

Research Report

Fredrik Meiton

The research project for which I received generous and vital financial support from the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking is entitled *Electrical Palestine: Jewish and Arab Technopolitics under British Rule*. The project aims to track the role of science and technology in structuring relationships of power in the conflict between Arabs and Jews in mandatory Palestine (what later became Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories). More specifically, it homes in on the efforts to build a single, countrywide electric grid, an endeavor that corresponded to the years of British rule from 1917 to 1948. In designing this research project, my primary aim was to place Palestine's electrification at the center of the story of the area's dramatic socioeconomic transformation in the interwar period, as a way of explaining that transformation and the ethno-national conflict that developed alongside it.

My working hypothesis was that by being imbedded in a larger sociotechnical network, the power system shaped and was shaped by the evolving political agendas, economic activities, and social visions that were at the heart of Palestine's evolution. Therefore, focusing on the construction of this large technological system would allow me to approach this widely studied period from a very different angle.

My inspiration came mostly from the fields of the history of science and technology, and Science and Technology Studies (STS). Starting in the late 1970s, scholars in the emerging field of the sociology of scientific knowledge first began to question the binary division according to which science and technology are treated in isolation from other spheres of human activity. Their work showed that scientific practice and the design of technological objects are not determined by scientific considerations alone. Rather, a host of cultural and political factors enter into the world of innovation and engineering. Technical objects, according to these scholars, are cultural artifacts, bound up with their social and political surroundings. Actor-network theorists proposed that all entities, be they scientific or social, should be regarded as inherently unstable and as products of their position within all-encompassing networks. For my purposes, the most important takeaway was the notion that knowledge and power are always materially embedded and embodied.

The research project also entailed expensive explorations of a number of archives. The archives of the Israel Electric Corporation, the contemporary incarnation of the company that received the exclusive concession to electrify Palestine in 1921, was an essential source. It contains records with information on virtually all aspects of the story. The National Archives of the United Kingdom helped supply the perspective of the British mandatory government in Palestine, British officials and ministers in the metropole, and the administrative apparatus around colonial management (the Crown Agents, consulting engineers, etc.). The Israel State Archives and the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, the Haganah Archives in Tel Aviv, the Weizmann House and Weizmann Institute archives in Rehovoth, and the municipal archives of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa provided information regarding the actions and perspectives of various Zionist bodies, including their interaction with the electrification concessionaire, Pinhas Rutenberg. To bring in as much as possible of the Palestinian perspective (a famously difficult task, given the status of archives in Israel and Palestine, as well as the broader political status of the two entities), I

visited the Nablus Municipal Archives, and perused the Palestinian Arab press from the time period, along with diaries and memoirs.

My research has so far resulted in three publications – two articles and a chapter in an edited volume – with a fourth – a book – due to be published with the University of California Press in the spring. The working title of the book is *Electrical Palestine: Jewish and Arab Technopolitics Under British Rule*. In the book, I argue that the story of Palestine’s transformation in the mandatory period is largely a story of the precipitous and uneven growth of its infrastructures, and the story of Palestine’s ethno-national conflict is largely a story of diverging economies coevolving with those technologies. Indeed, the Jewish state of Israel, founded on May 14, 1948, was *infrastructural* before it was anything else. This was not accidental, but the outcome of a deliberate effort to erect the material predicates of sovereignty. As a result, *Electrical Palestine* offers a new perspective on the question of who gets a state, who does not, and why.

Putting electrification at the center of the story of Palestine’s transformation makes new connections visible, with far-reaching implications for how that story should be understood. For one thing, it becomes clear that the history of empire matters a great deal to the history of Palestine, much more so than scholars have acknowledged, and in ways previously unexplored. The tendency among scholars has been to treat British policy in Palestine in isolation from Britain’s imperial project. But in fact Britain’s attitude to Zionism and the Arab population constituted just another provincial articulation of its empire-wide concern with non-Western development.

My research has also spotlights the close interrelation between capitalism and technology in colonial settings. Technological and capitalist reason both rely on self-reinforcing ideas, discourses, and practices that put an ever-growing distance between themselves and alternative systems. Specifically, Zionism’s territorial claim was based, to a far greater extent than is recognized in the existing scholarship, on the promise of organizing an economically viable territory in the context of global trade, and of doing so by means of infrastructural technologies. Its advocates justified their claim to Palestine through their promise to transform the territory into an area of modern production and consumption, and crucially also into a viable node in the global flow that characterizes “free trade.” That capitalist proposition was underpinned by their belief, on the one hand, in science’s ability to stake out the most efficient way forward, and on the other, in the ability of technology to transform apparently backward lands into productive and dynamic participants in global trade. This aspiration was expressed on the ground through the application of specific technologies chosen for their supposed ability to engender “free trade,” and whose precise properties were instrumental in shaping the endeavor as it evolved, in both expected and unexpected ways.

In other words, modern Palestine – and the Jewish state that emerged from it in 1948 – was forged as people, goods, information, and capital moved through the space in patterns largely determined by its infrastructures. The electrification scheme in particular was essential in setting the territorial scale of modern Palestine, pulling local communities together by virtue of being stakeholders in the grid’s growth. The concession that the British granted to the Russian engineer and Zionist Pinhas Rutenberg involved a countrywide monopoly, a requirement, as Rutenberg successfully argued, of the capital-intensive nature of the enterprise. Thus, even before the

borders of Palestine were determined, a nascent *electrical Palestine* was conceptually fixed in terms of an exclusive right to electrify the “Palestine” of the concession text, whatever the precise geographical delimitation would turn out to be. The vast scale of the electrification endeavor implied a particular socioeconomic future for the territory, involving large-scale industry and global capital.

Once completed the electric grid constituted the first material manifestation of what until then had been a mostly abstract claim for Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. It set Palestine up as a site capable of hosting a modern Jewish national home, complete with a (Jewish) national industry, economy, and culture. By the same token, the Palestinians’ struggle against electrification amounted to a concrete campaign to prevent de facto Jewish sovereignty over the land, conducted all over Palestine against a network that seemed to threaten local control over every inch of the territory equally. In short, the power system was essential in shaping out Palestine within the larger agendas of technocapitalist colonial development and Jewish nationalism. The system, for its part, was possible only because of its central role in the Zionist gambit to organize a viable political and economic national entity within that technocapitalist framework. Thus, Zionism, Palestinian nationalism, and the electric system enabled and produced each other, as well as modern Palestine. As a result, the conflict between Arabs and Jews inscribed itself on the grid, as the grid in turn inscribed itself on the conflict.

The final product was an entity I call *Electrical Palestine*: a shared lifeworld composed of a set of tightly integrated components, conceptual and material, drawn together in continual violation of the received domains of social theory, those of economy, science, culture, and so on. We might consider using concepts like paradigm, habitus, or episteme. Or we might reach for a sports metaphor. If electrical Palestine were soccer, it would be the pitch, the sidelines, the goal posts, the referee, the rules, the players, the ball... the entire “complex of men and things” that make soccer distinct from, say, tennis or fly fishing, and whose rules privilege certain attributes over others, creating certain strong path dependencies. This, the book argues, was a process that ultimately resulted, in 1948, in Jewish statehood and Palestinian statelessness, and set a dynamic between the parties that characterizes the Arab-Israeli conflict to this day.