

Editorial: Inequalities: Fate or State?

This issue opens the second volume of "Hagar: International Social Science Review". We enter our second year with satisfaction from the quality of the issues produced in the first volume, which were well received by the scholarly community. However, much work remains in defining and sustaining the interdisciplinary, critical, academic niche, we hope to create for this journal.

But the critical niche of the journal is also concerned with life beyond the confines of academia. This brings us to the current atmosphere in Israel/Palestine, still thick with anger, hostility and violent ethnic conflict. A new right-wing government headed by Ariel Sharon was elected in Israel in February 2001. It has since maintained Israel's heavy-handed military reaction to the Palestinian uprising, while deepening the occupation of the Palestinian Territories.

Without entering the political debate about the future of these territories, we can note that the current round of hostilities demonstrates a persisting and deep *inequality* between Palestinian-Arabs and Israeli-Jews in Israel/Palestine. It has sharpened the already wide gaps between the two communities in political and military power, economic standards and national identities. The inequality between the relatively developed state of Israel and the economically depressed, partially ruined, Palestinian localities is, today, starker than ever.

The heart of this issue of "Hagar" is devoted to inequality. The main section of which presents a scholarly debate around a conceptual piece by Charles Tilly. Tilly presents an abstract model of persisting human inequalities, based on deeply ingrained stratifying mechanisms such as 'queues' and 'conversations'. Tilly's model is an articulate, yet sober, abstraction of the structural inevitability of personal and collective equality in human society.

The responses to Tilly's provocative account came from various scholarly and geographical directions. Immanuel Wallerstein, a political scientist, Jeff Frieden, an economist, and Ilan Talmud, a sociologist, principally accord with Tilly's structural account, while offering adjustments and additional insights. The three place greater emphasis on economic dynamics and institutions, which shape markets and flows of resources according to specific (unequal) sets of logics. The process of globalization, with the associated retreat of the welfare state and conventional politics are also discussed as additional 'bricks' in the structural wall of human inequality.

David Smith, a geographer, also in broad agreement, regarding the durability of inequalities, pays greater attention to an aspect largely overlooked by Tilly: the geography of human disparities. This illuminates the central role of place and identity, underplayed by Tilly, and offers some rethinking about the inevitability of a deeply stratified society.

This scholarly debate links up with the story of Hagar/Hajr which shows that during ancient times, as today, inequalities were deeply inscribed and performed, but, at times, also challenged and breached. Similar to the perspective taken by Smith, the ancient stories of Hagar, the Egyptian maid, are replete with references to *identities and places* as major foundations of the logic-driving and legitimizing inequalities. The passage below, from Genesis 16 (3-10), highlights the unequal power structure between Sarah and Hagar. The asymmetry is challenged, with Hagar's bearings of Abraham's first child, but is later reasserted, when Sarah, a member of the dominant family/ethnicity, drives Hagar away into the desert.

After Abram had dwelt for ten years in the land of Canaan... Sarai... gave Hagar unto her husband Abram to be his wife... and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived her mistress was despised in her eyes... And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her face...

Islamic texts differ on the exact origins of Hagar/Hajr. Some claim she was a Coptic slave-girl, while others claim she was the daughter of a Pharaoh!¹ But the clear power relations in the family are still clearly presented by the *Hadith*, which tells us about Ibrahim, in accord with Sarah, who dispose of Hagar at will. For example, according to Islamic texts, when Ibrahim decides to leave Hajr in Mecca, she asks him: "O Ibrahim, to whom are you entrusting us?"; and he simply replies: "To God".²

God's impact on power relations and inequality, however, is not only a theme of sacred religious texts, but also a bone of contention in today's mass politics. In the next article of the publication in your hand, Yasim Arat shows well how religious matters, such as the wearing of the Islamic veil (mandil) feature in contemporary Turkish debates. Arat analyses the political struggle over the wearing of the mandil in public schools. She makes a strong case for allowing the mandil, using the theoretical foundations of liberal-democratic theory.

Religion, identity and inequality are never far from the surface in an analysis of the other two articles in the issue. Ella Shohat presents a powerful account of the construction of cultural inequalities between Mizrahi ('Eastern') and Ashkenazi ('Western') Jews in Israel. Shohat demonstrates how the state's creation of a Zionist collective memory, history and present have ruptured and marginalized the continuity of Mizrahi identity. Shohat is also interested in constructing new 'ways of knowing' as a basis for arriving at counter-narratives to the dominant

¹ Tha'labi *Oisas*, 69-70

² al-Tabari, *History of al-Tabari*, Vol. 2, p. 70.

Israeli-Western-Ashkenazi construction, and brings forth the stimulating idea of a 'Mizrahi epistemology'.

In the last article, Emanuel Ottolenghi traces the evolution in the approach taken by Israel's Supreme Court towards the issue of torture. Ottolenghi illustrates well the various pressures on the court, and its necessity to constantly maneuver between political exigencies and the principles of justice. The shifting powers of these orientations, according to Ottolenghi, lie behind the recent groundbreaking decision to disallow torture in Israeli jails.

The issue continues to deal with the evolving, difficult, circumstances of Israel/Palestine in the three following pieces. In our "Open Space – Perspectives" section, Luise Bethlehem weaves a reflective piece, where scenes from her own South African past intermingle with events from the current Palestinian intifada, and with observations on the nature of knowledge, body and theory.

Two in-depth reviews shed further light on some unexplored aspects of Israeli society. First, Nurit Alfasi describes and analyzes a recent exhibition on the "Israeli Project", which portrayed the massive construction of Israeli housing, towns and settlements, mainly during the state's first two decades. Alfasi explores the difficulties, contradictions and inequalities embedded in the continuous attempts of modern Israeli planners to fully control the built environment, and touches on the implications of housing the masses of Jewish immigrants who poured into the country during that period. Yossi Yonah takes us to tensions within Israeli identity, by reviewing two recent movies that paint a different picture of traditional Zionist narratives. The two movies account for the 'underside', mundane and troublesome aspects of being an Israeli Jew, either when fighting a bloody (and perhaps unnecessary) war, or by living on the social and geographical margins of the Tel Aviv metropolis.

The topics of the papers, as well as the events engulfing us these days, are constant reminders of the centrality of inequality and conflict in human affairs. They also remind us, however, that unlike biblical times, we cannot simply accept them as God's will, but understand the ways in which they are constructed, reproduced, and challenged. I hope this issue of "Hagar" will give the reader new materials and insights with which to fathom and encounter this reality.

Oren Yiftachel,
Beer-Sheva, May 2001.