INTERVIEW WITH GABRIEL PITERBERG

Gabriel Piterberg was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and grew up in Israel. He graduated from Tel Aviv University, where he majored in Middle East history and political science (BA) and Middle East and European history (MA). His D.Phil. in the history of the Ottoman Empire is from the University of Oxford. He has taught at the University of Durham, England, and Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. Currently, Piterberg writes and teaches on the history of the Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean in the early modern period, and modern themes like colonialism, Zionism, and Palestine/Israel at UCLA. He also writes for *New Left Review* and *London Review of Books*. His publications include "The Formation of an Ottoman-Egyptian Elite in the 18th Century," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 22 (1990); "Speech Acts and Written Texts: A Reading of a 17th Century Ottoman Historiographic Episode," *Poetics Today*, 14 (1993); "Domestic Orientalism: The Representation of 'Oriental' Jews in Zionist/Israeli Historiography," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 23 (1996); "The Tropes of Stagnation and awakening in Nationalist Historical Consciousness: The Egyptian Case," in Israel Gershoni & James Jankowski (eds.), *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East, Columbia University Press*, 1997; "Erasures," New Left Review, 10 (July-August 2001); *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel*, London; New York: Verso, 2008; *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play*, Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2003, and in Turkish from İstanbul: Literatur Yayinları, 2005; "Zion's Rebel Daughter," *New Left Review*, 48 (November-December 2007); (with Teofilo F. Ruiz and Geoffrey Symcox), *Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World, 1600–1800*, University of Toronto Press, 2010; and an exchange with Zeev Sternhell in *New Left Review*, 62 (March-April 2010).

Professor Gabriel Piterberg was interviewed for Tarih by **Ceren Abi**.

Thank you for this interview. Because this is a graduate journal, I thought our readers might like to know a little more about your background and how your research interests have developed.

I was born in Buenos Aires; my parents emigrated to Israel when I was seven and a half. I lived first in a kibbutz and subsequently moved to another cooperative settler colony called a *moshav*, which is something akin to a kibbutz but with more private arrangements of property and production. My mother was the doctor of that moshav and a few others. My parents were not agriculturalists but physicians. So I studied there and then I went to Tel Aviv University. I did a double major in Middle East history and

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political science. At Tel Aviv I studied with a professor who was very influential in my formation, Ehud Toledano. I also worked with Israel Gershoni, who became an important teacher. That's how I was drawn to Middle East history and specifically to Ottoman history. This early formation also brought to my attention the sub-discipline of intellectual history and the debates within it. I proceeded to do an MA in TAU's School of History, which, in effect, was a mixture of European and Middle East history. The school had very good scholars in the European field, from whom I benefited greatly. By the end of the MA I knew I wanted to try an academic career, and ended up going to Oxford for my doctorate. Actually the original plan was to work with Roger Owen on the communities of European merchants in the eighteenth century Levant. What happened was that I took a tutorial with Richard Repp in reading Ottoman texts. As soon as I started reading that material, I found it amazingly interesting. I also fell in love with the language. I had already learned Arabic and Modern Turkish in Tel-Aviv, but had done very little Ottoman. The text reading tutorials with Dr. Repp is still one of the most exhilarating intellectual experiences I have had. He is such a magnificent philologist and the thrill of working with him in the tutorial system is one of the privileges that Oxford afforded me. Gradually, I developed a sustained interest in Ottoman historical texts. We started with Naima, explored Peçevi, and grappled with Karaçelebizade Abdülaziz Efendi's highly-stylized prose. And that's how I became immersed in Ottoman.

Did the sources develop your interest in intellectual history, or was it already there?

I think it was already there and was a result of an interesting combination between Toledano and Gershoni. Toledano really made Ottoman history something very attractive to me, and Gershoni is an intellectual historian. With him, we read Skinner, Pocock, Chartier, and others. Intentions are often recast retrospectively. Looking back I see that I always had an inclination towards and passion for reading texts very closely, rather than reconstructing an institution or process on the basis of a large array of disparate documents. I am not saying that one is superior to the other; it's just that everyone has their inclinations and strengths. If I have any strength, it is reading texts closely and placing them in context. While the reading of the texts is mine, to surround texts with their pertinent contexts, to use a Skinnerean phrase, I rely on the excellent work of others. So it's a combination of the teachers I worked with, what I read independently, and personal sensibilities.

