

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Noga Kadman**, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-253-01670-6 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-253-01676-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-253-01682-9 (ebook)

## ***Institutionalized Ignorance and Manufactured Oblivion: Reading Noga Kadman's Erased from Space and Consciousness from an Agnotological Perspective***

Ignorance, like knowledge, has a political geography, prompting us to ask: Who knows not? And why not? Where is there ignorance and why? Like knowledge or wealth or poverty, ignorance has a face, a house, and a price: it is encouraged here and discouraged there from ten thousand accidents (and deliberations) of social fortune. It is less like a vacuum than a solid or shifting body – which travels through time and occupies space, runs roughshod over people or things, and often leaves a shadow. (Proctor 2008: 6)

Some years ago, I was doing research in the Lebanese village of Shabriha, located near Tyre in the southern part of the country. During my stay in Shabriha, I initially failed to comprehend the significance of the fact that this same village was often referred to as “Salha”. It took me quite some time to realize that Salha<sup>1</sup> was the village, now located in northern Israel, where the people that today reside in Lebanese Shabriha came from.<sup>2</sup> It took me even longer to appreciate that while the original village of Salha was almost completely destroyed, at the same time it continues to exist. Salha continues to exist both in space, in kibbutz Yir'on that encompasses its remains, and in time, in the hearts and minds of the residents of Shabriha.

It is the history of villages such as Salha – or, rather, the erasure of and ignorance about this history – that is central to Noga Kadman's compelling monograph *Erased from Space and Consciousness*. Kadman's meticulous account of the physical destruction and subsequent socio-

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1 Alternatively spelled as “Saliha”.

2 The people from Salha/Shabriha eventually obtained Lebanese citizenship, a process I describe in detail in an article for the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (Stel 2015).

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cultural marginalization of the Palestinian villages that were depopulated by the militias that eventually merged into the Israeli Defense Forces makes significant scientific and political contributions. It also raises broader philosophical and epistemological questions with regard to the production, maintenance, and consequences of collective, politically institutionalized amnesia. In this review essay I reflect on both. I start out with a discussion of the book and subsequently explore how the analysis presented in it can both benefit from and be of benefit to the nascent theory of agnotology – the study of socially constructed and politically imposed ignorance.

## *Israel's Depopulated Palestinian Villages: Reconstructing Erasure*

*Erased from Space and Consciousness* investigates the fate of 418 Palestinian villages that were depopulated as a direct or indirect effect of a coordinated expulsion campaign by Jewish militias in the process of the creation of the state of Israel. Kadman not merely scrupulously documents the depopulation and destruction of these villages, but explores what has become of them afterwards. She adopts a “spatial socialization” framework, focusing on the processes through which “individuals are socialized as members of a territorially defined nationality” (p.33). This uniquely facilitates an investigation of the position of the depopulated villages in both the physical and mental landscape of contemporary Israeli institutions and communities. For her analysis, Kadman draws on official documents produced by the Government Names Committee, the Israel Land Administration/Authority, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, the Jewish National Fund, and the Survey of Israel, as well as on private, mostly kibbutz, archives. She complements these data with her experiences as a tour guide at the village sites.<sup>3</sup>

While an oral history approach could arguably have augmented Kadman’s documentary and observational evidence, her material convincingly demonstrates how most of the villages in question were razed or strategically re-settled and allow her to reconstruct the processes through which their Palestinian origin was categorically concealed. The villages’ physical erasure was

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<sup>3</sup> Many of which are now (not always coincidentally) part of national parks.

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followed by a far more complex procedure of cognitive erasure whereby the remains of the villages were removed from official maps, documents, and histories, and/or renamed, replacing Arab names with Hebrew ones. If the villages were brought up at all in the material that Kadman discusses, this was done in a decontextualized and depoliticized sense that avoids any acknowledgement that Palestinian communities existed there within living memory and were forcefully expelled and expropriated. Kadman evocatively captures the relation between such material and social erasure, noting that the “failure to name places is tantamount to a deliberate act of disregard, which sentences these places to oblivion. Places without names do not latch onto the consciousness of people living nearby, traveling through them, or passing by them” (p.111).

