socialist, the sinister side of that system. It was very interesting to see how Naomi Klein moved from a totally
focused ecological agenda to a far, almost sober in my mind, agenda that connects capitalism even to ecological disaster. I think all of these things indicate that we are in the beginning of a process that at least—I do not know if it will be successful, but with all the distractions, and the most important of them is Islamophobia, that really preoccupies a person, even in the west. As if they are more occupied with terrorism than they are with their social security—all of these things are not going to be sustained easily by the powers that be. I know that they are immense. They are omnipotent in many ways. But I think that they are finding, in the age of information, very difficult to continue to deceive, disinform, and distract people from the realities on the ground. I think it would be great if we could integrate the Palestine issue to this conversation about social justice in America, in Latin America. We are beginning to do this. You know, it is not surprising. You can go to Norway and you can see women demonstrating in a textile factory for wages, waving the Palestinian flag. You ask them, “Why the Palestinian flag?” They will tell you, “It is for us today a symbol of social justice.”

KB: Yes, and wearing keffiyyehs, it is true. [laughs] It is true.

IP: Yeah. [laughs] And you see it elsewhere.

KB: In this book, “On Palestine,” with Chomsky, as well as in your previous one, you speak of the all-important concept of production of knowledge as a fundamental tool for perpetuating the status quo and the continuation of the cleansing of Palestine. This as well is controversial because even outside Israel this production of knowledge when it comes to the subject of Palestine is largely controlled by pro-Israel forces. Why is that such a taboo? Chomsky in particular refuses to take that into account. He downplays it fiercely. The source of this bias is never something that ever enters the discussion. And he claims that it is simply imperialism at work, a thirst for petroleum, etcetera. A huge chunk of the American left and the European left as well follow Chomsky in that direction. Is that in fact as irrelevant as it is made out to be, the fact that the people of the book are in charge of the production of knowledge, even outside of Israel? Not exclusively, but they have a large power in the publishing industry, in the news media, in Hollywood, etcetera. Is that not part of what we are up against?

IP: I think that is a very static analysis. I think production of knowledge is a dynamic process. If you sort of take a still picture of it, then yes this is a fair description. But if you try to video it, it is a slow movement, of course, it is a tectonic movement it is not an earthquake. I mean, it is a slower movement of blocks if you want, but it is happening. I can understand how people can say it when you compare the kind of things that were written, taught, and studied on Palestine until the 1980s and compare it to our days. There is a fundamental change in the way knowledge is produced about Palestine. It is true that as in the case of the media, also in the case of academia, the mainstream academia is timid, sometimes Islamophobic, and therefore these changes have not reached important basis of production of knowledge. This also is connected to capitalism and neoliberalism. I mean, universities today work on the assumption that they can, like big banks, determine which is an important publication and which is not. Therefore, power, capital, and knowledge are still connected in a way that serves the Israelis better than the Palestinians. Well, it does not serve anyone who is disempowered in society. But if you only look at this it means you take it out of the context of the revolution in knowledge production we had through the internet, for instance. In the growing sense of suspicion, even among academics themselves, about the way knowledge is produced and about the hierarchy of knowledge production. Again, I understand what is happening here. These are very slow changes.

People would like to see maybe quicker, tangible results. They do not have the patience to look at things in a more historical perspective. But I am an historian and I can see the change. I can see the
transformation. I think that Noam, for instance, kind of brushes aside the decision taken by the American Studies Association, the Linguistic Association, the upcoming decision of the Middle Eastern Studies Association. He does not think they are very important. I think they are highly significant. We are beginning to scratch the edges of the power centers. Yes, these are not yet the power centers themselves, but we are very, very close. To add something else, on the ground in Israel, as the last elections have seen, the inevitable other outcome of Zionism unfolds in front of our eyes. One consequence was the horrible consequence for the Palestinians. But the other one was that we realized that Zionism was a horrible trap for the Jews in Israel as well. The kind of policies that are now enacted, the kind of ideology that now pours out of what is Israel today, does not allow even Jews who were liberal Zionists to remain indifferent to Israel. They are trying now to find a way of telling us, “No, no. Do not identify us with them.” Even without without doing anything, Israel is accelerating the pace by which it becomes a pariah state. This will have an effect also on the production of knowledge. But I think we should never underestimate what has happened to the 1980s. It is impossible in any serious place to sell the Zionist narrative as a serious narrative. Those who do accept it as a serious narrative almost openly admit that they do it because either they got the money or they are just afraid of someone. Very few people will tell you that this is because it reflects what they really think about the reality.

