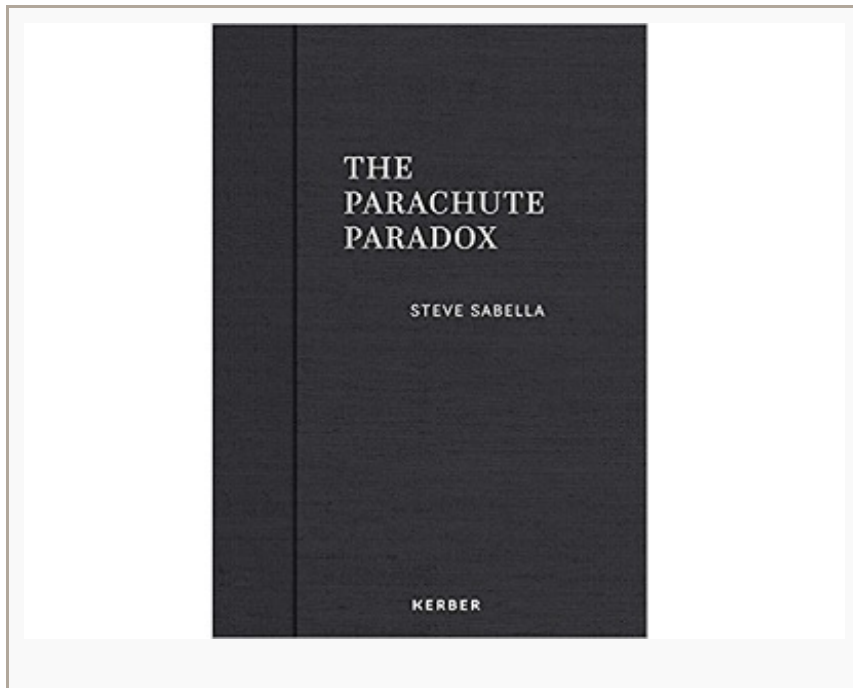


# The Parachute Paradox – A Book Review

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## Reviewed by Rod Such

(Steven Sabella. *The Parachute Paradox*. Kerber.)

If you were asked to conjure up an image that depicts the situation of the Palestinians, what would it be? A graphic image of an Israeli boot on a Palestinian neck, perhaps? The Palestinian artist and journalist Steve Sabella, known internationally for his photography-based collages and images, has personally experienced an Israeli boot on his face. But the image he conjures up in his brilliant memoir, *The Parachute Paradox*, is of a tandem parachute jump with an Israeli strapped to his back. Why this particular image?

Sabella explains that he sees it as a “metaphor for what it means to be a Palestinian living under Israeli occupation. Life under occupation is like the reality of a Palestinian attached to an Israeli in a tandem jump. There is an Israeli on the back of every Palestinian, controlling all aspects of life – the Israeli is always in control. This impossible reality places the Palestinian under constant threat in a never-ending hostage situation.”

How to liberate himself from this situation is at the heart of Sabella’s memoir, which might be better described as a journey of discovery, both of his own personal effort to free himself from the occupation and the collective Palestinian struggle for freedom. The reader who accompanies Sabella on this journey is rewarded with insights that only the Palestinian experience can convey.

A native of Jerusalem who is now living in exile in Berlin, Germany, Sabella’s journey of discovery includes the realization that it is impossible for Palestinians to escape the occupation, no matter where they live. That is because the imagination itself becomes colonized.

“Even as a twelve-year old,” he writes, “I was aware that I belonged to a country that was not a country, but a land occupied by Israel called Palestine. I could see for the first time the enormous effort needed to break free from the physical military occupation, and more importantly, from the Israeli colonization of my imagination.”

After the failure of the Second Intifada, Sabella observes, “Palestinians plunged into a deeper psychological defeat, into a state of numbness toward life under Israeli occupation. Palestinians reached a point where they

were no longer able to imagine that they could live in freedom. The colonization on Palestinian land was obvious, but what was hidden was the colonization of the imagination.” The occupation “starts with the land and then shifts to the mind,” he writes, noting that this phenomenon occurs even with “Palestinians born in the diaspora who live as if they are under occupation despite never having set foot in occupied Palestine.”

What accounts for the long arm of the Israeli occupation that it reaches even into the diaspora? Sabella suggests that its origin lies partially in the images the media convey of the “defeated Palestinian”.

As a photojournalist for a United Nations publication and as a Jerusalem resident, Sabella was allowed a certain amount of freedom of movement not permitted other Palestinians. On assignment in Gaza, he meets with mental health experts who describe the repercussions from the traumas Israel has inflicted on the people there, the chief one being the internalizing of the defeat and the self-blame and self-hate that often results, culminating in the feeling that the Israelis are “better than us.”

