

REVIEW ESSAYS

Recent Books on Israel, Palestine and Palestinians in Israel

Israel: The Rise and Transformation of a Settler Society

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Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship

By Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002. 397 pp.

The Invention and Decline of Israeliness

By Baruch Kimmerling. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2001. 269 pp.

Mizrahim Be'Israel: E'yun Bikorti Mechudash. [Mizrahim in Israel: A Critical Observation into Israel's Ethnicity].

Edited by Hannan Hever, Yehouda Shenhav and Pnina Motzafi-Haller. Tel-Aviv: Van-Leer Institute/Hakibbutz Hameuchad. 2002. 328 pp. [Hebrew].

What does it mean to be an Israeli these days? What are the qualities, which signifies Israeliness, and how and from where is Israeliness constructed, reproduced and changed? Had I written this review thirty years ago upon my immigration to Israel, a few months before the 1973 war, the answers to these questions would have been clear. Being Israeli was then conceived in terms of the collective identity represented by Zionism, and Israel was an island of western progress and rationality in the Middle East that had succeeded, against all odds, in managing an existential conflict against its enemies while pursuing its state-building mission: the absorption of immigrants by modernizing and transforming them into Israelis.

The books reviewed here offer a critical analysis of this self-complacent image. Instead of celebrating the achievements of the Israeli state and its nation building, or lamenting the different groups that have put multiple pressures on Israel's central institutions, they focus on the ways in which the processes of state and nation building constitute a complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, homogenization and differentiation resulting in a highly stratified society. Each volume, in its own way, presents this stratified society as the unstable foundation from which would emerge diverse collective identities that would eventually challenge and radicalize the very terms of what being Israeli means.

Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled's *Being Israeli: the Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship*, and Baruch Kimmerling's *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness* are comprehensive socio-historical analyses of the origins, development and transformation of the Israeli polity. Each presents a thorough picture of the processes of state and nation building beginning with the emergence of Zionism in the last half of the nineteenth century. Shafir and Peled's text centers on the emergence, development and transformation of the citizenship regime, while Kimmerling's examines the political culture of Israel. In contrast, Hever, et al's edited collection problematizes extant constructions of ethnicity in Israel by analyzing what they call Mizrahiut¹ and Mizrahim. This twelve-chapter collection seeks to open a new theoretical space from which an alternative perspective on collective identities can be developed. (Pp. 9) Yet, the book is not only about ethnicity, but also about Israeli nationalism and the ways in which it simultaneously included Jews originating from Muslim countries into the nation and marginalized them.

Although each book promotes a different theoretical agenda, all three share some fundamental assumptions about Israel. First, none claims that Israel is a unique case, and all of them place it within the context of colonial settler societies. Second, instead of externalizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and turning it into a factor exogenous to society, each book traces the ways in which that conflict was incorporated into society and shaped its institutions and cultural practices. Third, each volume questions the construct of Israel as a "Jewish and democratic state." In so doing, the authors not only problematize what has come to be employed almost like a mantra, but also disclose how this 'naturalized' construction created a sharp divide between Jews and Palestinians, which was consequently mobilized to de-Arabize the Jews of Muslim countries and marginalize the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Shafir and Peled set themselves the task of probing how

...three partly contradictory political goals and commitments
... colonialism, ethno-nationalism and democracy have
presupposed and built on one another [so that] Israel's
history is the history of the pursuit of these contradictory
goals and their evolution in relation to one another and to
outside forces with which the Zionist movement and Israeli
society had to contend. (Pp.2)

Peled and Shafir present this pursuit through an analysis of the citizenship regime of Israel and the multiple discourses constituting and legitimizing it. Their analysis centers on how social categories have been incorporated into the central institutions of society. For them, citizenship is a stratifying

¹ Mizrahiut awkwardly translates as "Orientalness," the cultural orientations attributed to Jews whose origins are in the Middle East and North Africa.

principle and a major factor in shaping the life chances and opportunities of groups differentially incorporated into the institutional complex established by Labor Zionism. Emphasizing the contribution of groups and individuals to the enhancement of the common good as the main criterion legitimizing the differential allocation of resources, this institutional complex slowly constituted a citizenship regime stratified by class, ethnicity, nationality and gender.

