

Reviewed by Nimer Sultany

The Palestinian citizens of Israel live mostly in separate Arab communities. Only a minority lives in so-called “mixed cities.” Thus, one would think that if there was any actual, or any hope for potential, coexistence inside Israel between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian minority it would be found in these cities. But what does the notion of “mixed city” really signify?

Israeli professor and planner Haim Yacobi, cofounder of Bimkom—Planners for Planning Rights, is one of the critical voices in Israeli planning studies. In *The Jewish-Arab City: Spatio-Politics in a Mixed Community*, which mostly collects his previously published essays, he attempts to pursue such an inquiry. By investigating the politics of planning and its discursive tools in one specific city, Lydda, Yacobi deconstructs the notion of “mixed city” in order to undermine it. Behind the “mixed” rhetoric, he finds segregation and unequal life conditions taking place within an “ethnocratic” structure. This is a particular form of political organization in which the ethnos persists as the dominant factor over territory and polity. This structure is part of settler-colonialism, in this case Israel’s settler-colonial society, a specific historical phenomenon in which settlers aim at “replacing” the natives rather than “civilizing” them.

The professional jargon of Israeli planning creates and simultaneously conceals this reality and denies the political nature of planning. While ethnocentric planning and development masquerades as a liberal, technocratic, and modernist project, the reality is far from conforming to the aspirations of equal citizenship. The label “mixed” is therefore a distortion of reality.

Yacobi analyzes some of the prominent discursive tools deployed by Israeli society in general and the professional community of planners in particular. These discourses seek to reproduce power relations in the built environment and rationalize, justify, and conceal the reality of segregation. As such, they are part and parcel of power relations and are embedded in social and political realities. Thus, Yacobi demonstrates that seemingly mutually exclusive

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paradigms and discrepant discourses actually work toward similar ends in Israel. Modernization and postmodernism, state monopoly and free markets have all been appropriated by the hegemonic discourse and prevailing power relations to advance the Judaization of the whole of historic Palestine. For instance, despite the growing influence of globalization and neoliberal ideology, Yacobi shows that in the Israeli context the state maintains a strong presence and influence through multilayered cooperation with private actors in order to produce a spatial order congenial to settler-colonial goals.

Nonetheless, Yacobi points out that despite the attempt to Judaize Lydda and transform its space, power has failed to fully achieve its plans given the impossibility of attaining total control over reality. Indeed, planning in Lydda has not always gone according to plans. For instance, the modernization movement aspiring to de-Arabize Lydda is incomplete: existing Arab houses have had to be used to accommodate the influx of Jewish immigrants.

Furthermore, planning and enforcement authorities have proved unable to eradicate unauthorized planning among the Arab population. Rather than dismissing such planning simplistically as merely "illegal," Yacobi conceives informal planning as an act of spatial protest and thus as a form of resistance. This resistance is neither explicable as the outcome of an organized collective strategy nor can it be reduced to individualistic sporadic action. While emerging out of a social need (the manifest exclusion of Arabs from planning), these practices also serve to disrupt imposed hierarchies and spatial orders. By doing so, they place sticks in the wheels of colonization and expose the limits of power.

Yet, these "petty acts of resistance" (p. 112) by the subaltern should not be romanticized. Their subversive potential notwithstanding, they remain unable to change the structure of power relations in a significant manner. This seems especially true given the connection between Lydda and larger political processes entrenching the logic of separation within and without the 1967 borders. But what is Yacobi's position concerning the possibility of embarking upon "liberating" urban projects within the established structures of hierarchical, ethnocratic sociopolitical orders?

Applying Oren Yiftachel's thesis concerning the nature of the Israeli sociopolitical order as an ethnocracy to the mixed city, Yacobi concludes that Lydda is an "ethnocracy." Hence one might conclude that without withering the ethnocratic order altogether and abandoning the ongoing settler-colonial project, it is likely that ethnocracies will persist. Planning for coexistence, then, is still premature.

This conclusion, however, might prove too strong an attribution to the author since he does not clarify what liberating projects mean. This lack of clarity seems to stem from his hasty movement between debates and his deployment of several, somewhat incoherent, theoretical tools. For instance, whereas Yacobi considers Israel a settler-colonial society, he also deploys the postcolonial discourse. This seems to eliminate the distinction between examining the legacy of colonialism (despite dismantling formal colonial structures) and analyzing the continuous formation of settler-colonial societies.

In addition, having recognized that power struggles are inherent to the "right to the city" (democratizing the decision-making process over urbanization) and hence to the "production of urban space," the author by the end of the book generalizes the case of Lydda as just one example of many "contested cities" in the world where ethnicity, migration, and control intersect.

Yet, if the struggle for equal citizenship in Israel is no different than in other global urban spaces, then the very theoretical tools Yacobi utilizes become useless for understanding domination or at least immaterial to the question of resistance to this domination. While the concept of ethnocracy relegates Israel to a category consisting of a limited number of states, ethnocracy makes Israeli cities a model for most cities. Settler-colonialism identifies a specific form of power struggle, but ethnocracy fails to provide such distinctions. This shows that when critical scholarship goes astray, it risks legitimating the very object of its critique.