In a remarkable development, Sabella is mistaken for a foreigner and is kidnapped by a faction in Gaza at odds with the Palestinian Authority. He and another journalist are held as ransom for the release of one of the leaders of a family clan. During their captivity, one of his kidnappers confesses to the despair he feels over the Palestinian situation. As Sabella describes it, “But then his shoulders slumped and in a voice filled with self-pity, he said: ‘We are shit. We deserve everything that’s happening to us. The Jews are just better than us.’”

How to counter these images of defeat became a central objective of Sabella’s own artistry. He invests his art with the goal of liberating the imagination from colonization. One of his most striking artistic endeavors results from the experience of seeing Palestinians forced by Israel soldiers to take off their clothes at checkpoints or at random encounters. “After stripping,” he notes, “Palestinians were told to turn around slowly with their arms spread wide open, like in a penguin dance, making them visible from both sides. Many incidents were caught on video by news agencies, which then transmitted the image of defeated Palestinians around the world.”

So Sabella imagines a photographic art project in which Israelis will strip in front of a Palestinian. Studying abroad in London at the time, he approaches Israeli students and acquaintances to get their cooperation with the project, which he calls *Settlement*. Part of the motive is to initiate a work of art led by a Palestinian, in contrast to what frequently happens when Palestinian artists are exhibited and curators bow to Zionist pressure and allow the exhibit to proceed only if Israeli artwork is also shown. These joint Israeli-Palestinian exhibits, Sabella finds, often come across as “artificial, lacking substance, generating cheap texts, embracing fake coexistence.”

Most of the Israelis he approaches agree to participate in the photo-shoot, one refuses, and one raises questions, such as why are there six Israelis and only one Palestinian. Why not six Israelis and six Palestinians, he asks. Sabella answers: “I’m not looking for a stand-off, a shootout, or to present two equal sides. The conflict was never equal, and yet it’s always reported that way. As long as the occupation continues, the Palestinians will resist till the end, till the last man standing.”

Despite the initial objection, the Israeli agrees to participate, as does another who confesses that he is still guilt-ridden about his actions as a soldier in the West Bank. Sabella observes, “Deep down he also wanted a way out, a settlement to free himself from the label of occupier – a label he couldn’t escape either.”

These passages occur toward the end of the memoir. By the time the reader reaches this point in *The Parachute Paradox*, it is not hard to understand how Sabella managed to win their cooperation, how he managed “to strip down six Israelis.”

*The Parachute Paradox* is the work of not only a remarkable artist but also an exceptional writer. Although English is not his native language, his sentences often leap from the page, like this one, “This book is not about death, yet living in Palestine is.” Having also mastered Hebrew, Sabella is routinely mistaken for an Israeli Jew, his name sounding like someone from Italy, although it is not an unusual name for a Palestinian Christian. As an “invisible Palestinian,” Sabella heard how Israelis viewed Palestinians without wearing the masks they might otherwise put on in conversation with a Palestinian.

His reportorial skills are also apparent, as in his accounts of the siege and assaults on Gaza and an Israeli raid in

2002 on the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem where militants had taken refuge. Interviewing one of the survivors who was trapped in his home for 35 hours and watched his mother and brother die in front of him, Sabella reports, "He showed me the piece of his mother's skull that he kept on top of his TV. It took me a long time to forget this story. And yet, I can still find it in the pages of my memory."

The reader of *The Parachute Paradox* is warned early on that this will also be the account of someone who suffers from "paralyzing depression." The book begins with an adolescent Sabella contemplating suicide in Jerusalem and ends with a mature Sabella contemplating the same in Berlin. Initially, the memoir doesn't seem so bleak because of his engaging accounts of falling in love with his wife, Francesca, and the inventive ways he romanced her. But while studying in London he describes days in which he remained in bed, unable to move.

Thankfully, this memoir is a journey that ends with an epiphany. Sabella finds a way to liberate his imagination and "live free," while still remaining committed to liberating Palestine. As to how Palestinians will get there, he writes, "I leave it to our collective imagination."

Collective memory, he suggests may be one way to get there. "History has proven that peace on colonized land starts when the colonizer publicly acknowledges what it has done." Accordingly, he suggests:

"Israel should apologize for every tree they cut down, every village they erased. For expelling natives from their homes, and their land. For settling in Palestinians' homes and stealing their property. Israel should apologize for the millions of refugees it created, and for not allowing the vast majority to ever set foot on their land again. Israel should apologize for trying to erase Palestinian culture, for fragmenting Palestinian society, for injecting fear into Palestinians and Israelis. For fabricating history. Israel should apologize for twisting international law, for forcing millions to live in open-air prisons, for using Gaza as a battlefield and testing ground for modern weaponry. For degrading Palestinian life. Israel should apologize for all the people, including children, it has killed. For murdering their dreams."

No matter how much we all seek individual freedom, all of us in the end are prisoners, prisoners of history. Freedom is recognizing what we need to do with the limited time we have.

– Rod Such is a former editor for *Encarta* and *World Book* encyclopedias. He lives in Portland, Oregon, and is active with *Occupation-Free Portland*. He contributed this article to *PalestineChronicle.com*.