The book is divided into three main parts. Chapter One analyzes the formation and consolidation of citizenship regime in Israel, a regime fragmented and legitimized by three different discourses. Chapter Two discusses the mode of incorporation of Ashkenazim (Jews originating from Eastern and Central Europe) and their re-constitution as Israelis. In Chapter Three, the constitution of Mizrahim as an ethno-class lacking modern cultural capital, and of women as mothers constrained by the ethno-national principle is analyzed. The inclusion of the Palestinian citizens of Israel by means of limited liberal citizenship and their marginalization from the pursuit of the common good is revealed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five analyzes how the problems of legitimacy faced by a settler society led to the incorporation of the Orthodox Jews as "privileged citizens." Shafir and Peled explain that the republican discourse of citizenship mediated between the liberal and ethno-national discourses, thereby contributing to the amelioration of tensions that arose between the contradictory goals of these positions.

The second part of the book, composed of two chapters, analyzes the incorporation of the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories and their disenfranchisement, as well as the emergence of Gush Emunim [Block of the Faithful] and this group's appropriation of the pioneering ethos to legitimize Jewish settlement of the Occupied Territories. These chapters trace the accumulation of contradictions as well as the different challenges (mainly the first Intifada, or Palestinian popular uprising) that would eventually bring about the transformation of the institutional complex of Labor Zionism.

In the four chapters comprising the third part of the book, Peled and Shafir present a detailed analysis of the socio-political and economic processes that eventually brought about the transformation of the institutional complex of Labor Zionism and the decline of the republican discourse of citizenship. According to them, this transformation was the result of challenges mounted by two strata: the economic elites or the members most privileged by the institutions of citizenship, and their most disenfranchised members, the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories. This double challenge, the authors contend, opened the way to the Oslo Declaration of Principles in 1993, (see especially Chapter Nine) strengthened the market and the Supreme Court of Justice as carriers of the liberal discourse of citizenship (Chapter Ten), and paved the way for the gradual erosion of the social rights of citizenship and an increase of inequality in Israel (Chapter Eleven). Chapter Twelve analyzes the incorporation within the citizenship regime of three

“new citizenship groups”- immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopian Jews and labor migrants. Shafir and Peled claim that these new groups arrived in Israel during major transformations in the citizenship regime and pose new challenges to it while opening new opportunities, such as the emergence of a more pluralist and multiculturalist discourse of citizenship. These newly incorporated groups have sharpened the tensions between the different criteria for the definition of the ethnos (religious and ethno-national) as well as strained the liberal principle, especially in the case of labor migrants.

Shafir and Peled’s book presents a sophisticated picture of Israel, its citizenship regime and its changing contours. The book is richly documented and presents a well-articulated theory of citizenship as a mechanism of stratification and as constitutive of social categories. However, and despite the authors’ efforts to conceptualize citizenship as mediating between structure and meaning, (as exemplified by their theoretical emphasis on discourses of citizenship) meaning must be almost automatically deduced from the different structural positions and supposed class interests. A theorization of the ways in which culture shapes interests and how both culture and interests are both deeply enmeshed in the production and reproduction of power would have lent a more dynamic character to the changing contours of citizenship in Israel.

Baruch Kimmerling’s *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness* focuses on Israeli political culture and provides a good complement to Shafir and Peled’s *Being Israeli* for readers interested in issues of culture and power. Kimmerling’s analysis demonstrates that Israel’s political culture has been shaped by both the protracted conflict between Jews and Palestinians and the difficulties faced by Zionism to secularize Jewish “civilization.” The main thesis of the book is that despite the diversification of Israel into seven counter-cultures, Judaism and militarism have remained the main cultural premises that integrate various Jewish groups in Israel. In the chapters, Kimmerling develops this thesis, beginning with the ways in which the national identity of both Jews and Palestinians has been shaped by the protracted conflict that originated in the colonial situation.

