

How Middle Eastern is Israel?

Mariusz Kałczewiak

Abstract:

Israeli Identity: Between Orient and Occident is an important book on contemporary Israeli identities and Israeli discourses on the East and the West. The authors examine various aspects of Israeli social, political, and cultural life, challenging a common belief that Israel is a Western state that only geographically is located in the Middle East. The contributors explore various manifestations of Israeli identities in a quest to answer an old, but lingering question: how Middle Eastern are Israel and the Israelis?

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Tal, David (Hg.): Israeli Identity. Between Orient and Occident. London/New York: Routledge, 2013, 308 S. Hardcover, 119,10 Euro. ISBN 978-0-415-82021-9

This new book edited by David Tal explores various facets of contemporary Israeli life, offering novel insights into multiple identities present in Israeli society. It shows how diverse groups (that make up the population of Israel) negotiate between the East and the West, between the European background of the country's elite and the Mizrahi heritage of the Jews who originate from the Arab countries.

The authors who contributed to this volume set out to explore various areas of Israeli and Middle Eastern studies. Stretching from cinema studies to architectural history and sociological research. Their articles mirror the everyday discussions about Jewishness, Israeliness, Middle Eastern identity, democracy, and Europe that are present in Israeli social, political, and cultural life. The authors present various views on Israel's unique situation: a country that is in the Middle East, but rather not of Middle East. It always locates itself somewhere between Occident and Orient. A few contributors point out the estrangement of Jewish Israelis from the Middle East, whereas others present examples of how Israeliness is being shaped by Middle Eastern traditions and influences. Thanks to various stances adopted by the authors, David Tal's book has a polyphonic and diverse character, resembling the pluralistic and complex nature of Israeli society.

The great value of this book lies in its cross-disciplinary and cross-historical take on Israeli identities. In the volume we find both discussions on the early Zionist imaginaries of the East as well as sociological examinations of the very recent African immigration. This collection of articles shows us the historical development of Israeli identities, their evolution and changes over time and space. The volume includes a few texts that are devoted to the problems of the so called "Israeli mainstream", whereas the majority of the contributors explores the groups and problems that were earlier socially and scientifically marginalized: Israeli emigrants, Mizrahi music, and Israeli Arab literature.

One of the most interesting articles is the text by Oren Steinitz, who explores the Israeli religious Zionist Internet, focusing especially on the popular "Questions & Answers" websites. On these platforms, users discuss various problems related to the Jewish law and its relation to the system of secular law, often seeking the support of rabbis and halakhic scholars. Steinitz, examining selected questions of the users, such as those related to gay pride parades or the rights of the Palestinians, draws a picture of a community that openly questions human rights

and the principle of equality. Steinitz writes that while benefiting from the democratic character of the Internet, the religious Zionist Israelis often use it for spreading anti-democratic messages. They embrace the freedom of speech granted by the secular laws of Israel, but refuse to accept the supremacy of this legal order when it comes for example to the protection of minorities.

Elsewhere in the book, Udi Sommer and Michal Ben Zvi Sommer describe the experiences of Israeli parents living in the United States. Carefully looking at the experience of emigrant parenthood, they shed a light on the identities of those who left Israel, but usually preserve a strong and multi-layered attachment to the home country. As Sommer and Ben Zvi Sommer write, Israeli expats who become parents face a need to come to terms with their own complex identities, to understand how being Israeli and emigrant is influencing who they are. For most of them, continuity and raising "Israeli children" is at the very centre of their lives, whereas others do not consider it important to "pass the Israeliness" to the next generation.

This volume encompasses many articles that deal with representations of Israeli identities in the arts, mostly in music and cinema. Igal Bursztyn portrays the historical development of the Israeli gaze towards the East, visible through movies produced in Palestine/Israel in the last hundred years. Focusing on the musical expressions of the Oriental Jews, Amy Horowitz explores the changing Israeli attitudes towards the Mizrahi music. She examines the process of the inclusion into the Israeli mainstream of the formerly marginalized musical creativity of Mizrahi Jews. As writes Horowitz, the music that was once heard only in the vegetable markets and car workshops (places where most of the Mizrahi Jews used to work) began, in the early 1990s, to be heard on the popular national radio stations and became an important component of the Israeli music scene. In her text, Horowitz looks as well on the political and cultural meanings of music inspired by the Middle East, discussing among other things the potential of Mizrahi music to foster reconciliation between conflicted groups of Israeli society.

Israeli Identities: Between Orient and Occident is a valuable selection of texts that allows readers to understand how complex and diverse contemporary Israeli identities are. The contributors shed light on important Israeli border spaces, on the processes and phenomena that place Israel and Israelis precisely on the borderline between the East and the West.