

RECENT BOOKS

REFLECTIONS ON COEXISTENCE

Mixed Towns, Trapped Communities: Historical Narratives, Spatial Dynamics, Gender Relations and Cultural Encounters in Palestinian-Israeli Towns, edited by Daniel Monterescu and Dan Rabinowitz. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007. viii + 311 pages. Index to p. 327. \$124.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Faier

This edited collection of essays examines how processes of modernity and nationalism intersect in the production and shaping of urban spaces. By focusing on “mixed towns” in Israel/Palestine, the authors illuminate the varied ways in which individuals and groups articulate identity, conflict, collective memory, nationalism, and daily life. Unlike much literature on the Middle East that favors homeland/Holy Land dichotomies or other static models, this volume eschews such tidy frameworks and instead reveals what the editors describe as “a fascinating array of contradictions, overlaps, collusions, protrusions” (p. 2) that characterize interpersonal and structural interactions between Jewish and Palestinian urbanites in both historical and contemporary contexts. Strikingly, the chapters demonstrate how the realization of one set of national goals comes directly in the face of “the other,” often involving processes of erasure that rewrite the city. As editors Daniel Monterescu and Dan Rabinowitz argue, the “competition over space, including urban space, was part and parcel of reality from the initial stages of the bifurcated national effort” (p. 3). The juxtaposition of chapters with a historical focus (for example, by Deborah Bernstein, David De Vries, Tamir Goren, and Mark LeVine) with those that focus on memory (Jasmin Habib, Rabinowitz, and Salim Tamari) affords

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the reader insight into later chapters that adopt a more contemporary and varied lens on the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian interactions (and lack thereof). In many ways, the chapters demonstrate how mixing is not a finished process but one where boundaries continually shift, dependent not only on politics but also on personal perspective.

Central to the volume—and one of the text’s strengths—is a theoretical exploration into what constitutes a “mixed town.” On the simplest level, a mixed town is defined demographically as a city with a sizeable ethnic minority. Still, as Tamari, Rabinowitz, Anton Shammass, and other authors demonstrate, the question of mixing is quite complex, with not only presence engendering “othering” but also absence, whether of individuals, groups, or cultural forms. However, the greater appeal of conceptualizing “mixed towns” as a theoretical object lays in the discursive realm, namely the ways in which loci afford the articulation of identity, history, space, and the civic on both individual and group levels. For example, for the activists described by Amalia Sa’ar in her chapter, cooperation and factionalism go hand-in-hand. Bernstein and Hanna Herzog detail the ways in which performed gender identities reflect both the social distance and geographic mapping of ethno-nationalist dynamics. In a personal account of movement between cities, Raef Zreik illustrates the shifting boundaries of obfuscation and clarity in seeing and being “in place.” Likewise, Monterescu demonstrates how a logic of place emerges within divergent interpretations over the meaning of violence, belonging, and political conflict.

Lest the mixed town be taken at face value, Monterescu and Rabinowitz provide a very informative and interesting overview of how it developed within Israel/Palestine and why it is worthy of attention. Their etymological journey suggests that the concept of “mixed town” reflects the historical and contemporary changes brought about by occupation, war, poverty, urbanization, civil rights, and cultural encounters. However, scant attention is given throughout the text to how this framework of mixedness differs from other

hallmarks of urbanism such as hybridity. While a number of chapters suggest that other dynamics such as religion or class are also at play, for the most part, such discussions are absent, to some extent because they are outside the scope of the volume. What unfolds thus is a narrative of the mixed city that is neither homogenous nor singular. Moreover, among the authors, there is disagreement as to whether the mixed town framework is itself enduring or appropriate (see Habib, Haim Yacobi, and Laurie King-Irani).

The collection is organized in four parts, focusing on history, memory, and representation; spatial dynamics; gendered narratives; and civil society. In general, the chapters display a high degree of referentiality with themes of contested contact, remembering/forgetting, spatial practice, identity, the role of authorities and technocrats, and cooperative/competitive alliances weaving through the pages. Most chapters stand well on their own with rich ethnographic, historical, and literary details. As a collection, however, the book compels the reader to rethink paradigms that have come to characterize Israel/Palestine studies and to consider what is at stake for the future, given what the mixed town simultaneously erases and embraces.

In many ways this is a distinctly intimate collection, punctuated by personal experiences, conversations with relatives and friends, memories, and discussions of many of the authors' roles as public intellectuals. The authors represent a wide variety of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, planning, history, and literary arts; the sensitivity and engagement of the authors with their material extends beyond disciplinary boundaries and reflexive traditions. The volume lacks a contributor index yet all or nearly all of the authors are situated firmly within both political and academic discourses central to the question of Israel/Palestine. Thus, while the text itself has many merits, its whispered conversations add another dimension, especially regarding the relationship between authorship and subject matter.