

Potential History: Thinking through Violence

Ariella Azoulay

1. Archival Conditions

The knowledge that fatal consequences of the past continue to shape what we can see, know, and think—and can also be shaped or affected by our civil imagination—ceased to be a general and abstract working assumption from the moment I began to create an archive of the formative years of Palestine’s transformation into Israel (fig. 1).¹ I began to understand several concrete conditions that determine the research of the past. Identifying these archival conditions—and reconstructing the violence involved in their creation and preservation—guided me in shaping a new surface of appearance for the items I collected in this archive.²

I interfered with the usual smooth functioning of invisible conditions for what one can see in and through existing archives and made them items in the archive that I created. The first of these conditions was the basic division of history, as though the history of the Jews and the State of Israel could be told apart from the history of the Palestinians; the second related to the adoption of the new alternative historical paradigm—the *nakba*—which enables the recognition of the plight of the Palestinians but, in fact, preserves the fundamental rift between Jewish and Palestinian history as if

1. The archive includes 214 annotated photos classified in seven divisions. The archive was shown in Tel Aviv and in London and was published as a book in Hebrew and later in English; see Ariella Azoulay, *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947–50* (London, 2011).

2. Inspired by Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the “space of appearance” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* [New York, 1959], pp. 178–90) through which action appears and Michel Foucault’s discussion of the surface of emergence through which objects appear, the archive was not merely of photographs but of events of photography; see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1975), pp. 131–51.



FIGURE 1. Graham Simpson, photograph from the *From Palestine to Israel* archive. Mosaics Room, London, 2011.

Jews are not concerned with or affected by this plight; the third related to the general state of relevant archives and to the common ignorance of the uninvestigated crime of removing Palestinian archives of that time, causing the Zionist archives of written documents to be perceived as sufficient in themselves; the fourth is the blatant absence of visual traces as a source for writing history; and the fifth, the most crucial of them all, is the omnipresence of categories shaped by the political regime—refugees, occupied, collaborators, citizens, illegal aliens, and others—as a prism through which the various events are discussed.

Let me clarify. At hand is not merely a description of the state of knowledge but of *civil distress*. Its basic form emerges when those who were trained by the regime not to identify the existence of a disaster as such begin to recognize it, but what they start to perceive clearly as a disaster continues not to be perceived so by others. This type of disaster is what I

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call a “regime-made disaster.”³ Its visible measures are expulsion, dispossession, and destruction related to “others.” These are inflicted by one population of governed—usually the citizens, the privileged ones—upon another; it makes itself invisible to this population of citizens who are mobilized to partake in it, especially because it is not perceived as a disaster; they do not perceive themselves as those who inflict such a disaster or are responsible for its outcome. This vicious circle enables regime-made disaster to last a long time and enables those who partake in it not to resist it because they are conditioned not to recognize it. Those who start to recognize it can usually do so only partially, as they see in it—in images from it—*what was done to “others”*—the Palestinians. When the majority of the Jewish Israeli population does not recognize the expulsion, dispossession, and destruction inflicted upon Palestinians as disaster, and views it as the consequence of reasonable and justified deeds, and when a tiny minority recognizes the disaster inflicted upon Palestinians and cannot recognize in it the Jewish population’s own disaster, the need to reconstruct the discursive and archival conditions of a regime-made disaster becomes urgent.

While I was creating the “From Palestine to Israel” archive and elaborating the idea of potential history out of its main concept—constituent violence—my assumption was that the disaster of 1948 made the fate and history of Israeli Jews and Palestinians inseparable and that as long as the disaster of the “visible victim”—the Palestinian who suffered expulsion, dispossession, and destruction—is preserved unseen, those who inflicted it or their descendants—the Israeli Jews—will not recognize their own disaster. The disaster of becoming the perpetrators of the “visible victim” has been kept out of the visual field.

Such distress cannot be solved by a new and different interpretation of one or another chapter in history. It is the kind of distress linked to the possibility of knowing, seeing, learning, and hence living, experiencing, and imagining. At hand are regime conditions born in constituent violence exercised in the late 1940s, conditions that imposed demarcations that were etched in the consciousness of Israeli citizens and in archives as if they were historical facts; ever since, people governed by the same regime have felt destined to preserve and replicate them. Constituent violence, as Walter Benjamin wrote, needs law-preserving violence in order to persist.⁴

3. See Azoulay, “Regime-Made Disaster: On the Possibility of Nongovernmental Viewing,” in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Yates McKee and Meg McLagan (New York, 2012).

4. See Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996–2003), 1:236–52.

Thus, I would like to propose that even without Israeli citizens practicing violence as recruited soldiers, their mere citizenship—denied to the Palestinians who share the very same land—reiterates and preserves the constituent violence. This constituent violence dispossessed the Palestinians of their country and denied them the possibility of becoming citizens. Any historical research describing the relations between Israelis and Palestinians since 1948 as relations between two coherent national entities necessarily preserves regime violence because it relies upon that same basic division between Israelis and Palestinians, perpetrators and victims, doers and viewers, intentions and deeds, that which is seen and that which is unseen, as if they were distinctions drawn directly from sense data and not the result of constituent violence whose law should be suspended.

