

Book reviews

Pnina Motzafi-Haller, *In the Cement Boxes: Mizrahi Women in the Israeli Periphery* (The Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2012), 262 pp. (Hebrew).

In her book, “In the Cement Boxes: Mizrahi Women in the Israeli Periphery” (2012), Pnina Motzafi-Haller seeks to learn what life looks like for women and men of the southern town of Yerhuham when they are positioned in the centre and not the periphery, and when they determine the discourse and define their life in their own terms and language. Her inquiry departs from the periphery to ask: What happens in a reality of multiple marginality - of a cement box - where the dynamics of gender, ethnicity and class limit social mobility? How do institutional and structural constraints affect the individual’s ability to act? How do people, restrained by those conditions, experience, perceive and manage their lives? By widening the concept of class beyond its materialist and economic characteristics, to include the personal and cultural effects on individuals in their different positions - a theoretical framework referred to as “the new sociology of class analysis” - the researcher avoids the imposition of concepts a priori. Rather, the researcher examines the simultaneous construction of social, ethnic, classed, gendered, religious and spatial positionalities within a system of social hierarchy.

This anthropological research that underpins the book was conducted across the period of a four year long intensive field work, during which the author noted down the life stories of almost fifty women and men and interviewed central figures in the town. She participated in public events and private celebrations, and joined her participants in their daily activities. Of all the participants, the author chose five women whose lives she portrays in great detail. The five were selected because of their creativity, warmth and perseverance, as well as the different structural choices that belie their way of manoeuvring their lives under conditions of restriction and marginality.

In addition to the introduction and concluding chapters, the book comprises seven chapters in which the author depicts the conversations and presents the participants’ own texts: her interpretation of the participant, the participant’s of her in return: and the participant’s perception of oneself and the author’s thoughts of herself and her partial realisations. It’s a writing strategy where the author does not speak in the name of the participants yet delicately but genuinely unmasks and confronts the power

relations embedded in the research situation. This attitude recognises the author's positionality as both an insider and outsider who continuously asks questions about the reality that she is constructing.

The author opens the book with the story of Nurit, who challenges most the stereotypical depiction and shallow public discourse about Mizrahi women. On the surface, Nurit is a poor single mother dependent on welfare benefits, and was married to a drug addict. However, her story reveals a generous, compassionate, complex and responsible woman determined to overcome the trap of marginality and poverty to provide better living conditions for her children. Her resistance to being labelled a "victim" or "failure" is vividly demonstrated in the Bar-Mitzva event, which she carefully planned for years and through which she successfully established her status as a valuable woman in the community.

The following chapter tells the story of Efrat, and centres on her strengthening belief through which she attempts to reconstruct the power relations within the family, establish a certain familial lifestyle and make her secular husband adopt religious practices. The similar processes that her daughters are going through reveal much the gendered aspect of the issue, where women use religious processes to make changes within the private and public domains. This, for example is the story of Vered, Efrat's daughter, who agrees to join her husband and migrate to the USA only after he promises to observe the commandments associated with Shabbat. The journey of Efrat and her daughters is a process of empowerment; one that is not restricted to different religious acts but of an internal transformation. It is a change in one's world view and priorities, such as the preference to invest in the children's education than follow useless consumption habits. Bearing in mind the low socio-economic status of the family, these changes enable the family exit the cycle of poverty and move towards a social and economic mobility, and is considered by the author to be the most successful strategy in this respect.

The third and fourth chapters are dedicated to Rachel, whose story manifests the structural obstacles that prevent women from attaining a life of stable income and independence. However, Rachel's sweeping intelligence and charisma, organisational skills and independent thinking, charm and creativity enable her to participate in social activism and find a job in a jobless town. Her success at becoming economically independent was also possible due to her ability to move between two different social, cultural and discursive frames, and to speak the language of those in power; a matter that proves how marginalised and centred discourses and lives are not disconnected. However, it is also shown that this juggling has clear the boundaries of a materialist economy, of distance and exclusion.