What did you do after Oxford?

I taught for two years at Durham—a very good university. After that, I was at a juncture because I had an offer for a permanent position in Israel, but I was reluctant to return. The problem was that, at that time, there were not too many openings in Britain, where I wanted to remain. And my supervisor, Dr. Repp, convinced me that I couldn't turn down a tenure-track offer and told me that I would be wasting my time hopping from one position to another. I didn't want to go back, but reckoned it would be easier to start out with a tenure track position than with a temporary position. I followed his advice, which turned out to be wise, because eventually I left. I was in Ben Gurion for six years, '93–'99, and then moved to UCLA. It was actually a very smooth adjustment to come to the US—in fact, there wasn't much of an adjustment. I think that this seamless passage was the result of the extent to which I was so truly relieved to leave Israel. It is a very professional place, but there are things that bug me, like culture and society and politics. I don't like America, but UCLA is a great place in terms of colleagues and graduate students and professional opportunities. There is no perfect place.

I have been asking other graduate students the questions they would like to ask you, and one of the most popular was about your various intellectual "hats." Readers wanted to know how you changed your Ottomanist hat for an activist hat and also now a settler colonial studies hat. And how does wearing these multiple hats work and feel?

Like with other things in life, there was no master plan. I think it was a combination of several things. I can present them to you, but to say that it was a coherent process, that I knew I was going from point A to point B, would not be true, and anyway wouldn't benefit historians, who should be cognizant of contingency and happenstance. Part of the decision to write a book about Zionism emanated from my friendship with Edward Said. That I can say very clearly. The friendship had begun with my project while at Ben-Gurion University to realize a Hebrew translation of Orientalism. So I wrote to him. It developed into an unequal friendship, but a friendship nevertheless. That friendship played a major role in convincing me that I ought to make my statement on Zionism. That's ultimately why I wrote *The Returns of Zionism*. I vividly remember writing through the night Edward's obituary for *The Independent* in London, having to stop because I was crying profusely, and becoming increasingly resolute about writing the book, which is dedicated to his memory. That book familiarized me with the field of comparative settler colonialism. I soon came to realize that this was the most insightful framework for a deep understanding of the project of Zionism and basically the history of modern Palestine/Israel. The key was the work of Baruch

Kimmerling and, most crucially, Gershon Shafir. He was really the first to apply this framework of settler colonialism to the study of early Zionist settlement in Palestine. Fortunately, this coincided with the bourgeoning growth of the field itself, which now has its own journal; the Australia-based *Settler Colonial Studies*. I read an immense amount of this literature—not all of which made its way into the book.

When the book was published, I found myself procrastinating. The dilemma was what to do next. I had two different topics in mind. One was settler colonialism. I knew I had said what I wanted and had to say about Zionism, and now I wanted to do something more ambitiously comparative on settler colonialism, of which Israel/Palestine would be one case. The other topic was something I had been thinking, reading, and teaching about for a while. I was contemplating a comparative study comparing of the literature of decline in the Ottoman Empire and Habsburg Spain in the seventeenth century. I went to Madrid for a whole spring and did a lot of research in the Biblioteca Nacional de España on the seventeenth-century Spanish Arbitristas. When I returned, I still couldn't decide what to do, and, in the end, I asked myself what I was really passionate about. I had to admit that my passion, also because of its clear political implication, was settler colonialism. I might one day write about comparative decline.

Wearing the two hats has actually been an enjoyable challenge because—to borrow Cemal Kafadar's brilliant phrase—it entails a "schizoid mental topography" of sorts. There is a constant oscillation in my teaching and research between two fields, and I like that. Take, for example, the Clark Core Program, for which I wear my Ottoman hat. This is carried out under the auspices of the UCLA Center for 17th- & 18th-Century Studies and the Clark Library. Every year, there is a proposal, usually by two scholars, for a year-long project consisting of three international conferences, the proceedings of which are published an edited volume, and the selection and supervision of three post-doctoral fellows. The two scholars who propose and run the program are appointed Clark Professors for the academic year. I already did this a decade ago (2002-3), and this has now yielded the volume *Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World, 1600 –1800*, which I co-edited with Teofilo Ruiz and Geoffrey Symcox. We brought together a fine group of European and Ottoman historians, and it worked well.