In his reading of Aristotle, Giorgio Agamben insists on the “potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality.”⁵ Hence his following claim might be inspiring for those writing histories of disasters: “to be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing. . . . To be free is . . . *to be capable of one’s own impotentiality*, to be in relation to one’s own privation.”⁶ For the potential history that I suggest here, this reversal should be taken further. Under regime-made disaster one should aspire to a complete change of the archival conditions so that the potential of expelling will be studied not merely in relation to *not-expelling* but to other modes and forms of life. Out of these alternatives, the perpetuation of expulsion—which refugees incarnate—appears at any moment as a choice that has been made to reiterate and preserve the constituent violence. My effort at reconstructing the constituent violence through that archive is in fact an effort to approach a discursive or archival point zero from which one could begin to see that which could not have been seen, as the discourse and the archives were part of that same regime-made disaster. Such were other forms of relations between Palestinians and Jews, traces of which can be reconstructed from the archive even if these have become illegible, intangible, and unseen for years, buried under existent categories.

The archive I created enabled me to make historical moments reappear at junctions where other options could have been chosen, not reiterated or altered later once their disastrous effects became clear. When nonviolent options for sharing life were constantly eliminated, the simple fact that they had existed earlier became inconceivable. The effort to make them

5. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1999), p. 180.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 183.



FIGURE 2. *Lubya* (probably June 1948). Golani archive. The photograph seems to have been taken a few hours after the white flags that are still visible proclaimed the surrender of the village.

visible was required with each and every single photo. Thus, for example, an image from *Lubya*—showing Palestinians carrying a white flag, a clear sign of nonviolence, and heading toward Israeli soldiers, the still-standing houses in the background—shows an option that we know was rejected because we know that the entire village was destroyed and its residents were not allowed to return (fig. 2). As soon as a given state begins to appear as a result of one among other possible paths not taken or actively rejected, one could begin to restore the other possible options and to understand how the mere fact of their existence was removed as a result of the violence that was exerted in order to make the initial choice unavoidable. Thus, for example, since the day the State of Israel was founded on the basis of expelling most of the Palestinians who had lived in the country before—750,000 people—violence was only understood in one single context: “us” and “them,” “Jews,” and “Arabs.” Any proposed solution has since been discussed as a solution that already assumes the existence of the State of Israel in Palestine. The Palestinians have been doomed ever since to appear from the outside and to embody the roles forcibly assigned them: refugees, expellees, occupied, enemies, a threat, terrorists, or suspects.

Under such conditions, the writing of history requires serious consideration of the question of how to rehabilitate a phenomenal space so seemingly overdetermined by the violence of the political regime. In other words, under these conditions the question is how to write history that does not partake in preserving the constituent violence, history that is not merely its reiteration.

It is not sufficient for such history to criticize the existing situation. It must reconstruct the possibilities that have been violently erased and silenced in order to make them present anew at any given moment. My effort is to reconstruct that constituent moment of decision such that any researchers, writers, spectators, or readers may be positioned as if they were actually participating at that moment of constituent violence and could eventually affect that moment when the choice among options was being made. Under democratic regimes, the role of law-preserving violence that Benjamin associated with the police should be associated with citizens who deny the constituent violence and their share in its preservation.⁷ Thus, as soon as Jews became the citizens of the State of Israel in May 1948, their citizenship, once initially imposed, became one of the most important light weapons used by the state to reproduce the majority-contested political regime. Ever since citizenship became a ruling tool of the State of Israel, the previous world in which people lived no longer looked the same as before. A time before that became nearly impossible to imagine—let alone reconstruct.

In a film I directed this year, *Civil Alliance: Palestine*, 47–48,⁸ I assembled no less than one hundred local civil alliances that Jews and Arabs tried to achieve from early 1947 until close to the declaration of the State of Israel in May 1948. The documents on which I relied have been dormant in state archives, accessible and open for a long time. However, the results of constituent violence condemned most of their content to a chronicle of collaboration, the *co-laboring* of which made it disgraceful. Constituent violence imposed upon both Palestinians and Jews a national-ethnic partition and then framed those who differed from their assigned side and marked them as traitors and collaborators. The mere joint action with individuals of the “other side” was considered treasonous, and whoever refused to be differentiated from others on a national basis was doomed to

7. In the police, writes Benjamin, “the separation of lawmaking and law-preserving violence is suspended. If the first is required to prove its worth in victory, the second is subject to the restriction that it may not set itself new ends. Police violence is emancipated from both conditions” (Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” p. 243).

8. See Azoulay, *Civil Alliance: Palestine*, 47–48, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqi4X_ptwWw



FIGURE 3. Film still, Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Alliance, Palestine*, 47–48 (2013).

be declared as an enemy collaborator.⁹ Thus Palestinians who cooperated with Jews—in order to *avoid* the violence that warmongers on both sides attempted to ignite after the UN resolution of partition (November 1947)—became collaborators. Thus it was possible to retroactively create evidence of the Palestinians' inferiority: a contemptible people who lack national feeling, awareness, and duty and who cannot possibly be relied upon.¹⁰ The film documenting those civil alliances is an effort to return to that point zero, before the world shared by Arabs and Jews was halved almost irretrievably. I used my archive and the new knowledge it produced to avoid the teleological reading of collaboration and to instead make that history appear as what it could have been before Jews and Arabs were condemned to mutual enmity.¹¹ The film proposes to read those documents as traces of complex and determined efforts of Arabs and Jews to salvage their shared lives (fig. 3).

