

Stone, Labor, and the Building of Israel



ADAM HANIEH

Andrew Ross's *Stone Men: The Palestinians Who Built Israel* is a significant contribution to an emerging literature on Palestinian labor. Through an examination of various facets of the stone industry in both Israel and the West Bank, Ross develops a series of insights into the nature of settler colonialism, patterns of urban development, the political economy of Palestinian class formation, borders and migration, and the ecological impacts of occupation. By highlighting the ways in which Palestinians actually built Israel, Ross's book carries important implications for how we think about Palestinian political strategy and the debates around one- or two-state solutions.

IN A WIDE-RANGING AND INSIGHTFUL SURVEY of labor historiography in the Middle East, Kevin Jones has recently noted that scholarly attention to the history of working classes in the region underwent a major decline through the 1990s and early 2000s. While earlier decades had seen landmark studies of labor and class across the Middle East, the “marginalization of organized labor by post-populist authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, the sudden rise of political Islam as the dominant paradigm of political opposition to the state, and the general abandonment of class analysis by historians in the wake of the ‘cultural turn’ . . . all contributed to [a] decline of academic interest in the lives of Middle Eastern workers.”¹ Jones argues, however, that this began to change in the wake of the uprisings that emerged across the region in 2011. This wave of social struggles has led to a renewed interest in questions of class, labor, and political economy more generally. The possibility now exists, according to Jones, that “the promising theoretical debates of the early 1990s might finally bear fruit in a reinvigorated field of labor history.”²

Arguably, the overall regional trend identified by Jones is even more apparent in relation to Palestine. Despite the long-standing academic debate on labor markets during the formative years of Zionist colonization, Palestinian workers were to feature much less prominently in writing on Palestine during the 1990s and early 2000s.³ Over the last decade, however, growing numbers of scholars, activists, and journalists have become more attentive to the lives and conditions of Palestinian workers in the post-Oslo period. This new literature explores a range of important issues including the emergence of independent Palestinian labor struggles and trade union movements,⁴ the highly segmented nature of Palestinian labor markets⁵ and the position of women workers,⁶ and the widening gulf between Palestinian elites and ordinary Palestinian

Journal of Palestine Studies Vol. XLIX, No. 2 (Winter 2020), p. 80, ISSN: 0377-919X; electronic ISSN: 1533-8614. © 2020 by the Institute for Palestine Studies. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2020.49.2.80>.

workers that has arisen alongside the neoliberal state-building paradigm of the Palestinian Authority (PA).⁷

Andrew Ross's *Stone Men: The Palestinians Who Built Israel*, a monumental study of stone—and the Palestinian workers who extract, fashion, and build with it—needs to be situated within this new literature on Palestinian labor. Although Ross's narrative extends far beyond the eponymous “stone men” whom he has spent many hours interviewing and observing, a pivotal contribution of this book is a deep concern with the everyday lives of those Palestinians who literally *built* Israel. This discussion is deftly linked with wider debates on the nature of settler colonialism, urban development and design of the built environment, the political economy of Palestinian class formation, borders and migration, and the ecological impacts of occupation.

The importance of stone to Palestine cannot be overstated. Strikingly, Palestinians are the twelfth largest stone and marble producers in the world, ranking just behind the United States and Russia.⁸ Mirroring other key Palestinian commodity exports from the West Bank, about 70 percent of Palestinian stone is exported to Israel. Around half of this figure is sent across the Green Line, and the rest is utilized in the building of settlements.⁹ This stone, and the Palestinian workers who build with it, has been essential to the accumulation and growth of Israel's largest conglomerates. More broadly, of course, stone has an important symbolic and discursive meaning for Palestinians—embodied in songs, literature, and narratives of resistance and uprising.

Given these clear facts, Ross utilizes stone as a lens for rethinking various aspects of the settler-colonial experience in Palestine. He begins with the “conquest of labor” strategy advocated by Zionist leaders such as Aaron David Gordon, Berl Katznelson, and David Ben-Gurion during the 1920s and 1930s. This strategy—the exclusion of Palestinian labor from employment in the early Yishuv and the attempt to ensure a “European wage” for Jewish settlers—was an important element in the eventual hegemony of the Labor Zionist movement and its ability to lead the colonization process itself.¹⁰ In the stone and construction industries, however, this strategy faced major challenges—Palestinian labor was not only cheaper, and thus more attractive for private builders, but Palestinians also tended to control the quarries that supplied the stone for new building projects. Most significantly, Palestinians possessed the skilled knowledge and technical expertise necessary to work with *kurkar*, the distinctive quartz limestone found throughout the coastal plains of Palestine that was widely used in buildings across the country.