This time (2012-13), the Clark program is the result of my collaboration with Professor Andrea Goldman, who is a historian of China. It is entitled "Moralism, Fundamentalism, and the Literature of Decline in Eurasia, 1600–1900." Essentially, this is a comparative and thematic exploration of Ming and Qing China and the Ottoman Empire. On my part, the initial stimulation came from *Age of Beloveds* by Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, as well as from my own work on decline consciousness (I have just turned 57—a perfect time to ponder decline). Andrews and

Kalpaklı's book made me think of the moralist trend in the seventeenth century as a backlash against what they describe; a sort of Ottoman puritanism. Andrea and I have had enriching conversations; she proceeded to read *Age of Beloveds* and was fascinated by it. Our conversations convinced us that there are comparable themes, and we added topics like urban violence in the eighteenth century. The seventeenth century conference on decline literature has already taken place. You attended, and would agree that it was very successful, and that the beautiful Clark Library is a perfect venue for this kind of gathering. On the Ottoman side, we had excellent papers by Linda Darling, Leslie Peirce, Derin Terzioğlu, and our own graduate student Nir Shafir. The added bonus for me is that, since I haven't been doing Ottoman work in recent years, I can put this resource to good use and help facilitate an ambitious comparative project, which offers a space for colleagues to present their research and have it discussed.

About the field of Ottoman history today, what do you think are the problems or promising aspects?

The state of Ottoman history is very encouraging. It has grown from being almost non-existent outside Turkey and a very few places in Europe (like SOAS), into, especially in America, a very important part of not only Middle East history but also history in general. It's more and more appreciated, more and more sought after, even by people who don't know the languages. There's a growing recognition that it is important to know Ottoman history. This is very encouraging. I think I can safely say that, even though I am obviously biased, among the fields under the umbrella of MESA, Ottoman studies is by far the most advanced and sophisticated. The extent of original and rigorous research is impressive. I have also noticed that each cohort of students comes increasingly well prepared, which was not previously the case. They develop a capacity to work with more than one type of documentation or text and with more than one approach. You no longer have to do something that is either purely philological or purely documentary (taxes levied on the sub-province *x* from 1591 to 1595), but can combine these skills and make use of the rigor that these methods require without stopping there. The questions that have emerged as a result evince imagination and interpretative daring. Think about Baki Tezcan's thesis on the Second Empire. You may agree or disagree with his thesis, but it puts forth a very bold new paradigm—a way to reorganize the early modern period of Ottoman history, at least as far as the imperial center goes—and is an excellent framework for further debate.

Nonetheless, what is a bit regrettable is, I think, that there is so much untapped material on the earlier centuries and so many questions unasked and unanswered. Too many students are going to the same late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, asking the same questions and giving roughly the same answers, with exceptions. The passage from the late Ottoman to the early Republican period via the Young Turks may have reached saturation. But then, however, much as I hope it is in some ways original, I wrote yet another book on Zionism, so perhaps I should shut up.

Talking about students, there is something I would like to share with you. Something that one student remarked in a written exam that made me think of my trajectory. Nir Shafir (this is revealed with his permission) wrote a brilliant exam. I asked him, among other things, to select a few studies on the intellectual history of the Ottoman Empire and review them, and evaluate the flaws and achievements. Among others he reviewed my *An Ottoman Tragedy*. He did so with great integrity and without an iota of pandering. He had good things to say about the book as well as critical ones. What made me reflective is that he concluded by saying that, whatever merits the book has, "it is not clear whether Piterberg is ultimately interested in seventeenth century Ottoman historical writing or whether he is much more interested in nineteenth and twentieth century European thought on historical writing." What I had meant to do was to create a dialogue between the two, but he sensed that the whole exercise was more of a vehicle for me to explore my main interest; European thought.