9. Hillel Cohen's important book, *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917–1948*, trans. Haim Watzman (Berkeley, 2008), shows the complexity of this category in the various decades prior to the founding of the state. Around the time of the Arab rebellion, the category of collaborator became a lethal weapon in the hands of the national Palestinian leadership, and many were executed. However, Cohen shows to what extent the widespread use of this category encouraged more and more Palestinians not to yield to its fatal power and to continue to cooperate with Jews. Thus, fascinatingly, the richest historiography of this place is the one documenting these "collaborators."

10. See *ibid.*, as well as the ninth chapter of my book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2009).

11. And it showed, subsequently, the relations between citizens and half-citizens and the relations between citizens and noncitizen subjects since 1967.

A new understanding of citizenship and photography served me in building this archive, without which perhaps I, too, would respond as did a conversant of mine when she heard about the film the day before its first screening in Tel Aviv:

Anonymous: Did these people [who achieved these civil alliances] represent anyone?

Ariella Azoulay: Yes, themselves, their community.

Anon.: Okay . . . were these agreements about the purchase of land?

AA: No, these were civil alliances about their lives.

Anon.: What?! Probably about who is allowed to live where, that here Jews may live and there they may not?

AA: No, they often lived as close neighbors. That was not the point.

Anon.: So what was their interest?

AA: To preserve their life.

Anon.: [*In silence, surprise, and amazement*] Okay, it only goes to show how easy it is to make people hate others.

AA: It is not that easy. Much violence, expulsion, massacre, vandalism was invested in this for many months, on a daily basis, and still not everyone was convinced.

Anon.: [*Embarrassed*] Okay, so I didn't know about it.

AA: Naturally, you couldn't have known. This was hidden much better than the massacres.

Anon.: How many such agreements were there?

AA: The film reports about one hundred, but I chose them out of many more.

Anonymous: [*Amazed*] What?!¹²

2. Photography and Citizenship

Time and again, the perspective of the "national conflict" caused one to look for the coin right beneath the lamp. Time and again it even prevented one from seeing the coin when it did lie under the lamp, right there on the pavement—and even from seeing the glaring lamp itself. This metaphoric coin I shall call photography, and the lamp—citizenship.¹³ I shall present them briefly both as objects of research and as work tools and show how useful they might be in looking for potentials in history.

Thousands of photographs kept in Zionist archives have lain un-

12. Conversation between Azoulay and an anonymous conversant, May 2012.

13. The question of why they have remained unseen I leave for some other time.

touched for decades. Historians waited for years for the archives to open and for confidential documents to be exposed, at the same time ignoring photographs that constitute invaluable historical documents. Most historians simply do not perceive the photographs as reliable or informative. Indeed, photographs are not objects of easy investigation. They do not speak for themselves and are usually filed carelessly, backed up by an extremely thin layer of information that does not provide the exact data for identifying an event, a location, those photographed, or the context of their production. The negligence often involved in the way photographs are handled in the archives, however, cannot excuse the historians' ignorance of them. Would we conceive, today, of passing up remnants of material culture such as pottery shards, stone tools, or coins because they have reached us without proper identification? Would we agree to forfeit the enormous body of knowledge about the past that archaeology provides only because archaeologists produce this knowledge out of pottery shards and piles of stones with scant help from written documents?

Let me reiterate here a few basic claims drawn from my study of photography.¹⁴ Photography takes place in and through an encounter between people, none of whom can ever dictate alone what will be recorded in the photograph and what will remain concealed. The photograph is evidence of an event—the taking of a photograph, the event of photography—which the photographic image could never exhaust on its own. This event is an invitation for yet another event—the viewing of the photograph, its reading, taking part in the production of its meaning. The photograph cannot determine the limits of this event. What the photograph shows exceeds that which the participants in the event of photography attempted to inscribe in it. Moreover, their attempt to determine and shape what will be seen in the frame and the power relations between those participants within it leaves traces that enable one to reconstruct the complexity of the event of photography. Ignoring these thousands of photographic historical documents greatly contributes to the pervasiveness of the perception that the national conflict is as unavoidable as a fact of nature and of the teleological reconstruction of its historical unfolding.

The second tool I use to create potential history is citizenship—commonly misunderstood as a legal status granted by the sovereign state to some of its

14. See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography and Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London, 2012).

governed subjects.¹⁵ This understanding is shared by the governing power and most researchers and leads to the anachronistic categorization of the photographed persons as *citizens* or *noncitizens* following their civil status. The viewer thereby takes part in determining the photographed persons' status by what seems like a simple denotation—this is a refugee, or this is an illegal worker. In an attempt to distance myself from power's point of view and to study citizenship from the perspective of its condition, not of its contingent effects, I have proposed to think about citizenship as a form of being-together, a form of sharing a world with others. This is especially true for the time and place with which I am concerned here, when the meaning, boundaries, and distribution of citizenship were very much at stake. One must therefore suspend the use of fossilized conceptual categories that organize a priori that which is seen as if it had already been determined within the framework of a national conflict. One is rather invited to reconstruct the formations and deformations of being-together of all those taking part in the event of photography. Like photography, citizenship serves me at one and the same time as an object of study and a research tool. It enables me to keep my distance from the ruling perspective and turn it into one of the objects of my study.