The fifth and sixth chapters centre on Esti, who provides a fascinating subversive interpretation of reality and challenges in original fashion the state system and local

traditional discourse concerning the meaning of the good life. Esti refuses to marry, raise a family and commit to a job that does not secure a decent income. However, despite her rebelliousness, Esti deals with a severe material want and social isolation. She bravely resists and tries to redefine this, but is repeatedly confronted with a recurring experience of unemployment, which sets limits to her actions. Esti shows that the failure to find a job is not personal but systemic, which explains the lack of development and the choice of the strong to leave town. Nevertheless, as she tries to discipline the factors affecting her life like debt, unemployment and gambling and give them a new meaning, she develops an alternative frame of self esteem; one that is built on social connections centring around weekly gambling sessions where she exerts power and authority. After all, despite the scarcity of jobs, Yeruham gives her a sense of belonging and security; a place where one can manage a life based on social connections, where people can lean on family members in times of need and buy and pay later.

Chapter seven centres on Gila, who succeeds in overcoming the force of marginality and exclusion, but whose story also exposes her painful struggle and complex relation to her hometown. The failure of the town to keep its successful and talented inhabitants keeps it wretched, poor and helpless. The experiences she goes through during the day she spends with the author and with Esti confront her with childhood memories and her ambivalent feelings towards the failing town and its people, and cause her an emotional distress. This state of power and vulnerability characterise the state of Gila and the author – who is originally from Migdal Ha'emek – and is common to those who leave their native town. As academic Mizrahi feminist women born and raised in so-called development towns, they both share disconcerting feelings towards the town and the people, and have paid the price of estrangement and of the painful process towards feeling proud again of their past and heritage.

These fragile and partial stories are powerful and humane but their significance, the author concludes, also lies in their meaningful social insights. The autonomous explanations that the people provide about their conditions constitute a social analysis that has the power to mobilise. Therefore, it is knowledge that should be presented next to its academic counterpart. For example, the detail and analysis that the women provide about the bureaucratic welfare system shows their struggle against the state systems and expose the institutional dynamics that create and perpetuate dependence. The “failure” to exit the state of poverty and dependence cycle is thus not caused by passivity or unwillingness to work. It is also shown that poverty should not to be measured by the level of income; it is part of a whole array of emotional feelings and social conditions of scarcity. Therefore, they exhibit knowledge that connects material want with the emotional state of poverty, longing for social recognition and fear from isolation.

This book fulfils its promise and achieves the goals it sets for itself. The reader is able to hear the voice of the participants and appreciate the author's effort to provide a multi-dimensional, complex, humble, sensitive and less deterministic understanding of the town and its people. Indeed, the author opens a window through which she pulls the reader into the participants' struggles, their ways to cope with marginality, and their attempts to give meaning to their lives. The author succeeds in developing an alternative framework of thinking and writing which provides a different kind of knowledge on the social reality; a model that does not determine facts but prompts the reader to think about social and cultural processes in Israel as she hoped to establish.

Lilian Abou-Tabickh

University of Toronto

Liat Kulik and Varda Muhlbauer (Eds.). *Working Families – Parents in the Israeli Workplace: Social, Economic and Legal Aspects* (Peles Publishing, The College of Management Economic Studies, Rishon Letzion, 2010), 306 pp.

The collection of articles in the book "Working Families" deals with the familiar issue of combining work and family, but offers an interesting perspective both in the choice of its focus and its multi-dimensionalism. Since the family is the unit influenced by and dealing with this concern, the book places family at the centre of the discussion, rather than concentrating on parts of the family like working mothers. The choice of the family unit is in itself a gender critique, which points to the fact that this issue is shared by both genders and affects the family as a whole. The editors of the book share their difficulties with editorial decisions with the reader, and point out that during the editorial process they realised that the gender aspects and the family aspects of this issue cannot be separated either conceptually or practically.

On reading the book, this dilemma is very understandable but their success in focusing their study without ignoring the existence of additional complex points of view is clearly apparent. In other words: they deal with the family whilst constantly interweaving the gender implications, finally returning to action on behalf of the family both at the level of thought process and the level of social policy.

The book's ten chapters present a wide variety of subjects relevant to understanding the components which influence working families, and the problems connected with the combination of working and having a family. These are taken from the