It is in this context that Ross presents some fascinating insights into how stone has shaped the modalities of Zionist colonization. One example is the move by early Zionist architects and city planners to replace *kurkar* with concrete and silicate brick, a technological shift that Ross identifies as a significant turning point in the conquest of labor. Cheapening the costs of construction—and reducing the need for the specific stonemasonry skills monopolized by Palestinians—was key in enabling the exclusion of Palestinians from both labor markets and urban spaces during the 1920s and 1930s. Of course, this exclusion was never fully complete—Palestinians remained part of the construction workforce in the pre-1948 period, particularly among private builders—but the new building techniques “meant that the factories and construction sites would potentially be freed from any reliance on local Arab labor . . . offer[ing] the prospect that the Conquest of Labor could be brought about, not by fractious, and racist, hiring decisions, but technical efficiency.”¹¹

The shift in building technique not only facilitated Palestinian exclusion, it also ushered in new architectural forms. Ross refers here to the distinctive architectural style of Tel Aviv—marked by its clean lines, white plaster, and Bauhaus functionalism. This architectural style has been widely feted in international circuits, with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaiming Tel Aviv’s “White City” a World Heritage site in 2003.¹² Ross points out that this global depiction of Tel Aviv actually serves to estrange aesthetic form from social history, arguing instead that Tel Aviv should be viewed much like the spatially separated European enclaves found in other colonial cities—its style representing “the architectural equivalent of ethnic cleansing because it expunged all visual references to the surrounding Arab habitat.”¹³ Seen from this perspective, Tel Aviv’s portrayal on the international stage acts “to sideline, if not entirely erase, the urban scale and sophistication” of Arab cities such as Jaffa, and serves as “nostalgic cover for a city built on violent dispossession.”¹⁴

Stone and Labor in the West Bank

Through these kinds of arguments, *Stone Men* resembles many of the global commodity histories that have been published over the last couple of decades. One of the great strengths of this kind of writing is that by following a simple commodity (such as stone) through its various connections, we open up the familiar and mundane to new and unexpected ways of thinking. But Ross’s book goes much further than this. His careful attention to the social relations that are configured around the stone industry—particularly the labor involved in extracting and building with stone—helps to bring out aspects of settler colonialism that are often underplayed in accounts that focus more on the machinations of political elites or the materiality of infrastructure.

This strength can be seen most clearly in the second half of *Stone Men*, which moves away from Israel to a detailed examination of the stone industry in the West Bank.¹⁵ Here, Ross describes the ways in which the West Bank has been utilized by Israel to effectively “outsource” pollution and other harmful effects of stone quarrying.¹⁶ Quite remarkably, Israeli-owned firms operating in Area C of the West Bank supply around one-quarter of Israel’s sand and gravel needs. Half of the West Bank’s twenty-five integrated crushers (which process stone at the quarry site itself) are Israeli owned and permitted to utilize explosives to break up the stone (a technique denied to Palestinian producers). Constrained by lack of access to Area C (where most stone deposits are located), and deprived of energy and water resources, the Palestinian stone industry has become largely subordinated to the needs of the larger Israeli economy.

Ross presents a perceptive account of the structure of this industry and the working conditions in the quarries, where many workers suffer from a lack of health and safety protections and lax environmental regulations. This has meant the widespread emergence of serious illnesses such as blood cancers, kidney disease, pneumonia, and other pulmonary ailments due to the small particulate pollution involved in quarrying. Palestinian quarry workers suffer from these illnesses (according to the hospital nurses and doctors interviewed by Ross), at levels far in excess of the general population.¹⁷ These environmental impacts extend beyond the workers directly involved in the quarrying industry. In this regard, Ross points to the struggle waged by Palestinian

Bedouins living near Bethlehem who have opposed the building of a cement plant adjacent to their communities on the basis of its deleterious environmental consequences. This factory is owned by Sanad Construction Resources, a new company run by the Palestine Investment Fund that is closely connected to some of the wealthiest businesspeople in the West Bank. The proposed site of the factory is located in Area C and has been approved by Israel. Given Israel's long-standing practice of outsourcing environmentally damaging industries to the West Bank, local activists have raised suspicions about its relationship with the Israeli cement industry.