Equipped with both these tools, I proceeded to view photographs kept in various archives from those four formative years. These photographic documents enabled me to pose new questions to contest the obvious use of political concepts that have become so common in discussions that reproduce those concepts rather than enrich the photographs. The main concept that collapsed as I began to view photographs of that period was that of the war.¹⁶ The unproblematic adoption at the apex of the "Israel-Palestine conflict" of the term *war* and the corresponding concept of war's passage to a state eliminate the complex variety of exchange and interaction between Jews and Arabs. That term's adoption replaces such complexity with the more familiar history of that period—partition, separation, and a seemingly unavoidable "national conflict." The historiography of the period continues to describe the series of events that occurred in Palestine at the end of the 1940s as a transition from war to state. Thus the exercise of systematic violence to create a clear Jewish majority that would correspond to and justify the formation of a Jewish state and the Judaization of state organs is still conceptualized as being part of an unavoidable war

15. Inspired many years ago by Étienne Balibar's insistence on the insurrectional aspect of citizenship, I developed my own conceptualization of citizenship's potentialities and reconstructed/imagined a community where it is practiced—the citizenry of photography.

16. See Azoulay, "Declaring the State of Israel: Declaring a State of War," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Winter 2011): 265–85.

between two nations and not as violence exerted against the many who insisted on continuing their lives without necessarily taking sides in the “national conflict” that was imposed as the only tolerated description of reality.

The unquestioned adoption of military terminology, *battles* and *operations*, for example, overlooks the wide range of roles the army played in managing civilians and violating hundreds of civil alliances such as those I report in my film. The civilian population can by no means be classified and identified as one of the fighting sides in a war, and the violent policies seeking to transform the politico-demographic reality in order to establish a new regime in Palestine cannot be described as a war against another army. From the photos that I included, one can reconstruct the systematic organization of expulsion and the successive phases of its completion. The selection of population—separating the old from the young and the men from the women and children—is repeated in photos from various localities (figs. 4–5); from the photos one can also learn that in various places the army supplied the buses—they are marked with the sign for army—and made sure they reached the newly established border. In a photo from Haifa, soldiers can be seen accompanying individuals to make sure they reached the port (fig. 6). At Ijlil or Atlit, the army functioned as a construction contractor, imprisoning Palestinians and exploiting their labor (fig. 7). The new and varied forms of violence exercised by the army of the newly established regime must be taken into account and weighed against the scattered battles and violent clashes between armed forces before one calls the period from November 1947 to March 1949 a war.

From the photographs one can reconstruct the regime’s efforts to undermine the possibility of a civil life shared by Jews and Arabs, the entire citizenry of the land. This destructive effort was part of the whole system of military governmentality—managing the civilian population of Palestinians, certainly, but the Jews as well, with military logic. The symbiosis between the military logic and the civil order has characterized the Israeli regime from its inception and cannot be restricted to the Palestinian sector. Freedom of movement was denied Palestinians but was controlled and administered for Israelis as well. The caption for a photo taken in Jerusalem describes it as a curfew when in fact what we see is a lost woman looking for answers, and as the city is under curfew she addresses the soldier who controls the public space and allegedly provides her security (fig. 8). The transformation of public space into a space mastered by military logic did not suddenly just happen one day. The first day of conscription to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was not a real success and was, therefore, followed by a huge operation codenamed Beser, in which 3,200



FIGURE 4. *The Road from al-Ramle and al-Lid (July 1948)*, in Yitzhak Sadeh Album No. 1. Courtesy of Yoram Sadeh. Palmach photographic collection.



FIGURE 5. Beno Rothenberg, *Deportation of the Women of al-Tantura (18 June 1948)*. Israel State Archive.



FIGURE 6. Fred Chesnik, *Jewish Military Police Escorting an Old Arab Woman Who Came to Pick up Her Belongings* (1 Apr. 1948, Haifa). Jewish National Fund archive.



FIGURE 7. *Ijlil* (1949). Israel Defense Force and Defense archive.

soldiers fine-combed Tel Aviv with dogs and went from house to house to flush out those who were already termed draft dodgers (*mishtamtin*) (fig. 9).¹⁷ Careful reading of these photographs—not restricted to what the picture is supposedly about—shows that military presence always means the end of civil life for Jews as well as for Arabs. Citizens quickly accepted and adopted the constraints the military imposed on public space and its allocated boundaries. This can be illustrated, for example, by a photo from the Jaffa ghetto indicating that while Palestinians were being trained to become inmates in the public space, Jews across the road were trained to live in the presence of people enclosed in a ghetto just because they were Arabs (fig. 10).