In documenting this oppressed recent history, Kadman offers a groundbreaking alternative to the currently hegemonic Israeli narrative. This dominant narrative “ignores a long period of Arab settlement in the country, or frames it as a passing, temporary, and negative episode” and silences circumstances of displacement, ignores acts of aggression, and remains indifferent to villagers-turned-refugees (p.143). As such, the book, like the campaign of oblivion it seeks to defy, addresses three core audiences. Kadman’s account is primarily relevant for Israeli society at large. Kadman (p.7) intends to demonstrate that Israel is not a monolith and her book functions as a trailblazer for emerging alternative narratives about the shaping of memory and space in Israel. By challenging the uniformity of Israel’s position vis-à-vis the *Nakba*<sup>4</sup> and its consequences, secondly Kadman also helps to remedy the dominance of the Israeli perspective among a broader “Western” public. In this sense, the tone of the book merits specific mention: Kadman is relentlessly critical, but also nuanced and compassionate. She has a keen eye for the tragedy of a traumatized people blind to the new trauma they themselves instigate. Finally,

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<sup>4</sup> Nakba is Arabic for “catastrophe” and refers to the forced expulsion of Palestinians from their lands by Jewish militias – such as the paramilitary Haganah, Stern and Irgun groups – in the process of the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948.

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Kadman's study holds important insights for Palestinians. These insights are not always straightforward, yet they are significant. In the book's foreword, Oren Yiftachel notes that:

... the two national movements have created opposing discourses, resembling photographic narratives, in which the same land – sacred to both peoples – embodies opposite images. Zionism draws a Jewish, Western, and democratic country, rooted in the Hebrew biblical space while erasing the Arab-Palestinian past. Palestinian society, on the other hand, portrays a romantic image of a lost paradise and (in part) refuses to recognize the millions of Jews who settled in Israel and created a new vibrant society on the same ruined Palestinian space. (p.xii)

*As Erased from Space and Consciousness* should help Israelis acknowledge the past, it might help Palestinians to acknowledge the present; not to submissively accept it, but to recognize it as the only viable starting point for building a future. Exploring to what extent the increasing disregard of the “right to return” of the Palestinian refugee diaspora by the nascent Palestinian state is a corollary of the systematic erasure and denial of the origins of these refugees by Israel should be part of this reflexive exercise.

## *Agnology: Theorizing Politically Institutionalized Ignorance*

Despite the contributions described above, the documentation of the depopulated villages is not new in itself. Scholars such as Walid Khalidi, Salman Abu Sitta, Meron Benvenisti, Arnon Golan, Oren Yiftachel and Benny Morris, whom Kadman elaborately cites, have described the depopulation, destruction, and marginalization of Israel's Palestinian villages. But *Erased from Space and Consciousness* does not stop at describing the process of erasure central to its argument. It goes on to address the far more elusive questions of how such erasure was made possible and what the stakes of this dual erasure were and continue to be for the Israeli state. Kadman persuasively demonstrates that the depopulated Palestinian villages are more than a public planning nuisance. They signify a past that needs to be subdued if the present status quo is

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to be protected; a volatile past linked to imminent political issues that Israel does not want to deal with. Kadman concludes that:

Israel eschews its responsibility for the depopulation of the villages and the fate of their refugees and refrains from engaging with moral questions regarding its part in creating the refugee problem, perpetuating it, and exploiting what the Palestinians have lost. The depopulated villages from which the Palestinians were exiled and of which they were dispossessed may raise such questions – and so their memory is being suppressed. (p.144)

If read from this perspective, the book contains many parallels with existing theories of imposed ignorance, the politics of forgetting, states of denial, and structural amnesia that merit a more explicit exploration. In the remainder of this essay, I hope to provide some handles for such deeper conceptualization by linking Kadman's "spatial socialization" approach to the broader theory of agnotology. This makes a dual contribution. On the one hand, it underlines and extends the significance of Kadman's claims for the field of radical geographic thought. On the other, it provides important empirical substance for the ongoing process to "develop epistemologies of ignorance" (Tuana 2008: 108).

Agnotology refers to the scientific study of "agnogenesis", the process of generating or maintaining ignorance (Christensen 2008). It is sometimes presented as an "anti-epistemology", as by Galison (2008: 45), who proposes that whereas "epistemology asks how knowledge can be uncovered and secured", anti-epistemology "asks how knowledge can be covered and obscured". As such, agnotology agendizes the pervasive and fundamental influence of ignorance on human agency and sets out to understand how it "is constructed, the work it does, and the impact it has" (Smithson 2008: 209). Agnotology traces "the cultural politics of ignorance" and analyzes "why some knowledges are suppressed, lost, ignored, or abandoned, while others are embraced and come to shape our lives" (Schiebinger 2008: 152). Combining concepts like silence, absence, impotence, and uncertainty, its aim is to "explore how ignorance is produced or maintained in

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diverse settings, through mechanisms such as deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy, and suppression, document destruction, unquestioned tradition, and myriad forms of inherent (or avoidable) culturopolitical selectivity” (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008: vii).

