

American Radical:

The Trials of Norman Finkelstein

Produced and directed by David Ridgen and Nicolas Rossier; edited by Cameron Clendaneil; cinematography by David Ridgen and Nicolas Rossier, original music by Judd Greenstein; including Norman Finkelstein, Noam Chomsky, Musa Abu-Hashhash, Avi Shlaim and Alan Dershowitz. Color, 84 min. A Typecast Distributing release, <http://typecastfilms.com>.

Few scholars have achieved the notoriety of Norman Finkelstein. Vilified by many for his harsh critique of Israel's human rights record and his contempt for those who have profited from the "Holocaust industry," Finkelstein also has been praised by others for his unflinching support for Palestinian rights, his meticulous research, and commitment to applying international law to understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Filmmakers David Ridgen and Nicolas Rossier's understated and revealing feature-length documentary, *American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finkelstein*, presents a humanizing portrait of a complex and principled individual who has all too often been demonized for his views. Rather than delve into the difficult history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the politics of the "new anti-Semitism" (recently examined in Yoav Shamir's film *Defamation*), the documentary keeps its focus sharply on Finkelstein, the committed activist and scholar. Through a combination of interviews with Finkelstein, his critics and supporters, as well as footage of his many public appearances, from Canada to Beirut, *American Radical* crafts a sympathetic profile without glossing over the polarizing effect he often has on people, even those who agree with many of his views.

Of course, other scholars have criticized Israel, including Finkelstein's friend and mentor Noam Chomsky, but very few have received the level of invective that has been used against Finkelstein. Called a "despicable self-hating Jew" and a "lunatic" because of his intemperate language and unpopular views, Finkelstein is equally harsh in his assessment of "hucksters," thieves, and gangsters he believes have profited at the expense of those who suffered the most during World War II as well as in the contemporary conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Not shy about naming names, Finkelstein has taken on some of the most well-known public supporters of Israel—from Elie Wiesel to Abe Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and Alan Dershowitz. The blogosphere is filled with rants and diatribes both in support of and denouncing Finkelstein, so this nuanced documentary comes as a welcome addition to the heated debate.

As a graduate student writing a dissertation on the history of Zionism, Finkelstein

began courting controversy by exposing shoddy scholarship in Joan Peters's best-selling book, *From Time Immemorial*, in which she uses a spurious demographic argument to dispute Palestinian claims that Jewish immigration had overwhelmed the native population. Others would also discredit her scholarship, but, as Noam Chomsky remarks in the documentary, Finkelstein's forthright critique of the book and his critical perspective on Zionism did not win him many friends in academic life. This experience set the stage for larger battles concerning academic freedom that would plague him for the rest of his career.

The documentary convincingly shows how Finkelstein's personal background, particularly his relationship with his mother, has influenced the content and the contentious style of his scholarly work. Both his parents survived the Warsaw Ghetto uprisings and knew firsthand the horrors of working as slave labor in Auschwitz and the Majdanek concentration camps. As Finkelstein recounts in an interview, while his father remained silent about much of what he had witnessed, his mother related the experiences of living through the oppression of the camps to almost every aspect of their daily lives. One of the most revealing aspects of the film is the way in which Finkelstein's working-class Jewish background and his relationship with his mother influenced not only the subjects of his later academic work but also his tone and style of expressing himself. Finkelstein speaks of his mother's hysterical ranting against the Vietnam War and other social injustices, openly admitting that the memory of his mother is one of the reasons he continues to speak out against the oppression of the Palestinians, despite the toll it has taken on his personal life and career. According to an excerpt from his unpublished political memoir (available on his Website www.normanfinkelstein.com), as a teenager, "I couldn't comprehend how people compartmentalized the carnage and

went on with business as usual: at this very moment, I thought, Vietnamese are being murdered. It was only many years later after reading Noam Chomsky that I learned it was possible to unite exacting scholarly rigor with scathing moral outrage; that an intelligent argument didn't have to be an intellectualizing one."

While viewers of the documentary may have heard of Finkelstein on the basis of his numerous publications—books such as *Image and Reality of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (1996) and *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (2000)—in recent years much attention has come from his public dispute with Alan Dershowitz and his failure to receive tenure at DePaul University in Chicago. The film includes sections of the infamous *Democracy Now* debate where Finkelstein skewers a squirming Alan Dershowitz for "concocting a fraud" in his book, *The Case for Israel*. While Dershowitz appears to have lost the televised face-off, his retaliation against Finkelstein's accusations of inaccuracies and apologies for Israeli human rights abuses (later documented and published in Finkelstein's *Beyond Chutzpah: The Abuses and Misuse of Anti-Semitism*) and his participation in the organized campaign to influence the DePaul tenure decision, in particular, seemed designed to settle the score.