KB: You mentioned earlier in our discussion what you call the Jewish lobby, what we usually call the Israel lobby, to not brush the whole entire Jewish community. Because people are very sensitive about that. But in reality, when you look at how it works in this country, certainly in the United States. It is not just the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), it is not even just the organized Jewish community which is very right wing and tends to be further to the right than the community at large, it is also any number of individuals who do feel something for Israel and they feel sympathetic and they help in whichever way they can. If they have a job in the media, or a job wherever they are, they have a little bit of money they contribute. So it is an entire group effort, even if it is only 30% or 40% of the community, they are very powerful whether we like to admit it or not. That is something that Chomsky is very strongly opposed to, the recognition of this fact. As a young man he was a fervent Zionist. He recognizes it, he admits it, even a Kibbutznik for a couple of years, if I remember correctly, in the 1950s. He claims he is not in favor of a Jewish state in Palestine, but on the other hand, everything that he actually does—he talks a good game, he does criticize Israel in fundamental ways, that is good for him—but when it comes to BDS he is very ambivalent about it. Certainly when it comes to the academic part of it, he is against it. When it comes to a two-state solution, he is fervently in favor even though he claims not to be. He basically explains White Man’s Burden, that the Palestinians who do not want this do not know what is good for them, that he knows better than the Palestinians themselves. How do you explain this kind of attitude coming from such a brilliant individual who otherwise is quite progressive, and even radical, on so many issues?

IP: Yeah, I think that some of the reasons we decided to have this conversation in the book because I admire him, he was in many ways a moral guide, an ideological guide, not just to me but to my generation. And yes, there was a creeping disappointment about some of his positions on Palestine. I thought the book at least helped to clarify some of them, and I think it was important to understand his position. I think there are two conflicting impacts here. One is a genuine concern about the power of American imperialism. He really thinks that we might be looking at the tail of the dog instead of the dog if we credit so much power to the Israeli lobby and we forget the basic objective of American capitalism. I mean, he will tell you how people who are 5% of the world hold 25% if not more of the natural resources, and so on. These amazing statistics about how America needs, in many ways,
economically and ecologically to control the world to keep its standard of living. That is why he wants to contextualize it a bit wider. That is the part I can identify with. Where I think there is a problem is what you referred to. I think, although he is not a classical case of what we call in America PEOPS, Progressive Except On Palestine. I think that, like so many of his generation who went through a Zionist period in their lives, went through some anxiety as Jews and so on, they almost in a subconscious way, they are afraid to let go of Zionism. I can understand it also because he did not live here throughout these last 67 years. He did not see the disease, how it really works. He sort of read about it more than saw it. And then he hoped that there is a better version of it. If you remember, in the book he talks about the need to see the varieties of Zionism, and I do not see the varieties of Zionism from the point of view of the native. So, I think that you are right. It is something that you notice in many other European intellectuals that, on any other issue you would totally identify with them, and somehow this exceptionalism about Israel creeps in, sometimes hidden, sometimes very clear, sometimes in a kind of ambivalent way. Then it is covered by general comments, like Noam says, “Basically I am against states altogether.” Because, I do not know, I am not a psychologist. Having done the journey myself, I know what you have to liberate yourself from. It is not easy.

KB: There is a lot of fear. People are generally still fearful from what happened in the past to a lot of Jewish communities.

IP: Exactly. I call it the insurance company.

KB: [laugh] Exactly. So it is hard to completely—

IP: Maybe Israel is still an insurance company, but your insurance agent is such a lunatic. I would say, look for another insurance agent.

KB: [laughs]

IP: How could anybody sell Israel as an insurance? But yeah, I think you are right. I think, at the very basic, there is a fear. I sometimes think that the fact that from a very early age I lived with Palestinians—I know the language, I speak the language, I shared so many things as friends, intimate friends—really cured me from this fear. You probably need through experience to go through it. So I am a great believer in the educational system here that we are building under the radar of the Israeli educational system. From Kindergarten level, I really think that this is something that has the potential of A) re-humanizing the Palestinians in the eyes of the next generation of Jews, but also dealing with these basic fears.

KB: You do mention in the book somewhere that this fear is conflated or compounded by a real racism and it is hard to tell where one stops and the other begins. In the Israeli and pro-Israeli imaginary, a lot of the fear is self constructed. “It is this crazy Arab on the other side, can I really trust the Arabs?”