The Israeli state is the focus of Chapter Two. Israel emerged as an advanced state, shaping society according to ethno-national boundaries, and civilizing new immigrants (mainly those with origins in Islamic countries) through the military and the school system. The book shows as well that this homogenizing drive has been accompanied by a differentiating one resulting in the constitution of ethno-classes by different practices of resource allocation and settlement. Yet, Kimmerling also seeks to demonstrate how, in the process of building “an immigrant settler state,” the code of Judaism, in its religious interpretation, gradually gained strength due to the re-opening of the frontier after the 1967 war. The ascendancy of religion and of the groups embodying it resulted from the inability of secular elites to legitimize the

territorial expansion that ensued after the 1967 war. This deficit in legitimation led, according to Kimmerling, to the gradual ascendancy of religious interpretations of Zionism and of religion in general in Israel.

In Chapters Three and Four, Kimmerling deals with what he calls the "Invention and Decline of Israeliness." Here he analyzes the cultural practices and institutional mechanisms that simultaneously homogenized and differentiated amongst Jews and created a sharp boundary line between them and Israel's Palestinian citizens. Chapter Four explores how Israeliness was invented in the pre-state period and the ways in which the veteran elites engaged, after 1948, in a comprehensive civilizing mission aimed at preserving their cultural and political hegemony. The main objects of this civilizing project were the Jews who came from Muslim countries, who resisted such attempts to turn them into "Israelis." However, Kimmerling does not conceive of these moments of resistance and rebellion as challenging the Zionist secular hegemony. Instead, the central hero of the chapter is Gush Emunim, which appropriates the ethno-national and religious components of Zionism and radicalizes Judaism. Its emergence marks the beginning of the demise of the "secular Zionist hegemony" and blazes the trail for the emergence of "cultural diversity and the appearance of additional autonomous political-cultural groups." (Pp. 110)

This radicalization of Jewishness (Chapter Four) yields different cultural alternatives, one of which is the formation of a secular middle and upper middle class Ashkenazi counter-culture, characterized by individualism and an emphasis on self-realization. The formation of a religious counter-culture represents the opposite pole of this tendency. Kimmerling shows, however, that despite the differences among religious groups in regard to Zionism and the state of Israel, a radicalized Jewish culture creates similarities between the religious settler society built by Gush Emunim in the Occupied Territories and the Jewish Orthodoxy or *haredim*. Throughout Chapter Four, Kimmerling contends that Israeli society has been "religionized" as the result of the unselective mass immigration of the 1950s, mainly from North Africa and the Middle East, and the difficulties Zionism had in separating religion and nationality (Pp. 125). The first part of this argument resonates with some of the theses of the "old structural functional paradigm" which Kimmerling has questioned over the years. It is implied that had immigration to Israel been more selective, Zionism would have succeeded in secularizing itself.

It is precisely at this point in the book that a more explicitly formulated theory of the relations between state and nation building and culture is missing. The explicitness of such a theory would have explained how processes of inclusion and exclusion from the national project constituted the boundary lines between the different counter-cultures. It could have helped explain why Kimmerling combines different social categories and strata - such as Mizrahim, (redefined here as the "Traditionalist

Counterculture”) Palestinian citizens of Israel, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopian Jews, and labor migrants - into one conceptual category of “newcomers.” What emerges from the chapters is that each of these groups or counter-cultures poses a challenge to Zionist secular hegemony by disclosing conflicting definitions of the boundaries of the community and the criteria for membership in it. However, nowhere does Kimmerling provide a theoretical rationale for treating each group, with its own interests and agenda, as equivalent to the other in comprising a “newcomer” category.