Ross continues this discussion of working conditions in his final chapter, where he examines the construction industry inside Israel and within Israeli settlements. He makes the critical point—echoing the conclusion of much recent migration and border studies literature—that borders should not be seen as impenetrable barriers but rather as filters, whose function is to sift labor and establish differential costs of labor power.¹⁸ Israel's Wall and the closure and permit regime instituted over the last three decades play precisely this role. By establishing barriers to movement and thereby making labor more precarious, these measures drive down the cost of Palestinian labor and simultaneously benefit a complex array of middlemen and subcontractors who facilitate the movement of Palestinian workers across the Green Line. Within this discussion, Ross pays careful attention to the various migrant workers who have also been central to Israel's labor markets in the post-Oslo period. He points out, however, that Palestinian labor from the West Bank has a specific attraction for the Israeli construction industry: Palestinian workers are relatively skilled, possess good Hebrew language skills, and most importantly, return to their homes at night. They constitute “human gold” in the words of one of the workers interviewed by Ross.¹⁹

All of this has naturally met with resistance, and recent years have seen a significant resurgence in Palestinian labor organizing and worker struggles in the West Bank. Ross spends considerable time examining these developments, including the new independent trade unions in Palestine that have emerged in opposition to the undemocratic and unrepresentative structures of the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions. He also discusses the recent wave of worker protests against new PA laws, as well as wildcat strikes in the industrial zones that straddle the border areas with Israel. All of these struggles have generated new political questions, forcing workers to navigate a complex political terrain that involves organizing for their rights against both Israel and the PA.

Political Rethinking

Like all good writing, Ross's book opens up many more questions and new avenues of exploration than it can possibly answer. In the opinion of this author, there are three key themes that deserve highlighting. First, Ross makes a convincing argument that the social polarization that has marked the post-Oslo period must be central to any account of contemporary Palestinian society and to the elaboration of a viable strategy for liberation. This theme emerges frequently through his narrative and the voices of his interviewees: the highly unequal structure of the stone industry in the West Bank; the nature of Palestinian urban planning and the impact of new urban development schemes such as Rawabi; the subcontracting chains that mediate the movement of

Palestinian labor into Israel; the displacement of populations and ecological consequences of the stone industry; and the emergence of new forms of worker mobilization and strikes that specifically target the policies of the PA (such as the recent Social Insurance Law).²⁰ All of these examples confirm that it is not enough to view the occupation simply from the perspective of Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As Franz Fanon observed many decades ago, one of the ways in which settler colonialism functions is through the creation of a dependent social class among the colonized, one that is tightly linked to the colonizer and which helps mediate the exigencies of occupation itself.²¹ Ross's interviewees make this point repeatedly, and one of the lessons of *Stone Men* is the utility of foregrounding class and social polarization as an analytical lens for understanding Palestinian society.

Second, the construction and stone industry presents a valuable entry point for unpacking the complex relationships between Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories and those living in Israel or across the wider Middle East. In this respect, one wishes here for a more detailed analysis of Palestinian citizens of Israel (PCIs) in the contemporary period. While Ross does mention the importance of the construction sector for PCIs today, much of his discussion of Israel is concentrated on the early period of the state. We need a more systematic study of how this industry functions inside Israel itself, including its connection to labor in the West Bank and its role in the political economy of PCIs.²² All of this is part of a wider intellectual project that is yet to be written: a history of Palestinian construction labor across the wider Middle East. Palestinian refugees brought their skills of stonemasonry and construction to Lebanon and have been widely employed throughout Jordan, the Gulf, and elsewhere. Palestinian-owned construction firms remain among the largest across the region today. But the story of workers in this industry—and of their complex intersection with migrant workers from other countries—is one that remains to be told.