Let me go back to how and why I moved to settler colonialism: It is true that I am not writing on historical thought, but, since I do literary and intellectual history no matter what geography and time, the book I am now writing with Lorenzo Veracini (which I will talk about in a little while) is essentially a history of European thought—this time in the context of settler colonialism, its spread, why it became a global phenomenon, and so on. It's not that I feel bad about it, but Nir made me think about whether Ottoman history was a foray, and, in the end, I am euro-centric; not politically or ideologically—on the contrary—but my heart is in European culture. Students can make you think about things. I travel abroad, but where do I travel? With the exception of Buenos Aires or İstanbul from which Europe isn't exactly absent, Europe. What do I do basically enjoy culturally? Europe. It also reminded me of the fertilizing tension that inheres in Said's life and work between a conservative aesthetic sensibility and radical politics. I wonder if being a product of a culture and being immersed in it on the one hand, and being a radical critic of its follies on the other, might be an existential predicament of "present absentees" (if you excuse my use of the chilling Israeli euphemism for Palestinians whose land is "lootable") like the French Jew Bernard Lazare, the German Jew Hannah Arendt, and the Palestinian American Edward Said.

Let's talk about the present; can you describe your current research?

Originally I had hoped to write a comparative book about the history of thought and literature in settler colonial societies. I was interested in four themes in no particular order: the use of the Old Testament in a Protestant manner to justify the settler project as a whole; ideologies that justify land expropriation; whether Eugenics has a specific settler iteration; and settler literature, on which I have already published a hefty article. I will write that book but have deferred it in order to co-author another. This is the result of a special friendship—intellectual and personal—with Lorenzo Veracini. Contingency at play again, I suppose.

Lorenzo Veracini is an Italian from the Pisa area who went to Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa but left after two years to become a full-time activist for the Communist Party. After a while, he despaired of Italy and emigrated to Australia, where he completed his studies and became this amazing scholar. Last year he came to UCLA for a six-month period as a visiting professor. We started to talk about each other's work. The intensity and intellectual satisfaction was such that we decided to write a book together. Right now, we are writing the first chapter. The book's title is telling: *The World Turns Inside Out in the Age of Settler Revolution*. It is a play on the title of Christopher Hill's famous book, *The World Turned Upside Down*, in which he studied radical revolutionary expressions in seventeenth-century England. The second half of the title, "in the age of settler revolution" draws on a magnificent book by James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld, 1783–1939*, in which he argues that the nineteenth century was really the century of settler colonial revolution which created a different structure of the world. This book convinced us to focus on the nineteenth century, even though settler colonialism had begun in earnest with the Elizabethan and Cromwellian colonizations of Ireland in the seventeenth century.

The basic argument is that, from the seventeenth century on, a bifurcated political tradition emerged in Europe, and later in its colonies: revolution (the world turned upside down) and displacement (the world turned inside out). Revolution has of course always encountered counter-revolution but, fierce and violent conflicts notwithstanding, they share in common the resolve to fight *for* and *within* the society and polity in which they already exist. The world turned inside out, whose expression is settler colonialism, is a political tradition that in a way wishes to pre-empt revolution by displacement; by the aspiration—or illusion—that it is possible to sidestep or circumvent the potentially revolutionary socio-economic tension. The political tradition of the world turned inside out sought to create

in a non-European geography, considered a civilizational clean slate, a sovereign community that would "return" to what the community of origin was imagined to have been prior to the brewing social conflict or else to what it could have become if that social conflict had not existed.

We have identified a series of five textual junctures at which (and remember that what we are creating is an intellectual history of settler thought) the two political traditions—the world turned upside down and the world turned inside out—bifurcated. We follow my method, which Lorenzo liked, in the first chapter of *The Returns of Zionism*, where I use Carlo Ginzburg's idea of the starting point, or *Ansatzpunkt* (see his "Latitude, Slavery and the Bible" in *Critical Inquiry*), to understand the bifurcation. With the help of Belich and others, we can contextualize these textual bifurcations. The bifurcation we are currently writing on is Edward Gibbon Wakefield and Karl Marx. The second bifurcation occurred within the Chartist movement, the third is Henry George versus Engels, the fourth is a reworking of my chapter on Herzel and Bernard Lazare, and the fifth and final looks at Ebenezer Howard, who can be seen as the veritable prophet of suburbia, and the Russian anarchist Piotr Kropotkin. We will have an epilogue which will revisit, in light of what we do in the book, the debate between Michael Walzer and Edward Said on the political and ethical meaning of the Exodus narrative.