The more deeply I looked at photographs from that period, the more the use of war as the general organizing category of the photographed situation became less and less plausible. The term itself has gradually appeared as an effect of the regime's power to impose its unifying logic of national enmity upon complex exchange relations on different levels: commerce, labor, unionization, partnership, community, and friendship. But the *nakba*, too, as I have already said, is insufficient historiographically and cannot frame the reading of these images of violence. It presupposes and reproduces the split between the two populations and preserves the catastrophe of 1948 as an object for Palestinian history and concern, as if Israeli Jews can continue their lives without accounting for these dramatic events in their own history. The *nakba* framework places all Jews on one side and all Palestinians on the other, ignoring the role of the *nakba* in creating the national rift as well as its destructive effects within the Jewish population.

By viewing the protagonists depicted in the photos as opposing sides in a conflict, one ignores two important things. First, this view fails to account for the considerable history of civil resistance to the violence of war all over Palestine until the very end of the forties. Second, one ignores the force it took to silence attempts among Jews to acknowledge and condemn, or at least problematize, the overt violence of expulsion and destruction that the photos depict. The division of labor between Arabs and Jews as ruled and rulers didn't happen suddenly. Look at this photo from al-Nasirah (fig. 11). The city had been captured the day before the photo was taken. Women, children, and the elderly remained in their homes under curfew. The elderly Palestinian man seems hesitant. He stands uncomfortable in his suit while the two Palestinian women openly and vig-

17. Reconstructing the itinerary of the Beser operation, Tomer Gardi counted one soldier stationed every fourteen meters from the north of Tel Aviv to the south; see Tomer Gardi, *Stone, Paper* (Tel Aviv, 2011).



FIGURE 8. Edgar Hirschbein, *Curfew* (1 Oct. 1948), Jerusalem, Jewish National Fund archive.



FIGURE 9. Beser Operation, Tel Aviv, Aug. 1948. Israel Defense Force and Defense archive.



FIGURE 10. *Ajami Ghetto* (1949). Courtesy of the Jaffa Arab Committee.



FIGURE 11. *Al-Nasirah* (17 July 1948). Associated Press.

orously gesture to the soldier. They're telling him that they don't understand the curfew. They're fearlessly demanding their civil rights. Although armed, the soldier, too, does not react as one who clearly knows how to respond. Otherwise the Palestinians would already have been forced to return to their homes, leaving the soldier to dominate the public space by himself. The women and the soldiers are learning their new positions, roles, and functions.

Gradually, with the help of photography and citizenship as my tools, it became clear that the expulsion, destruction, and dispossession we are looking at affects the whole population, victims and perpetrators alike, as well as generations of later spectators. Taking these two observations into account, it becomes clearer that what we are facing when viewing photographs from this period is a regime-made disaster.¹⁸ One of the main features of this disaster is that it has become quite impossible to recognize the disaster as such—neither in what has befallen others nor in what has befallen oneself once one becomes a perpetrator.

When a regime-made-disaster is at stake, we can see that the forced transformation of the majority of Palestinians into “refugees”—those who can only be understood as being the other side—creates the reverse: the transformation of those citizens who turned the Palestinians into the non-governed of the new sovereign regime into perpetrators.

When the fate of the entire population—Jews and Arabs alike—is considered, the expulsion, dispossession, and destruction can no longer be narrated solely as a Palestinian catastrophe. Military force was needed to overcome the opposition of the majority of the land's inhabitants and to realize a nightmarish partition plan based on brutal expulsion and the prevention of return. In order to produce such military force, the Jewish civil population had to be recruited and made submissive. The might of war as an existential threat had to be imposed on the population; the dividing line between Jews and Arabs had to be constituted as absolute. This dividing line was the means by which the disaster imposed directly on the Palestinians was transformed into a noncatastrophe in the eyes of the Jewish citizens, into what I have characterized as a catastrophe from their point of view—“their,” of course, referring to the Palestinians. The distinction between Israeli citizens who view the Palestinians' disaster as an actual catastrophe, in every sense, and those who see it as catastrophe from their point of view, or who don't view it as a catastrophe at all, coincides to

18. Most of the photographs I have shown were previously unknown, but samples of them have always been accessible. They were not secretly held by Zionist or state archives, nor do they contain revelations. Acts of expulsion—depopulating cities and villages, appropriating Arabs' properties, or transforming public spaces into segregated ghettos—were not then unknown.

a great extent, though not completely, with the division between Arabs and Jews. There were, among the Jews, some individuals and groups who immediately realized that what had happened to the Palestinians *was in fact a catastrophe* and it had happened to them, too, but they had to make a special effort to articulate and communicate this understanding, struggling to “brush history against the grain.”¹⁹

3. Potentializing History

The archive I created has enabled me to reconstruct citizenship used as a tool of regime oppression—one that decisively differentiates various parts of the governed population—while still insisting on the potential of citizenship as partnership, as cooperation. Potential history, then, is at one and the same time an effort to create new conditions both for the appearance of things and for our appearance as its narrators, as the ones who can—at any given moment—intervene in the order of things that constituent violence has created as their natural order. I call this move history that exposes past potential and the potential created by this exposure.