The two central principles of agnotology are that it approaches ignorance not as an omission or gap, but rather as an active construct and, consequently, that it sees ignorance as underpinned by specific intentions and interests. These two hallmarks can help to highlight the relevance of Kadman’s work even more forcefully. In coining the notion of agnotology, Proctor (2008: 9) sees ignorance as “something that is made, maintained, and manipulated”, often an “actively engineered part of a deliberate plan”. Mayor (2008: 164) adds that silences can be produced in a manner that is “active and deliberate”. *Erased from Space and Consciousness* constitutes an exceptionally potent illustration of such engineered ignorance.

The significance of Kadman’s book lies in the verbs she uses; the “erasing”, “replacing”, “concealing”, “ignoring”, “suppressing”, “marginalizing”, “omitting”, “silencing”, “denying”, “eschewing”, “disregarding”, and “neglecting”. The book is rife with examples of deliberately manufactured not-knowing. These range from an education system that ensures that “the landmarks of Arab existence in the landscape are not perceived as part of the land that an Israeli should ‘know’” to explanatory signs for remains of depopulated villages that were never installed (p.51, 91, 89). Just when the terror of the *Nakba* seems to disappear in the numbers and nigh endless descriptions, Kadman steps in to drive home that the terror of it all lies exactly in this almost casual acceptance of facts on the ground. It is precisely when this process of active forgetting takes on a natural, inevitable guise that its true power becomes evident. This fundamental paradox of Kadman’s story can be resolved through an agnotological approach that outlines how the mechanisms that produce or maintain ignorance change over time so that “once things are made unknown – by suppression or by apathy – they can often remain unknown without further effort” (Proctor 2008: 8).

Agnotology not only puts a premium on agency, it also emphasizes intention, demanding specific attention for the interests that underpin particular regimes of ignorance. This

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agnotological focal point, too, can serve to highlight Kadman's core contributions. Intentionality is per definition elusive in an agnotological approach: how to "prove the existence of something for which the very ability to evade detection is a key criterion for success"? (McGoey 2012b: 559). By distinguishing between two categories of not-knowing – "things we don't know we don't know and things we know we don't know" (McGoey 2012b: 558-559) – agnotology can be specifically helpful to further Kadman's argument. Her book particularly engages with the latter form: the things people know they do not know but do not want to know and the things they know but pretend not to know. Explicating this helps to link Kadman's case-study to similar quests to uncover the production of ignorance.

Kadman's book is an exemplar of the functionality of ignorance and can be a benchmark for other agnotological studies, particularly those that are concerned with the legitimating qualities of ignorance. Smithson (2008: 223) notes that ignorance often serves to justify inaction, maintain the status quo, or evade culpability. *Erased from Space and Consciousness* gives a potent example of how this can work. Erasing the Palestinian villages from Israeli lands and minds, ultimately, is done to deny "any responsibility for them and for their fate" and to keep "the refugee problem" off the agenda (p.89). The Israel Nature and Parks Authority and the Jewish National Fund, in this vein, structurally convey that the responsibility for the depopulation of the villages lies with the villagers that "abandoned" them (p.137). Following the same logic, documentation produced by the kibbutzes that were built on top or in the vicinity of the depopulated villages often acknowledges a form of correlation between their presence and the original villagers' absence, but vehemently denies causality: Jews came and Arabs left, but Arabs did not leave *because* Jews came (p.82).

The issue of intentionality brings me to two other aspects of agnotology that Kadman's work resonates with and where her study might strengthen the theory of agnotology: its politics and its concreteness. On the one hand, agnotology scholars have defined ignorance as the product of cultural and political struggles (Slater 2012: 951). They have acknowledged the utility of ignorance as a "tool of usurpation" (McGoey 2012a:10) and proclaimed that the issue of

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concern is not individual, but collective, societal ignorance (Croissant 2014:10). Indeed, there are plenty of examples of studies that trace the institutionalization of not-knowing. At the same time, the discipline grapples with the collective aspect of this institutionalized ignorance. It often fails to link up with theories of “domination, hegemony, ideology, mystification, exploitation, and so on” (Mills 2008: 231). Yet these are exactly the themes at the heart of Kadman’s analysis, which connects collective amnesia and institutionalized ignorance with a system of political, even neocolonial, repression. What her book fundamentally boils down to is the realization that:

