

RECENSIONI

Daniel MONTERESCU | *Jaffa Shared and Shattered: Contrived Coexistence in Israel/Palestine*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 362.

Jaffa, where you can dance until dawn along with Israelis and Palestinians; where you meet all, straight and gay, green and red. Jaffa, where ugly, monotone housing blocks hide an eclectic mix of people, cafes, garages and garbage; places and people that you would expect only on opposing frontlines. Jaffa, where several boundaries blow up at once. Jaffa, where high-rise buildings spring up among the dusty, neglected streets. Where no one seems to pick up the garbage, where roof pools oversee corrugated iron, slums and graffiti. Jaffa, beer, shisha, mint tea, plastic seats, – and smoky kebabs on a sidewalk. Jaffa, the old proud Arabic sea port. Jaffa, a neglected periphery on the forgotten outskirts of booming high-tech Tel Aviv. Jaffa, where you can buy and sell all kinds of outdated Ottoman kitsch.

In Jaffa it is not difficult to find contradictions, frictions, connections. Daniel Monterescu claims to be «obsessed» (Monterescu 2015: XI) with the political history of his native town. And I can understand why. Now Associate Professor at the liberal, open-minded European Central University Budapest threatened by the Hungarian government to close, he wrote a deeply fascinating anthropological portrait of this «mixed city». Note, he says «mixed» city, not «divided», neither «dual», neither «colonial». And with the portrait of the city, he wrote a much needed and highly unique portrait of social relations in Israel/Palestine. He aims to provide a Bourdieuan «relational reframing» of the Israeli-Palestinian space, of Arab-Jewish coexistence and shattered ethnonational aspirations. He focuses on intricate, complex aspects of the conflict, issues that likely to upset and provoke criticism from both sides of the conflict, from those who draw their power from acting as representatives or spokespersons of one or the other ethnic or



national «community». For instance, his meetings in Jaffa's Ajami quarters with Arab Jews in search of Palestinian-Israeli hybrid spaces that can't exist elsewhere. Or his account about frictions of joint forms of protest during Israel's «Arab Spring». These accounts are neither romanticizing coexistence providing the illusion of horizontal or postmodern fluid encounters, nor are part of the mainstream literature on the conflict, made of narratives of collision, partition, static separation. This is an account that brings forward what Yaakov Garb labels the «softer side» of collision and Gil Hochberg's exploration of the limits of the separatist imagination.

This is a book that points out the intricate complexity in everyday life in Israel/Palestine of which Jaffa is a particular emblematic case. An aspect that is often overlooked and overseen in front of more monolithic, one-sided and linear accounts of one of the most studied conflicts in the world. Reading the dense ethnographies of the author's meetings with Jaffa residents, my own (fieldwork) memories obfuscated with the author accounts of intersections, transgressions, interfusion's. Of how I went with an Arab-Palestinian Bedouin friend to meet a potential future wife of him and a shooting between gangs interrupted our coffee conversations. Of how we pilgrimed from the dusty south of Israel's desert to the lightly city in search of life, culture, light. And, in search of ice-cream. Of how constantly the interpretative categories of what is «Palestinian», of what is «Israeli», of what is «Jewish» or «Arab», of what is «new» and «old» and whether this matters – all seems blown up in everyday practices, of how these spaces and boundaries are constantly evolving overturned, remade, subverted. I had been always wondering why nobody has been written a serious book on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from such a perspective. I mean a really ethnographic one, which pays attention to life as it emerges in concrete and relational practices.

“Transliteration and transformation”

Now we have such a book. We can get one indication of the complexities from his «Note on Transliteration and Translation», a note that would be worth quoting at lengths. « (...) For Hebrew I largely follow the Library of Congress transliteration system, with some modifications for the sake of clarity and consistency with the transliterated Arab» (*ibidem*: XVII) reads one emblematic sentence. If it is not the content of the book that might convince you, this note demonstrate the author's scrupulous diligence. First note words like «largely» and «with some modifications», than think about the

reference to the dominant Anglo-Saxon Library of Congress and we can get a first flavor of shifting boundaries and the repercussions of a long colonial history. If you know look at other books on Israel/Palestine you will wonder why most other accounts on the Israeli-Palestinian space can be so linear, one-sided. Do they obfuscate all elements that disturb one or another macro-political imagination? Monterescu offers a sophisticated look beyond the separatist imagination. The introduction, for instance, provides a «checkered history» (*ibidem*: 13) of the concept «mixed towns». The author uncovers the roots of the concept in publications dating back to the Peel Commission in 1937 who worked on the partition plan and struggled with those cities that could not clearly separated into Arabic or Jewish locations. The theme of cohabitation intermingles here with dynamics of gentrification and becomes evident in «everyday spatialized practices». The following first chapters ground his research in anthropological and studies of political geography of so-called «mixed town» and spaces of Arab-Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian intersections, a key theme in Israeli anthropology and political geography. But beyond debates that are specific to Israel's political geography as the works of Dan Rabinowitz or Oren Yiftachel, Monterescu situates his work in broader theoretical fames of dominant Anglo-Saxon theories revealing his doctorate from Chicago.

“*Sad oranges, happy cement*”

Jaffa, «the city of the sad orange that will smile again» (*ibidem*: 97), quotes Monterescu a fading graffiti on a crumbling wall, somewhere. The expression seems a reference to a Palestinian book that idealizes the city's past as an Arab-Palestinian orchard and its tragic transformation under Jewish-Israeli statehood as a seemingly inviable periphery of Tel Aviv. «Jaffa is the Jewish city» states another graffiti described by the author, as an exclusive aspiration, reflecting more Jewish-Israeli anxieties than realities (*ibidem*: 5). Based on substantives and essentialist conceptions of space and time, fantasies of «Judaizing» and «Palestinianization» have remained just such. Exclusive narratives of past and space are fragile in light of the hybrid, mixed and heterogeneous forces of the shared and shattered spaces of the city. The second part explores the shifting socio-political life of the city in light of neoliberal dynamics of gentrification, going beyond the dominant concepts of ethno-national studies as the city's shaping forces. Spatial politics of neoliberal happy cement cover up, outdate and intermingle with ethno-national politics of spatial differentiation. And again, against the risks of a

reductive critique of postmodern neoliberalism, in the last chapters the author refreshes the reader with his exploration of the emerging alternative cultural life and its creativity.

This is not an end of itself. Against the background of a collapse of the various dreams of ethnic purification, the book sheds light on the possibilities on coexistence as a continuous desire. Jaffa, a laboratory for examining the forces of neoliberalism and ethnonationalism, is not an oxymoron. Not divided and purified, but shared and shattered, that is a message of hope.

Alexander Koenler

Queen's University Belfast

alexanderiht@yahoo.de