In this case, *potential* has a dual meaning. On the one hand, it signifies the reconstruction of unrealized possibilities, practices, and dreams that motivated and directed the actions of various actors in the past. These were not fully realized but rather disrupted by the constitution of a sovereign regime that created a differential and conflictive body politic. On the other hand, it means the transformation of the past into an unending event, into what Benjamin has called incomplete history, in which our deeds in the present allow us to read the violently constituted achievements of the past in ways that historicize the sovereign power of the past and render it potentially reversible.

In differential regimes where citizens are governed alongside noncitizens, potential history is first and foremost history not shaped in the perspective of the ruling discourse—sovereign nationality.

Potential history insists on restoring within the order of things the polyphony of civil relations and forms of being-together that existed at any moment in history without being shaped solely, let alone exhausted, by national division.

Potential history is an attempt to develop a new model for writing history, using photographs and citizenship to free myself of the clamp of

19. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996–2003), 4:392.

sovereignty and the perspective of the national conflict and to extract from the past its unrealized possibilities as a necessary condition for imagining a different future.

The perspective of the national conflict presupposes that there are two separate parties and buries the question of whether Jews and Arabs ever existed as two truly separate, hostile, homogeneous parties prior to the war in 1948. What was the role of the violence exerted by the nationalist movements in creating this separation and founding national identity on this separation? What was the role of this circular syllogism by which any moment of disagreement or violence was—and still is—represented as an ultimate proof of the “inevitability” of partition, inevitable precisely because it is presented as a solution to an “inevitable” problem whose formulation presupposes the term of the solution—*national conflict*. In order to ask these questions seriously, one should strive to break the framing of two powerful mindsets and look beyond the horizon they fix. The first mindset stems from Zionist hegemonic ideology; the second, perhaps less expected, mindset comes from mainstream Western political thought, which has sanctified national self-determination and sovereignty ever since the revolutions of the eighteenth century.²⁰ Approaching the histo-

20. In the late eighties, the “new historians” in Israel began to contest the Zionist paradigm of research in the domain of Jewish history in general and of Zionism and the history of Israel in particular. A few years later, Zachary Lockman identified the model of a “dual society” as the main flaw of the historiography of the Israeli-Palestinian “conflict.” This “historiography,” he wrote, “hardly questioned the representation of the two communities as self-evidently coherent entities largely uninfluenced by one another.” In response to this flaw in which two national communities were reified and radically separated at the same time, Lockman proposed “relational history,” that is a history of relations, not of substances, that shifts from “the internal dynamics of a single community (as the dual society paradigm would prescribe) to the domain of Arab-Jewish interaction” (Zachary Lockman, “Railway Workers and Relational History: Arabs and Jews in British-Ruled Palestine,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 [July 1993]: 604, 606).

The search for a richer and more complex picture of the relations between Jews and Arabs was already part of the new historians’ discourse and a groundbreaking endeavor within it. On the one hand, the opening of archives allowed the new historians to start reconstructing the *nakba* as a special Jewish-Palestinian affair that deserves a fresh look; on the other hand, often using documents that had long been available, they began to deconstruct the paradigm of dual historiography along the lines proposed by Lockman. In his own work, Lockman focused on worker relations; Nahum Karlinski studied relations between Jewish and Palestinian owners and workers in the orange-grove industry; Deborah Bernstein studied urban life in Tel Aviv, Jaffa, and Haifa under the British Mandate; and Cohen examined Palestinian collaboration with Hagana and later state security agents. These histories do not necessarily depict ideal forms of coexistence, and some of the forms of relations they reconstruct are even explicitly abusive and exploitative.

However impressive as this historical work may be, it is still caught within the dualist-nationalist perspective. Concluding his extensive article on Haifa’s workers, Lockman writes: “there are students of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict who have pointed to instances of cooperation between Jews and Arabs in mandatory Palestine . . . as evidence that the conflict

ries of Israel/Palestine in the late forties and early fifties with the concept of potential history inspired by the incompleteness of the past as suggested by Benjamin, I'll argue that what we are facing is not the unavoidability of a national conflict but the inevitability of coexistence while a mixed population shares the same territory. Photos can give us a glimpse of the unavoidability of coexistence between Arabs and Jews who found numerous ways to collaborate, work, trade, share, and imagine their life together.

Here are a few examples from which one could also reconstruct the motivation to create a mundane souvenir of this sharing: a photograph of Jewish and Arab medical staff working together in the same hospital in Haifa while enjoying each other's company outdoors or the photo of Margo, taken in 1947 at the Sea of Galilee, showing her rowing with an Arab friend on the left and a Jewish one on the right (figs. 12–13). Or the mixed audience in the streets of Tel Aviv during the Purim procession (*Adloyada*) in the thirties. In a photo taken at Ofakim on 19 November 1947, just a few days before the partition plan was declared, one can see overt collaboration of both populations. The Arab neighbor or worker participates in the building of the new Jewish locality—Ofakim. Another photo from a new Jewish settlement in the western Negev was classified in the Zionist archive as “the morning after establishing Haluza; Arabs are passing by at dawn and are astonished by what they see—a new settlement established overnight” (fig. 14).²¹