IP: And it is a product of indoctrination and manipulation that has been working for 100 years. Layer on layer. I mean, people here are exposed to this intoxication from cradle to the grave. You are exposed to it in overdoses. I think American Jews were also exposed to this a lot. Sometimes, maybe, it is difficult to totally clean your body from this intoxication, from this venom.
KB: Finally, as a last question, thank you very much for taking so much time, Ilan. Last question is when do these books come out? These brilliant books that you have been producing, that we have been following, we cannot wait for the next one. Honestly.

IP: They will come out very soon. I have to have some space between books. I think that is one of the reasons to delay some of the books. We do hope next year that we will see two books that I am really happy about. One will be the comparison between South Africa, and the other one is—really, I have written it now for twenty years, you will see when the book comes out why it took so long—was really trying to explain the history of the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as part of the general context of ethnic cleansing. It was not so much a matter of accumulating new evidence, although a major part of the book is exposing the Israeli decision making between 1963 and 1968, a very important period. It was really finding the most persuasive way, which I thought was really important to the wider public, to explain why they were mislead and taken by the nose with all this talk about the peace process, the two-state solution. How it was really an organic part of what we talked about, of a shield that was meant to cover up for the continued ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

KB: How are these books that we praise so much and are so important to establishing the history and spreading some truth, how are these books received not in the mainstream, that is not my question, but on the left? People like The Nation, Amy Goodman, Democracy Now, and all that?

IP: It is an excellent question. It is very interesting if you mentioned, you know, Democracy Now or The Nation. These are the venues where people who stretch the word Zionism to such an extent that if they would one day leave it, I do not want to be there to get it in the nose. It is like an elastic gum. They have really succeeded in remaining loyal to a basic Zionist idea and yet being very, very liberal and open-minded. I think what I am doing is too much for them. I just pinch the balloon and I say, “Guys, I am sorry, you cannot.” And I know they really mean well. They somehow believe that there could be a Jewish state and it could be liberal, it could be democratic. That Palestinians would be happy with that. [laughs] You know?

KB: Yeah.

IP: And they are jugglers of words and ideas. They are squares of circles, amazing. And they are good people. I really love them. I am not saying it cynically. I know them so well, really, some of them I know personally. But I think it is time for them to understand that it is painful. They have to do what I did, and it is not nice. I am telling you, it is not nice to get out of the tribe. To get out of the warm embrace of the ideology. It is not a nice feeling.

KB: It is not fun.

IP: No, no fun at all!

KB: [laughs] But I will give you some of the good news, I am sure you know it already, is that you are getting more and more people, the new generation, to actually learn from these books. And actually openly quote you and say, “Yeah, I have read the book.”

IP: I will tell you a secret which is really amazing to me. All of the new ambassadors and councils general who come to Israel tell me that their predecessors tell them to read my books but to be very careful to mention the ideas in them. That is a good sign. I think they know they have something there that does tell them the truth.
KB: You have ignited this new generation. I was talking to Lia Tarachansky the other day, the filmmaker in Israel.

IP: Oh yeah.

KB: She told us she was influenced by your books, because we loved her film.

IP: Oh it was a very good film.

KB: Oh yeah, and I was thinking, “Hey this smells like my friend Ilan Pappé.” And sure enough she comes out, without my prompting, she says, “Oh yeah I read Ilan Pappé, it really opened my eyes.” Good for you! You have younger people like Max Blumenthal and others. They are coming to the fore and they are daring now.

IP: Absolutely. They are the future, undoubtedly. They are very clear, very outspoken. Concepts are very structured. So I think this will come too. Maybe one day The Nation will be bold enough to publish an article by me.

KB: They will have to at some point. They will feel like at some point their game is up, if everybody can.

IP: Even [[00:59:21] Unclear] maybe will be [[00:59:22] unclear]].

KB: That is right. Ilan Pappé is the author of numerous books on the history of Zionism, including the seminal, “Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine: A History of Modern Palestine and the Israel-Palestine Question.” I spoke with Ilan Pappé about his new book, “On Palestine,” which he co-authored with Noam Chomsky. On Palestine is edited by Frank Barat. You have been listening to Status Hour. I am Khalil Bendib. This interview was recorded at KPFA studio in Berkley, California. Please join us next time for another edition of Status Hour. You can listen to and podcast Status Hour interviews at statushour.com.

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