Finally, as Ross emphasizes repeatedly throughout his book, all of this carries important political implications. One of his most interesting arguments is that by highlighting the ways in which Palestinians actually *built* Israel, we are forced to shift how we think about any future resolution of the conflict and the debates around one- or two-state solutions. Instead of speaking solely about pre-1948 property ownership and restitution for refugees—however crucial these may be—we also need to consider the ways in which the wealth that exists in Israel today has arisen through the systematic exploitation of Palestinian labor over the last seven decades (and counting). This points to the importance of thinking beyond frameworks grounded simply in appeals to international law, which often valorize the rights of those with preexisting titles to property over those who have had little recourse but to sell their labor power. It is not the goal of Ross's book to suggest how this insight might figure within any future political strategy, but his careful attention to voices “from below” makes the critical importance of such a rethinking abundantly clear.

About the Author

Adam Hanieh is associate professor in development studies at SOAS, University of London. His most recent book is *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kevin M. Jones, "Unmaking the Middle Eastern Working Classes: Labour and the Politics of Historiography," *Social History* 40, no. 2 (May 2015): p. 145.
- 2 Jones, "Unmaking," p. 156.
- 3 With a few important exceptions, including Leila Farsakh, *Palestinian Labour Migration to Israel: Labour, Land and Occupation* (New York: Routledge, 2005), and the coverage of Palestinian trade unions in various issues of the *Middle East Report* through this period.
- 4 N. Alva, "Palestinian Workers Campaign for Social Justice," *Middle East Report* 281 (Winter 2016); Mai Abu Moghli and Mezna Qato, "A Brief History of a Teacher's Strike," *Middle East Report Online*, 5 June 2018, <https://merip.org/2018/06/a-brief-history-of-a-teachers-strike/>.
- 5 Matthew Vickery, *Employing the Enemy: The Story of Palestinian Labourers on Israeli Settlements* (London: Zed Books, 2017).
- 6 Samia Al-Botmeh, *Barriers to Female Labour Market Participation and Entrepreneurship in the Occupied Palestinian Territory* (Birzeit: The Centre for Development Studies—Birzeit University and the YWCA of Palestine, 2013), <http://www.ywca-palestine.org/UploadCenter/Files/1386108714.pdf>; Samia Al-Botmeh, "The Political Economy of Palestinian Women's Labour Market Participation," in *Development Challenges and Solutions after the Arab Spring*, ed. Ali Kadri (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 175–99.
- 7 Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour, "Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Movement," *JPS* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2011): pp. 6–25; Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2013); Toufic Haddad, *Palestine Ltd.: Neoliberalism and Nationalism in the Occupied Territory* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2016); Mandy Turner, *From the River to the Sea: Palestine and Israel in the Shadow of "Peace"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).
- 8 Andrew Ross, *Stone Men: The Palestinians Who Built Israel* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 2. It should be noted, however, that there is a very pronounced global concentration of stone production, with over 90 percent of the world's stone produced in just ten countries.
- 9 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 3.
- 10 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 32.
- 11 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 60. The technological secrets to these new building techniques, Ross points out, were allegedly pilfered from an Egyptian factory by one of the main construction owners of the time.
- 12 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 69.
- 13 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 65.
- 14 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 69. The heavy use of concrete—which Ross describes as a "full-blown patriotic cult" (p. 67)—was later carried over into the Brutalist style of the development towns constructed through the 1950s, and after 1967, into the settlement blocs built across the West Bank. In more recent years, however, *kurkar* was to reappear in the "artist colonies" and high-end apartments of Jaffa and other historic Palestinian towns inside Israel. Here, mirroring similar tourist-driven gentrification projects across the world, the use of *kurkar* was brought back and lionized for its supposed authenticity and expression of tradition. These processes have created new forms of exclusionary urban spaces inside Israel itself.
- 15 For reasons of access, Ross concentrates his account on workers in the West Bank, dealing in much less detail with the Gaza Strip.
- 16 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 161.
- 17 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 185.
- 18 Paolo Novak, "Back to Borders," *Critical Sociology* 43, no. 6 (2017): 847–64; Adam Hanieh "The Contradictions of Global Migration," *Socialist Register* 55 (2019): pp. 50–78.

19 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 215.

20 Ross, *Stone Men*, p. 224.

21 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

22 Indeed, a recent spate of PCI deaths on government-owned construction sites through 2019 has been the subject of campaigns by nongovernmental organizations and Palestinian political parties in Israel.