Astonishment, recoil, resentment, resistance, and a sense of threat were a part of a richly nuanced repertoire of reactions to Jewish settlement, in addition to excitement, interest, involvement, enchantment, and friendship. All were a part of a changing world in which relatively large waves of immigration transformed the existing situation and created new possibilities. This wide variety of reactions produced fascinating interactions and joint efforts to invent new ways of life; they crafted business and personal partnerships, undid knots, mediated conflicts, and reconciled disagreements in order to enable life to go on. In order to acknowledge this rich

need not have taken the course it did. . . . The history of the mandate period thus becomes a story of missed opportunities.” He does not want to be considered among these students of the conflict. For he adds, as if to reassure the readers that what is implied in his research is not what he intends to say: “I am not making that argument here. On the contrary, the Zionist and Palestinian nationalist movements clearly sought irreconcilable objectives and were on a collision course from the very start” (ibid., p. 624). At the closing moment of the article, the nationalist framing is reintroduced and presented as inevitable, as if to present his version of relational history in an acceptable dualist wrapping.

21. Catalog entry for Lazar Dinner, “Ofakim, a New Locality in the Negev, the Arab Neighbors Help in Building the Spot,” KKL Archive, 19 Nov. 1947.



FIGURE 12. *Haifa Hospital, Late 40, Medical Staff.* The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum.



FIGURE 13. *Margo and Friends.* The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum.

variety one must bracket the defeat of all other possibilities caused by the creation of the State of Israel. Until a few months earlier, people indifferent to the national project as a state project—and at the time they numbered many on both sides—saw no harm in cooperating with their neighbors whose origins were different from their own. They did not feel that their affinity to their own origins was impacted or jeopardized as a result.

In a series of photos taken at the Tiberias hospital and preserved in the Torrance collection, one can see typical situations where both populations share the same space, services, and concerns without being bothered at all by the national dictate that they should avoid such encounters.²² In one photo, Dr. H. W. Torrance is speaking to Jewish patients in the courtyard, while Arab patients wait in the shade. In another snapshot taken inside the same hospital, one can see an Arab boy and his father posing with a Jewish boy for the camera. It's not, as the official caption states, the medical condition of the "Two Cases of Bladder Stone" that is so blatant in the photograph but the obvious confidence of the Jewish boy once he is left with the Arab boy's father. The periodic group portraits of the joint staff of the municipal engineering departments in Jaffa and Tel Aviv or other municipal departments were nothing exceptional at the time, as the infrastructure was shared and their roles and responsibilities required them to work in collaboration and coordination.²³ This could be seen not only in public sectors like municipalities but also in private ones, as for example this photo taken at the Gan Hawai or El Alamein café—owned by two partners, an Arab and a Jew—on the bank of the Yarkon River (fig. 15). The place was very popular in the forties, and the collaboration between the partners shown in the photo was reflected in its mixed clientele. These are mundane photographs; there is hardly anything special about them except that they were so hard to find—not because they were so rare at the time but because they have been rarified by the nationalist organization of the archives.

In order to implement a partition, borders and fences had to separate the newly defined sovereign territories. Constituent violence would not have to drive apart the two populations, had it not been preceded by co-existence, both historically and ontologically.

Prior to that time, Amman, Cairo, Alexandria, Damascus, or Aleppo were not sites across borders.²⁴ The line separating Jews from Arabs had to

22. See www.dundee.ac.uk/museum/collections/archives/torrance80.htm

23. A collection of such photographs is today part of an archive created by Dor Guez, based on his grandfather's albums.

24. After the collapse of Ottoman rule, the boundaries of the region were defined by the Franco-British Boundary Agreement (1920) and the Transjordan Memorandum of 16 September 1922, during the British Mandate period.



FIGURE 14. Lazar Dinner, *Ofakim, a New Locality in the Negev, the Arab Neighbors Help in Building the Spot* (11 Nov. 1947), Jewish National Fund archive.



FIGURE 15. *Gan Hawai or El Almein Café* (1940).

be supplemented with internal lines of separation on each side. These borders were meant to separate that which had previously been intentionally or unintentionally, as a matter of fact, mixed.

When such photos of coexistence are juxtaposed with others, where we see how the national conflict was imposed on a variety of forms of Jewish-Arab relations to mold them into the framework of a seemingly inevitable opposition and force upon them separation as a *fait accompli*, another challenge emerges: to reconstruct the factuality of coexistence not only from images of ordinary life where Arabs and Jews are seen in various forms of exchange relations but also from episodes of violence.

Throughout the creation of the archive *From Palestine to Israel*, I argue that we are actually invited to reiterate the constituent violence that framed this divide, in such photos as were taken in 1947–1950, as a *fait accompli* and that we are made accomplices in this transformation. As we are attending the very moment of construction of an unbridgeable divide between the photographed persons—the Jews and Arabs—we can intervene and try to make other options available again.

