

Electrical Palestine: Capital and Technology from Empire to Nation. By Fredrik Meiton. University of California Press, 2019. 312 pp. \$29.95.

The history of the Israel-Palestine conflict over land did not start with the creation of the Zionist nation-state—far from it. To truly understand how this process materialized, one needs to go back to the first half of the twentieth century. These are the decades that Fredrik Meiton narrates and revisits through a new and compelling lens: the infrastructure of electricity as a network of influence. Going back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire through the early 1950s, *Electrical Palestine* tells a story of continuous and spectacular growth for the Jewish settlers—an elevenfold increase outpacing all other Middle Eastern economies. The indigenous Arab population—seen by Western and Jewish authorities as backward and in need of modernization—did not benefit from this capitalist, technological expansion. Through his clean, lucid prose, Meiton sheds light on the technical workings and cultural ramifications of financial imperialism while criticizing overt racism against Palestinian Muslims. Using electrical deployment and power both concretely and metaphorically, Meiton coins the term “technocapitalism” to describe industrial Zionism. I myself was skeptical of the validity of the term at first; it seemed to me that the author might have been influenced by later technological developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and by the rampant, hegemonic neo-liberalism of recent decades. But Meiton’s immersive depictions and abundant data led me to embrace his choice, and the term “technocapitalism” actually aptly captures the situation he describes from a century ago. *Electrical Palestine* unveils a tableau of speculative investments, monopolies and orientalist resentment which bears resemblance to many more recent familiar situations.

Meiton’s central argument is that electricity as a technology has never been neutral or apolitical. In Palestine, power as a utility would not be nationalized until 1954, and issues of access, control and distribution dramatically determined the dynamics of Zionism from the 1920s onwards. Until nationalization (recounted in the last chapter of the book), the emergence of electricity in Palestine happened within a public market in which Great Britain (and later the United States) had a vested interest. The evidence Meiton presents is undeniable and important to the field of Middle Eastern Studies. Meiton draws

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from contemporary caricatures and cartoons from the journal *Filastin*, as well as letters and news articles from other outlets including the *Palestine Post*. He also analyzes passages of the *Blue Book for Palestine*, a government source of mostly quantitative accounts published by the British from the mid-1920s on. Meiton visited numerous archival centers in Nabuls, Tel Aviv, Jaffa, and Haifa, and consulted a wealth of Arabic material alongside Hebrew sources. In his introduction, the author makes a point of his commitment to a multitude of voices and of his methodological and empirical departure from previous works (he cites Ronen Shamir and his book *Current Flow*, as well as Tom Segev). *Electrical Palestine* was put together with the clear intention to “compensate for the lopsidedness of the sources” (10) by including the Arab Muslim perspective to the narrative. This history of industrial Zionism had previously been presented as a miracle of economic growth with no regard for ostracized communities, and Meiton consciously corrects this existing bias.

In his fifth chapter, the author acknowledges Bruno Latour’s seminal actor-network theory to emphasize the social implications of technological systems. He also revisits Timothy Mitchell’s contributions in the third chapter while explaining that in the case of Palestine, the relation between the grid and politics needs to be understood as more gradual and fluid than previously established by Mitchell about oil. His discussion of boundary-making also owes greatly to Mitchell’s discussion of techno-politics in *Rule of Experts*. Meiton’s description are by no means black-and-white; on the contrary, he insists on the nuances of the process and its opposition both inside and outside of Jewish communities (104).

A main point of criticism would be the lack of explanation about the structure in the introduction. Meiton does not walk the reader through his decision to organize the book the way he did, and why these different snapshots matter. The progression is loosely chronological, and while the chapters do add different layers to the technocapitalist complex of electrical Palestine with clear summaries at the end of each, it would have been helpful to bookend the monograph with a strong conclusion wrapping all of these stories together. Instead, the conclusion is quite short; I recommend reading it as a reiteration of the introduction. Together, they form a groundbreaking essay on why we need to revisit the history of Palestine from imperialism to nationalism through the

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framework of infrastructure. To achieve this goal, Meiton tracks a central character throughout the book: Pinhas Rutenberg. Crucial concepts like sovereignty, economism and technological utopianism “conquering the forces of nature” (32) emerge out of Meiton’s vivid portrayals. Undeniably, the author is a good storyteller—perhaps even too colorful at times. His various metaphors include soccer, Frankenstein, and comparing the Jewish nationalists to a Prometheus arriving in the land of Palestine.

More concretely, projects of hydroelectrical power stations and transmission, data collection (chapter 2 and 4), and Palestinian opposition to Rutenberg’s electrification venture (chapter 3) form the bulk of the research. Ethnographers will also find attention-grabbing analyses of the deliberate and documented exclusion of Palestinian Arabs (called “Asiatic labor” (142)) from high-paying electrician positions by Zionists and Britons, which further debunks the universalist modernist façade of the civilizing mission, and shows how technology, socio-economics and ethnonreligious lines intersect. Data-driven social historian and economists will find chapter 5 to be particularly relevant and convincing, as Meiton shows which group experienced exponential growth and access to credit and which one did not. In chapter 6, the author zooms in on Jerusalem as a case study of uneven electrical adoption while formulating a key argument: “As a new technology is introduced and becomes ubiquitous, it transforms material and mental landscapes: its absence becomes an event. The arrival of a new technology creates a presence, and thus also the possibility of the presence of an absence” (207).

As a whole, this book tells a story of divergence and decoupling, but also continuity between the first half and second half of the twentieth century as far as the Israel-Palestine conflict is concerned. Meiton’s main point is that the infrastructure of industrial Zionism pre-existed the actual state of Israel (founded in 1948). Political power and social networks do not emerge out of the writ of constitutions or summits, but out of tangible pipes and cables gridlocking cities. Technology has more impact in shaping ethnonational relations than proclamations like the 1917 Balfour Declaration, and Meiton contends that previous historiographies have been mistaking the end for the means. At the root of electrical technology was a capitalist countrywide monopoly granted by Great Britain in 1921 to Rutenberg. This counter-narrative of technocapitalism is a

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powerful contribution, and it invites other scholars to think more critically about the histories we narrate and the role we attribute to politics, economics and technology. It also adds to a growing body of literature showing that infrastructure is neither neutral nor built by nations; it is actually a fundamental *builder* of nation states.

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