

Jewries at the Frontier: Accommodation, Identity, Conflict.

By Sander L. Gilman, and Milton Shain (eds.), Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999. pp. 401.

Reviewed by: ANDRÉ LEVY

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel

In the opening article of this edited volume, Sander Gilman contends that he aims to undermine the polar conceptualization "center" (or "homeland") and "periphery" (or "diasporas"), that have often been used to analyze Jewish identity and Jewish existence throughout history. In this programmatic article Gilman sets the tone, or delineates the common dominator, for the eighteen contributions that comprise this volume, the outcome of a conference held in Cape Town, South Africa in 1996.

According to Gilman, this misleading yet potent dichotomy has had various manifestations and was constituted and reconstituted by a variety of cultural products and political events throughout the histories of the Jews. Lately, the establishment of the modern Israeli nation-state in 1948 and its very existence since then has imposed a strong political meaning onto these terms; Israel's presence as a real *state* and not only an idealized promised land was intimately felt by the Jewish communities outside of Israel. Gilman therefore claims that the homeland/diaspora pair is limiting both politically and intellectually through the claims it exerts. This dichotomy necessarily situates most Jewries on the margins, or even as "pariahs" in their "host" societies, while simultaneously representing the history of the Center, or more likely the writing of its historiography, in Edenic terms. Such Zionist historiography, he explains, follows traditional rabbinical thought that interprets life outside the Holy Land as the result of sins committed by the tribes of Israel. Accordingly, the catastrophe of the holocaust is read as an unavoidable result of European xenophobia and the establishment of modern Israel as its remedy. Gilman objects to this perspective since it morally condemns all Jewish existence that is located outside the flow of history in Israel: "It is the imagined center which defines me as being on the periphery" he complains (p. 1).

"The center/periphery model" Gilman writes, "is in truth a symbolic structure of the understanding of the impossibility of a Diasporic life within this model of center and periphery. Such a definition demands the existence of a "real" center and thus defines the Jews in terms of their relationships to that center" (p. 5). No wonder then, that he proposes a different conceptualization that would liberate "peripheral" Jewish communities from the darkening shade of Israel as the ultimate Center. Gilman's remedy lies in the postmodern concept of

the frontier. His “frontier” is not a concrete space, but a “structure of communal fantasy, [as] a model of imagining oneself in the world” (pp. 13-14). Gilman chooses this image of the frontier rather than the border, because the latter implies a line of demarcation that distinguishes between (at least) two well-defined constructed identities, whereas the concept of the frontier implies an identity that is constantly within the realm of or in a space of contestation. Gilman alerts us, however, not to be too romantic about frontiers because they risk turning into places of human catastrophes. They might develop into spaces of great massacres or zones of cruel battles. But he does not elaborate on why this might occur. Is it because of the threat of novelty? Is it because on every frontier there stands the Other?

Gilman’s introductory article sets the theoretical tone for the volume. He and Milton Shain invited contributors from a variety of disciplines (social sciences, history and literature), to produce a multiple reading of Jewish existence through a variety of histories and from a wide range of places around the globe. Yet, several meaningful (demographically, at least) groups of Jews are blatantly absent or treated *en passant* in this volume. I refer mainly to Asian Jews who are virtually ignored and to the North African Jewish communities that are hardly represented. The latter are mentioned only in an article that analyzes Albert Memmi’s largely autobiographical book: *La Statue de Sel* (The Pillar of Salt: New York: Criterion, 1955). In his book, Memmi articulates what later on became known or labeled as a “post-colonial theory”. He presents the painful dilemma of subjugated Tunisian Jews who realized that in order to free themselves from their inferior religio-legal Muslim status of *dhimmis* they must embrace the French colonial regime. Yet, this “betrayal” leads neither to incorporation nor assimilation into French culture for the colonial regime rejected Jews as inferior. According to Grunebaum-Ralph, Memmi’s articulations of this dilemma of identity here (as well as in his other texts) is in fact the interrogation of the ways in which “these boundaries are historically constituted” (p. 291). In that sense, Memmi (like Frantz Fanon) was ahead of his time.

Neglecting the Jews of Asia and North Africa, who became known in Israel and consequently elsewhere as “Mizrahim” (here indeed, Israel might turn into being a powerful symbolic and political center that affects Jews outside it), is intriguing for it is not coincidental and highly indicative. In his programmatic analysis, while criticizing the center/periphery model Gilman unintentionally discloses the limits of his own horizons. He claims that: “What is striking in understanding the complexity of this model is that one marker seems to be central to its articulation and that is language—whether it is Hebrew (as the center) and the false, base Diasporic languages of the Jews, or Yiddish (as the center) and the false lapse into languages of acculturation or assimilation, or German/Magyar/English (as the center) and the peripheral and false languages of victimhood (Yiddish/German), our center/periphery is always articulated in terms of the struggle for language” (p. 6). One does not need to employ

sophisticated tools of critical textual reading in order to note the political demarcation of Judaism with its inclusions and exclusions. By limiting his linguistic frontiers to Yiddish, all of Judaism is condensed into that with Ashkenazi culture or origins.

Having said that, let us explore which groups *are* represented as Jewries at the frontier. For obvious reasons South African Jews are over-represented in the volume; six papers are dedicated to their contemporary situation (one of which compares South African Jews with those of North America). Three chapters deal with Australian Jews, two with Jews in the United State (one with Alaska and the other with Texas) and one each with Brazil, China, Tunisia (or, perhaps, North Africa) and Quebec in Canada. Yet, the largest concentrations of Jews including New York City, the former Soviet Union (Russia and the Ukraine), France and yes – Israel, are overlooked. Ignoring the Jewish concentration in Israel is particularly surprising as it defeats the purpose of the argument against the organization of Jewries into homeland and diasporas. The inclusion of Jews in Israel as yet another community on the frontier could strongly support Gilman's critique.

The variety of the Jewries represented risks exoticification of at least some of the communities. Treating them as exotica misses Gilman's point that the frontier is a constructed concept. This problem comes to the fore with particular force in Reisman's work on Alaskan Jews, which was lured perhaps by the exoticism of the "Last Frontier" (Alaska's motto). His article reminded me of the joke about an American Jewish soldier who was in China during the Second World War. He came upon a group of Chinese men praying in Hebrew. The soldier introduced himself to the cantor, "I am a Jew too," he announced. The cantor responded in an astonished manner, "Funny, you don't look Jewish!" I felt exactly that same exotic estrangement while reading about Alaskan Jews. For Reisman the frontier settlement or community indicates a natural or physical space that has four very clear "criteria": distance from settled sections, few people, limited services, and limited family networks resulting from the distance. This naturalistic position, however, is antithetical to the tone that Gilman's introductory essay sought to establish.

Gilman's strong refusal to accept the diaspora-homeland concept is somewhat misleading for it assumes a powerful dominance of the supposed "Center" that I doubt was ever there. Surely, it is not the case nowadays. In order to convince us of his premise, Gilman erects a straw-man by over-attributing gravity to the inscribed writings at the entrance to Beit Hatfutsot, The Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv. "Remember where you stand. Only the Land around you is real...". Popular notions, as well as academic and artistic works, do not accept such a perspective. A significant number of Israel's social scientists have transcended the "ingathering of exile" stage that examined socio-cultural developments among the Jewries of the world through parochial lenses. Long gone are the days when the term "*yordim*" (those who descend) was the appropriate designation for émigrés from Israel.