Constituent violence is understood here not only—as suggested by Benjamin and a whole tradition of political theory—as the force used to create and impose a new political regime but also as an entire scopic regime that supports it. It is precisely this scopic regime that my use of photography seeks to undermine. Each photograph bears traces of the catastrophe and is susceptible to becoming a noncatastrophe in the eyes of the majority Israeli Jews who became subjects of this regime. These events were narrated as a series of unproblematic, quasi-natural events and justified as side effects of the state-building project. As such they are quite familiar. None of them would surprise Jewish-Israeli spectators who have seen the remains of Arab villages on the streets as well as in photographs. Israelis can see themselves in the pages of those photo albums documenting how the country was built: members of youth movements clearing stones from “abandoned” villages, pioneers celebrating “settling the land,” or just urban dwellers moving into nice Arab houses situated against a backdrop of Arab landscapes, ignoring the fact that their Palestinian residents had left those houses—brutally expelled or escaping voluntarily, no matter—weeks, sometimes days, or even hours earlier. Expropriation was accompanied by appropriation of notoriety and skills, as can be learned from this photo, for example, where weaving is taught in this famous Palestinian craft workshop in Majdal without anyone being disturbed by the absence of the Palestinian experts and workers expelled from the city (fig. 16). Jewish Israelis were brought up to look at these photographs and not see the traces of catastrophe they displayed. As the stories of the *nakba* per-



FIGURE 16. Fritz Cohen, *A Russian Immigrant and a Turkish Immigrant Working Together at the Migdal Gad Hand Loom Factory* (21 Feb. 1951). Government Press Office.

sisted or were reintroduced into Israeli public discourse, many reacted by reframing what they saw or could no longer deny as signs for what was a *catastrophe from their, the Palestinians', point of view*. As such, the catastrophe could be imagined and conceived as a marginal episode in the history of the Jews, a somewhat unpleasant series of events that had accompanied the establishment of the State of Israel inadvertently and unavoidably and which “they” have blown out of all proportion.

This archive of constituent violence created conditions for the emergence of potential history as an object of research and a new way to relate to this particular type of violence. Potential history helps us see in those images of violence—notwithstanding all the paradoxes involved—evidence of endless reiterations of a constitutive moment that can never be completed and terminated. The framework of potential history enables us to see that this series of reiterations can be interrupted only through a new form of relations among all those involved in the production of violence—victims, perpetrators, and spectators. It helps one see this new form of relations as a real possibility. Once such a possibility is introduced, the never-ending series of moments is transformed into a never-ending project, a necessity



FIGURE 17. *Al-Ramle* (12 July 1948). Israel Defense Force and Defense Archive.

to preserve it for some, an obligation to unravel it for others, or a universal civil right to be claimed, as I suggest.

4. A Dual Moment of Becoming

Let me conclude with this photograph taken in al-Ramle on 12 July 1948 (fig. 17). The photograph documents a dual moment of becoming: the Palestinian becomes a refugee at the same time as the Israeli soldier becomes a perpetrator, a role that transforms his civilian neighbor into a refugee. The girls depicted in this photo and their plight are often expelled from the phenomenal field where Israelis look for their past or future. But this later expulsion cannot expel the catastrophe. Its outcomes are out there, in our landscape, in our forests, in the refugee camps, in our nightmares, in our hopes. It can be recognized or denied but not cancelled, at least not as long as the refugees—or others on their behalf—claim their return. What we, spectators of these photos, see—or should see—in them are not merely documents of complete destruction but also the unavoidable seeds of a future where this violence should be accounted so that those

who were tied by it may choose anew, differently, to reinvent the way they tie themselves together.

Forgiveness, the way I formulate it here, can be one possible form of potentializing the constituent violence and giving new shape to the relations between those who were tied by it. Forgiveness is an act taking place in the present but directed simultaneously towards the past and the future. Forgiveness facilitates a bridge between an unforgivable past and a possible future. It does not do so by making the unforgivable forgivable. It helps the perpetrators acknowledge their deed as unforgivable. Begging forgiveness is not sufficient without entailing a new form of partnership—one that rejects explanations, reasons, and particular motives, one that demands that the universal basis of partnership be revived. In life after the perpetration of a crime, such a basis can only be found in shared recognition, in agreement that the crime is unforgivable. Such shared recognition alone can open the door to the perpetrator. Through joint learning about the crime, its materiality, the sides can become partners in sustainable life. Life with a future can be possible only upon understanding that the future is inseparable from the past, not partitionable, nor could it ever be privately managed. Inspired by Benjamin, we may call these photos of constituent violence documents of an incomplete history: “the past,” Benjamin wrote, “carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption.”²⁵

Photographs like this one are often overlooked. The young girls in the photo, whose mothers dressed them in their nice summer flowery dresses that day, as if they were about to go for a short journey, didn’t return to their homes. Becoming a refugee was clearly their catastrophe, but as I’ve said, becoming perpetrators or descendants of perpetrators was my, our, catastrophe as Israeli Jews. As long as history is kept incomplete each of us can still claim what I suggest is a universal right—the right not to be a perpetrator. This is the right to intervene in the constituent violence at work in the event of photography and claim the transformation of the photographed person not only into a nonrefugee, equally governed, but also into a citizen so as to enable me, us, to regain our full unimpaired citizenship.

25. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” p. 390.