

Response by Ian Lustick to Comments

Editor's Note: This is a Response to the Four Comments on Lustick's Article in This Issue, V37(1)

Ian S. Lustick¹

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I am grateful to my colleagues in Israel, Canada, and the United States for their thoughtful and stimulating comments on my article and for the opportunity to respond briefly that has been extended to me by *Contemporary Jewry*.

All four of the responses reflect an understanding of my argument. Dan Michman, Sergio DellaPergola, Paul Burstein, and Adam Ferziger identify its “fundamental tenet” correctly. There are four “distinctive constructions” of the Holocaust in Israel: “as a Zionist proof-text,” “as a wasting asset,” “as a human rights object lesson,” and “as a template for Jewish life.” As they note, I do contend that the fourth construct “has been hegemonic in Israeli life since the 1980s.” It is not clear whether they agree with this claim or not, though the other three commentators explicitly affirm its correctness. But Michman et al. do agree with me that the four constructions are best understood as having “existed for most of the history of the State of Israel and constantly vie among each other.” One key element of the argument, although mentioned by them, is explained best by Jeffrey Kopstein. His cogent summary cites the importance of the mechanism of “unintended consequences” giving rise to “contradictions” that, in turn, account for jagged patterns in the changing prominence of the four Holocaust constructions in the discourse of the Israeli political elite and across Israeli culture more generally.

In some respects, however, Michman et al. seriously misconstrue my argument. They write that “one cannot accept his essay either as the final word on the subject or as an adequate or sufficient piece of scholarship.” *Chas v’shalom* that any author should consider an article, even in *Contemporary Jewry*, as the “final word on the subject.” In the production of knowledge, a crucial criterion for value is not whether a contribution ends the conversation, but whether it generates new questions and more interesting work than would have occurred in its absence. From the

✉ Ian S. Lustick
ilustick@sas.upenn.edu

¹ Philadelphia, PA, USA

suggestions appearing in this collection of comments, it seems evident that my article meets this test.

Accepting the hegemonic status of the template for Jewish life construction, and its dangers, Kopstein suggests asking about whether this outcome was inevitable or not, and whether it could be used to increase the plausibility of a two-state-solution future for the country. Avinoam Patt correctly assesses that the evidentiary focus of the article is on elite discourse and its contribution to political culture. He suggests looking at the extent to which there were tensions or synchronicity in the relationship between patterns in this discourse and patterns in Holocaust constructions prominent in discourses of survivors and other non-elites. Yael Zerubavel suggests opportunities for deepening and extending the analysis by mobilizing more systematically the theories and methods developed by scholars of collective memory. Michman et al. themselves suggest, and I agree, that if my analysis were extended to the United States, the ascendancy of “Holocaustia” would be found to be even more well-established among American Jews than it is in Israel.

Michman et al. criticize the article repeatedly for not including all important work published on matters pertaining to the topic. But, of course, no article—indeed, no book—could achieve the kind of mapping and integration of the insights and findings of all relevant secondary, not to say primary, sources. I am quite sure that many of the authors they suggest I should have cited have produced work that would relate in interesting ways to the topic I have tried to address. Indeed, part of the test of my argument will be to see whether, as more and more evidence is brought to bear, it becomes necessary to add or subtract from my typology of Holocaust constructions in order to comprehend more effectively the cultural history of Israel on this dimension or to determine whether and when the “template for Jewish life” construction may be judged to have lost its hegemonic status.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that many of the authors whose work Michman et al. fault me for omitting are cited in the text. In this connection, I would like to correct one minor point. They criticize me for citing Saul Friedländer only as someone who used the (in)famous “like sheep to the slaughter” metaphor. In fact, my reference to Friedländer’s work was to his analysis of the metaphor’s prominence (note 6).

Finally, I cannot help but observe that, contrary to the other three commentators, Michman et al. advance *ad hominem* arguments. They challenge my argument’s credibility by questioning whether I have the qualifications to make it and by suggesting that what they presume to be my political opinions invalidate my empirical claims. In this, they make much of two particular assertions involving language. My sources, they say, are inappropriate because they are “quite exclusively” in English. In fact, approximately 10% of the sources I cite (as opposed to those I consulted) are in Hebrew. Translations from them are my own. Almost all of the others were already available in translation or were written originally in English. Connected to this critique is the accusation that by using the word “Holocaust” rather than “Shoah,” I reveal myself as an “outsider,” using an “outsider’s rather than an insider’s word.” What makes this extremely odd is not only that Kopstein and Patt use the two terms interchangeably (Zerubavel uses only “Holocaust”), but also that in their own comment on my article, Michman et al. use

the term “Holocaust” 34 times (excluding direct references to my usage). They use “*Shoah*” 23 times, and “*Shoah/Holocaust*” twice. “Holocaust” is also the term used in the translation of titles of works produced by the authors included in their list of references. It seems that they themselves treat the terms as interchangeable in their ordinary language, even as they seek to delegitimize my work by accusing me of not understanding their widely different “semantic and emotional implications” and of therefore failing to use them in distinctive ways.

The point is amusing, perhaps, but profound as well, for it highlights the basis of my methodology, which they also question. That method is to probe searchingly and systematically into the ways that variation, change, and stability in political culture are manifested in the habitual and “natural” uses of language, metaphor, imagery, and argument, even by elites and experts accustomed to calculating their terminology with exquisite precision.

Ian S. Lustick is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania where he holds the Bess W. Heyman Chair. Before joining the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania in 1991 he taught for 15 years at Dartmouth College. He holds a BA in Politics from Brandeis University and the Masters and PhD degrees from the University of California, Berkeley. His sole-authored books include *Arabs in the Jewish State* (1980); *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (1988, 1994); *Unsettled States Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank/Gaza* (1993); and *Trapped in the War on Terror* (2006). He has published widely in professional and public affairs journals on a wide variety of topics including Jerusalem, Israeli-Palestinian politics, US foreign policy, international politics, comparative politics, history and politics, and social science methodology. Among the journals where his articles have appeared are *American Political Science Review*, *International Organization*, *Comparative Politics*, *Journal of Israeli History*, *Middle East Journal*, *Middle East Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Polity*, and *Politics and History*. Professor Lustick has also worked as an analyst on Middle East affairs with the US State Department and is a past president and founder of the Association for Israel Studies.