Israelis do not suppress the memory of the villages out of personal instinct; the suppression is collective, and it is shaped through direct manipulation by the state, which prefers to keep Israeli awareness of the issue dormant and distorted. The marginalization of the depopulated Palestinian villages has a political rationale that goes hand in hand with the ideology of Judaization and Israel’s ethnocentric structure, and it is motivated by the desire to cement Jewish domination of the land. (p.144)

In this way, Kadman’s work can help fulfill the potential of agnotology to “provide a lens for the values at work in our knowledge practices”, as Tuana (2008: 140) phrases it. Kadman shows, better than most agnotology scholars, that “[w]hat we do not know, as much as what we do know, tracks power as it operates in social contexts both past and present” (Wylie 2008: 187-188).

Kadman carefully reveals both the political nature of the erasure of the depopulated villages and its political implications. The removal of the country’s Palestinian villages from the landscape, maps, histories, and daily lives of modern Israelis often had a “quiet and gradual” or “camouflaged” character, and bore the “semblance of neutral administrative action” (p.28, 43). Yet, Kadman (p.27) shows, the state employees working on this process had no doubt about its political significance. And it is not only the underlying intentions of the erasure that are unequivocally political: the erasure’s consequences are as well. In the end, “[i]gnoring and sidelining Arabness in time and in space represents yet another Israeli victory in yet another



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arena of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, made possible through the Israeli military conquest of the territory and the making of most of its Palestinian residents into refugees beyond the state's borders" (p.4).

The political implications of the agnogenesis that Kadman draws out so keenly are intimately related to another contribution she makes to agnotology, namely, its concretization. By developing a specifically spatial perspective on the production of ignorance, Kadman makes this process uniquely tangible. Agnotologists have highlighted "the historicity and artifactuality of non-knowing and the non-known" (Proctor 2008: 26-27; see also Croissant 2014:11; Smithson 2008: 210). As the opening quotation of this essay illustrates, Proctor himself, moreover, identified spatial politics as a particularly promising angle from which to further such concretization. This means, as I have noted before, that exploring the spatial manifestations of ignorance is a logical priority in the attempt to further agnotology (Stel 2016).

In this sense, Kadman's account responds to my call, in an article published in *Antipode* earlier this year (Stel 2016), to approach collective ignorance from a spatial perspective. Her tracing of a "disappearing geography", "the naming and mapping of locations in contested space", the creation of "facts on the ground", and the "spatial practices of erasure and manufactured oblivion" inimitably demonstrates how space and politics are linked (p.xii, 35, 40). The villages are a permanent reminder of the threat of return. Their marginalization, therefore, "is meant to reject the bond that exists to this day between the refugees and their villages" and prevent any open discussion of the refugee problem (p.145). The material erasure of the villages allows Israel to present the "refugee issue" as a matter that is "devoid of specific content, as it is not substantiated by imparting knowledge and awareness of the historical and geographical moves that had created it in the past, or of the present-day state of the refugees and their families" (p.145). Kadman's immensely detailed and thoroughly empirical spatial agnotology provides a particularly potent antidote to this project.

*Implications*

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Kadman's gripping analysis of one of today's most tragic forms of institutional and cultural dispossession forcefully establishes the relevance of the questions raised by agnotology: How is ignorance made and unmade? Who benefits and how? Which types of ignorance are tolerated and which will be combated? (see Proctor 2008: 3, 26). This makes *Erased from Space and Consciousness* a pertinent vantage point for the furthering of agnotology theory. It also gives the book an immediate political relevance, not least in questioning the role of academia and knowledge production. After all, "decisions of what kind of knowledge 'we' want to support are also decisions about what kinds of ignorance should remain in place" (Proctor 2008: 26).

In her book, Kadman successfully defies a protracted and politically lucrative regime of ignorance, an accomplishment that is moral as much as it is scholarly. Ultimately, *Erased from Space and Consciousness* vindicates the liminal existence of the community of Salha that I introduced in the opening passage of this essay. It sheds new light on the irrevocable ties of this community, and the broader Palestinian refugee diaspora it represents, to a time and a place where they "knew every corner and hole of the land".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Community leader, Shabriha, 17 July 2014.

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