In the documentary, Finkelstein comes across as far more introspective and emotionally open than readers might assume from his aggressive and sometimes arrogant public persona. He's visibly moved in speaking not only of his mother and familial memories but also of the plight of his Palestinian friends who must live under the brutality of occupation. As the film reveals, the many sides of Finkelstein need to be considered, especially for those eager to discredit his passionate involvement in his scholarship. Is the emphasis on the personal too much, as some critics of the film have argued? Even Finkelstein believes that his



Norman Finkelstein (center) accuses Alan Dershowitz of plagiarism in his book, *A Case for Israel*, during a *Democracy Now!* broadcast, in *American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finkelstein*.



Author and activist Norman Finkelstein speaks to a student at one of his college-speaking appearances in the feature documentary, *American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finkelstein*.

identity issues as a Jew should not color the veracity of his claims. Still, they give an important context for understanding his motivations for doggedly pursuing the truth regardless of the consequences.

The documentary follows Finkelstein on a Canadian speaking tour where he is greeted by both ardent supporters and hostile critics. At the University of Waterloo, he seems surprisingly dispassionate, even when angry demonstrators disrupt his talk. It's only when a young woman breaks down in tears, upset by his equating Israeli with Nazi behavior, that we get a sense of the tone that has enraged so many of his critics. Rather than try to appease the student, he launches into a shrill tirade and berates her for shedding "crocodile tears" over his remarks. His indignation escalates as he plays the "Holocaust card" to recount the story of his parents and the losses they suffered at the hands of the Germans. Ending with Finkelstein's proclamation that "there's nothing more despicable than to use the torture of Holocaust victims to justify the treatment of Palestinians," the scene is uncomfortable to watch but gives a feeling for the emotional exchanges and withering criticism his intellectual opponents have faced.

Although the film project began before the events surrounding Finkelstein's tenure bid and its denial at DePaul, that controversy provides the focal point for *American Radical's* examination of his controversial positions. The facts of the case are now widely known. After demotion and a pay cut from his nontenured position at Hunter College in New York, Finkelstein took an assistant professorship in the Political Science Department at DePaul. In 2007, after teaching and publishing widely for six years, the department voted nine to three in support of his tenure application. He also received the full support of the College Liberal Arts promotion committee. During the tenure evaluation period, Alan Dershowitz, with some others, orchestrated a smear campaign, circulating a file of critical letters

that accused Finkelstein of violating academic standards through ad hominem attacks rather than scholarly proof in registering opposition to other views. The three department members who voted against him distributed a dissenting opinion with which the Dean and University Board on Promotion and Tenure agreed, thus overturning the tenure recommendation. Despite considerable student protest and an international outcry, Finkelstein was forced to resign, although not without receiving (and distributing) a letter from the DePaul Administration citing him as "a prolific scholar and an outstanding teacher."

To many in the academic community, the case was not only a personal tragedy for Finkelstein but also a chilling reminder of the power of the Israel Lobby and a flagrant violation of the principles of academic freedom. Even critics of Finkelstein's views recognize that, in spite of the aggressive language he often uses in his works, his right to hold unpopular opinions supported by responsible research is precisely what academic freedom is meant to protect. Although Finkelstein's international reputation assures him access to publication and speaking engagements, the loss of the "scholarly haven" of a stable academic appointment was devastating, as the film makes evident. Ironically, according to Neve Gordon, Lecturer in Politics at Ben Gurion University, in Israel Finkelstein most likely would have been tenured. It's only in the U.S., with the increasing corporatization of universities and the strength of the American-led Israel Lobby, that his fate was sealed.

Filmmakers David Ridgen and Nicolas Rossier are accomplished political documentarians whose previous work (Ridgen's *Mississippi Cold Case* and Rossier's *The End of Aristide*) has dealt with sensitive and complex issues. According to promotional materials for *American Radical*, their first collaboration, they were not intending to make a propaganda piece for Finkelstein but instead wanted to make a film that would

prompt audiences to make up their own minds. While this may be slightly disingenuous, the inclusion of critical commentary from Dershowitz and others ensures that the documentary is not a simple puff piece. That said, however, the film could be strengthened by the use of footage showing the conditions in the occupied territories or referencing the most recent attacks, beginning in 2008 in Gaza, known as Operation Cast Lead, providing viewers with a stronger context for understanding Finkelstein's outrage. It would also have been useful for the film to include a more thorough discussion of the accuracy of Finkelstein's scholarship by those supporters included in the film, such as Chomsky or the eminent Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, especially since that scholarship has come under such severe criticism.

American Radical joins a group of recent documentaries about leftist figures with strong moral positions and whose controversial views or actions were later vindicated in whole or in part. (These films include Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith's *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* and Emily and Sarah Kunstler's film about their father, *William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe*). Perhaps Norman Finkelstein's positions on Israel and Palestine also will gain wider acceptance with the passage of time, or at least will not be so easily dismissed. In the meantime, *American Radical* deserves to be seen widely as a fascinating introduction to the man and his views.—Susan Ryan

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