One of the main conclusions of *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness* is that the formation of social and cultural boundaries backed up by institutions where collective identities are elaborated, have turned Israel into a highly heterogeneous society in which no group holds complete hegemony. In light of this argument, the Ashkenazi middle and upper middle classes are but one of the many groups contesting and wrestling for hegemony. While this may be the case at the level of daily politics, and while *Ashkenaziut* (the cultural identity of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe) and Israeliness can no longer be naturally conflated, Kimmerling’s conclusion is not substantiated because of the dominance of Ashkenazim in Israel’s economy, the armed forces, higher education, the legal establishment, the media and other important institutions.

Mizrahim in Israel is a collection of articles resulting from the editors’ efforts to set a new agenda of issues about ethnicity from a different analytical vantage point. (Pp. 9) In the introduction to the volume, (Pp. 15-27) diversity and heterogeneity are presented both as the starting point and as the result of nation and state building. Inspired by post-colonial and Gramscian approaches to issues of identity, resistance and hegemony, the research group that produced the collection set out to challenge extant conceptualizations of ethnic identity in Israeli social sciences and its periodization of “ethnic” resistance and contention. In contrast to Shafir and Peled’s volume that deduces collective identities from class interests, and to Kimmerling’s that portrays well-delineated and almost pre-constituted collective identities, *Mizrahim in Israel*, conceptualizes identities as ruptured, fluid and hybrid, juggling with different threads, and crosscutting categorical social boundaries. This continuous juggling, imitation and reiteration of hegemonic genres is, they tell us, what resistance is all about. That premise motivates the authors of the different chapters to search for an alternative history and alternative sites that let the “subaltern speak.” The chapters seek and find sites other than protest movements (such as the Wadi Salib revolt of 1959 or the Black Panthers protest movement of the 1970s) to trace the genealogy of Mizrahi agency. At first glance, the chapters by Matalon, Kemp, Shenhav, Hever and Motzafi-Haller look like they are situated in locations where hegemony is reproduced. However, these chapters show that it is at these specific sites - border settlements at the beginning of the 1950s; leaflets and communal

newspapers, political organizations, and literary texts - that hegemony is questioned and challenged. Many of the chapters, especially those analyzing texts, show that the challenge to hegemony was not pre-conceived or highly articulated, yet the chapters demonstrate that in the attempt to gain access to the Zionist epos and ethos, different groups reformulated its main genres and thereby resisted them. This kind of analysis lends new meaning to the question posed by the editors in the introductory chapter: How to escape the double trap posited by the conceptualizations of the Mizrahi subject either as a problem or as a victim.

The collection's second major task is to trace the genealogy of ethnification in Israel (Pp. 18-19). Ethnification, the constitution of ethnic categories, their treatment as pre-constituted entities and the identification processes accompanying them is dealt with by Khazzoom, and by Yona and Saporta. Although the themes of these two articles differ (Khazzoom's is Jewish-Iraqi educated women; Yona and Saporta's is the pre-vocational educational plan of the early 1950s) they convey the same main message showing how supposedly universalistic philosophies and institutions constituted diverse groups into one ethno-class.

Despite the stated attempt of the collection to deconstruct the processes through which different groups of Jews originating in Muslim countries were ethnicized and turned into a homogeneous category, and despite the goal of showing different modalities of Mizrahi voices, most of the chapters deal only with Jews originating from Iraq who belong to or claim the status of elites. Only two articles out of twelve explore a different mode of resistance and give a sense of different voices. Kemp analyzes the resistance of rank and file immigrants from various countries in the Middle East to the Israeli state's civilizing mission, and Peled's chapter on Shas centers on a movement whose constituency are Jews originally from Morocco. All inclusively, for a collection seeking the voice of the subaltern from a different vantage point, it ignores or excludes diverse modes of resistance.

These three books offer a fresh approach to analyzing Israel. All of them were initiated and written towards the end of the 1990s, a period when optimism and pessimism about the future of Israel was mixed, but also created intellectual spaces that, along with protest movements, set as their task a re-imagining of Israel and Israeliness. These political intellectual processes of imagination contribute to an understanding of Israel and Israeliness as a contested terrain. Yet, it remains clear that in this contested terrain some groups and individuals still hold more power to define what Israeliness means and can enforce their definition upon others.