You asked about the first chapter, which looks at the Wakefield/Marx bifurcation. Wakefield was the first systematic thinker on settler colonialism, even if the phenomenon itself had existed for two centuries before him, and there had been pronouncements on it. Wakefield emerged out of the context of a twofold debate in the early decades of the nineteenth century: classical political economy, in which he was steeped, and empire. He became a planner of settler colonialism in New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, in Australia. He was also involved in Canada. Critical of certain aspects in Adam Smith and David Ricardo's theories, and looking especially into America, where land was abundant and cheap, he concluded that, in that formation, settler colonialism impeded what he called "capitalist civilization." Why? Because there was no exploitable labor, which in turn meant there could be no accumulation of capital—exactly the view that Marx would systematize in *Capital*. Cheap and abundant land also meant geographical dispersion, which for Wakefield was tantamount to barbarism. Neither he nor Marx mention that the abundance and cheapness of land is predicated on its forceful seizure from the indigenous people. At the heart of what he proposed was that the metropole colonial government created an artificial price for land, which he called "the sufficient price." The sufficient price would raise the value of land so that arriving settlers would be forced to sell their labor before they could buy land and become independent farmers,

small or large. This would also, perforce, prevent geographical dispersal. Under these conditions, primitive capitalist accumulation could occur.

Marx found Wakefield so interesting that he dedicated the last chapter of volume I of *Capital* to arguing with him. It's no coincidence that this chapter concludes the section on primitive accumulation. Marx saw in Wakefield a simultaneously insightful observer and proponent of capitalism. However, he thought that Wakefield was delusional in hoping that one could build a capitalist civilization without the social conflict to which it would inevitably give birth. What we are trying to argue in this chapter is that this bifurcation shows that the histories of settler colonialism and of primitive accumulation in the expanding capitalist world economy were actually inextricably intertwined. So you can't understand the history of capitalism and its spread without it. It also occasions an intervention in the critique—most notably by Rosa Luxemburg and recently David Harvey—of Marx's rigid understanding of primitive accumulation as the first, but unrepeatable, phase of capitalism's history.

I think that our method demonstrates the incredibly stimulating force of Ginzburg's micro-history, specifically the notion of the Ansatzpunkt, or starting point. In this method you narrow down the initial investigation to a very concrete, intentionally limited, "thing." In his brilliant metaphor, you narrow the lens of your camera in order to see less. This leads to momentarily "knowing less to understand more." You use that moment to clarify the problem and then use it to ask bigger questions. So the specific point that drew Lorenzo and me to that chapter as an Anstazpunkt was Marx's ironic response to Wakefield. There is something irresistible about Marx the ironic writer par excellence.

How does the process of co-authorship work?

So far it has been working well. We are benefiting from Lorenzo's experience as an editor of the journal *Settler Colonial Studies*. We read each other's comments on primary or secondary sources and exchange very detailed notes, which are meant not only to convey what we think about them but also to summarize and select quotes and references. With time, we have created an archive of copious notes with which we have created a master file for the first chapter. I comment and he comments. Now we have a skeleton of a chapter. We each work on creating a flowing prose. For me, it has been a vitalizing and creative process. I am not saying that I would like to co-author everything from now on, but the experience itself is quite enjoyable, simply because Lorenzo and I click.

Finally, what are your future projects?

Right now, the priority is to finish this book with Lorenzo. There is an article idea that compares the late janissaries and sans-culottes in a socio-economic sense. Then there is the book I had intended to write on comparative decline which I described earlier. Beyond that, as the French say, *on verra*. In the public sphere, I don't wish to sound dramatic, but there is a war on the freedom of speech in the California university system and American academia in general; at the heart of it is the right to criticize Israel and the attempt to silence it. This is a war that can be looked at in two ways. One is that the suffering of the Palestinians is more important than freedom of speech in the US. The other is that they are not unrelated. In any event, I think this is what I can do within my environment. I am as active as I can be fighting Zionist McCarthyism in America. One of the main sites of this war is the soul of the G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near East Studies at UCLA, which is one of the first centers of its kind in the English speaking world. Because, generally, area studies is not very old anywhere, really. I am resolved to dedicate what I can in this arena, to protect students and their organizations from persecution, and to do this *hatta-al nasr*.

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