Sorina Georgescu

Book Review: “Bureaucracy, Thy Name Is Israel”

Recommended Citation:
Sorina Georgescu, “Book Review: ‘Bureaucracy, Thy Name Is Israel’”. Cultural and Institutional Memory as (a) Means of Progress (Part I)

Sorina Georgescu
Hyperion University, Bucharest

Book Review: “Bureaucracy, Thy Name Is Israel”

Reviewed work:

At the crossroads between a coursebook1, a piece of writing about life and a feminist manifesto, Wrapped in the Flag of Israel. Mizrahi Single Mothers and Bureaucratic Torture is, as the subtitle suggests, both an enlightening insight into Israeli intra-racism and an original and valuable connection between two seemingly unrelated concepts: bureaucracy and torture.

The book is structured in 13 parts: a “Note on Transliteration”, a “List of Illustrations”, an “Introduction”, six chapters – each with several subchapters, a “Glossary of Hebrew, Arabic and Yiddish Terms”, “References”, “Acknowledgements” and an “Index”. The main theoretical concepts throughout the book are “GendeRace”, “Zionism”, “Agency” and “Identity Politics”, each having its own way of using bureaucracy and perpetrating torture on the Mizrahi single mothers.

The author also draws from epidemiologist Nancy Krieger’s theory that links “chronic bureaucratic entanglements, hypertension, chronic pain and death”. This she further develops as “divine cosmology”, defined as “the Divinity of the Jewish State” – Jewish people’s ‘promised land’, now a real state, and the “Divinity of Chance” – “the goals the faithful have when they go on pilgrimage”. As these “divinities” suggest, we also have lots of humor in this book:

A welfare mother petitioning a bureaucrat is like a pilgrim beseeching the jawbone of a saint. Mother and pilgrim are bound by the strict script of religious ritual on the one hand, and by serendipity on the other. A mother trying to track down her income augmentation might consult a bureaucrat at the NSB, the post office clerk, an appointed bank official, a case worker at the municipal welfare office, or others. All the while, she is constantly praying for a miracle. None of the avenues is guaranteed to succeed. She has no choice but to subject herself to this godly roulette. Godly it is because both mother and bureaucrat conceive themselves as integral parts of the miraculous ingathering of the Jewish diaspora in the promised land. This is the land of divine bureaucracy governed by ETSBA’ ELOKIM (the finger of God), where citizenship is one guaranteed miracle, so long as you can prove five generations back of Jewish mothers. The other guaranteed miracle of Israeli Jews is an IDF draft notice to report of duty at age eighteen (19).

The book is all the more interesting for being Smadar Lavie’s personal experience. The daughter of a Mizrahi/Arab/Yemeni2 mother and of an Ashkenazi father, she benefitted from a much better education than most Mizrahi women, being raised in a “largely Ashkenazi working-to-middle-class neighborhood

---

1The book explains a lot of facts and concepts regarding history, ideology, laws
2Mizrahi – 50% of Israel population; they are Easterners or Orientals and have their origins in the Arab and Muslim world and the margins of the Ottoman Empire (Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Bulgaria, former Yugoslavia, India); they are the majority of Israel’s disenfranchised; Ashkenazi – 30%; they come from Central and Eastern Europe; they spoke Yiddish; they control the division of power and privilege in the State; other ethnic groups/races: Sephardim Jews (Spaniards), Palestinians (20%), Russim (10-12%), Kavkazim plus Gruzinim (2-4%)
less than ten miles south of Tel Aviv” (11). Thus, unlike the average Mizrahi girls, she had access to superior education, leading her to the US as a researcher-anthropologist. However, divorce from a violent husband and the loss of her 9-year-child’s custody, through a controversial Parental Alienation Syndrome charge\textsuperscript{3}, make her take her child back to her family, in Israel. Here starts her drama as a welfare mother, after having resigned her tenured associate professorship at the University of California, Davis: her color – the Arab phenotype\textsuperscript{4}, and her politics – anti-Zionism – exclude her “from academic positions that paid a living wage” (13). Here, she becomes the member of a feminist NGO which actively supports the anti-governmental protests of poor Mizrahi women, such as Vicky Knafo, a protest - the Knafoland – that begins and ends Lavie’s book.

As the author declares in the “Introduction”, the purpose of her book is “my simultaneous existence as Mizrahi single mother on welfare, former university professor turned into feminist-of-color activist, and media personality” (22). To which she adds an “attempt to counter Israeli Anthropology’s insistence on harmonious finals” (22).

The first important concept, the equivalence between “GendeRace”, bureaucracy and torture, can be explained by starting with the educational system in Israel, a gender-segregated one, with “far fewer classrooms for girls than for boys” (50), with mainly vocational high-schools (seamstresses, knitting, weaving), with fewer kindergartens only in the evenings. In other words, “inferior education, if any at all” (50). Bureaucracy, associated with physical force, is the educational officials’ argument for enrolling “into boarding schools or kibbutzim any children about the normative two-child family” (51). There, “the Ashkenazi educators made sure that the boarded Mizrahi children would not intermingle with the superior Ashkenazi children” (51).

Work in Israel is another “GendeRaced” issue. Not only did and do the favored Ashkenazi women have difficulties in finding a job and face lower wages than Ashkenazi men, but, well into the 1960s, the Arab Jews were the domestic servants, cleaners, launderers and agricultural workers. They were battered by their employers, they were victims of “sexual abuse and rape”. As feminists in the 1990s and the 2000s, Mizrahi ONGs are not allowed to “educate our communities on feminism of color” (61). As single mothers, they are too fond of the Jewish State to be really able-willing to fight “the somatic pain inflicted upon them by the state’s bureaucracy”, which means queuing in huge lines at the welfare bureau, with endless papers to be filled in, in order to try to obtain their monthly income check:

Even though she moves through time and space, she can only move through the time and space allotted by the regime. Because she loves her Jewish homeland and fears that genuine resistance will weaken her homeland’s stand against the Goyim\textsuperscript{5}, she can enact only a figurative simulacrum of resistance. The regime merely lays its web in wait for her to entangle herself (81).

Another bureaucratic shortcoming is ambiguity and evasiveness, lack of any obvious rules, plus the demand of sexual favors by the clerks and/or potential employers, turning any success at the bureau into “a miracle”. The mother does not know and has no way of knowing, which actions correlate with success or failure” (82). Finally, the single mother is practically denied even the chances of obtaining her money through court. All judges care for are endless fees, papers, signatures and stamps, all these

\textsuperscript{3}Parental Alienation Syndrome – PAS – the assumption that a child estrangement from a violent father most likely precipitates from the mother causing alienation between the father and child (26)

\textsuperscript{4}Yemeni race marks: olive-chocolate skin and dark brown eyes, wide eyelids, high cheekbones, prominent collarbone and wrist bones, narrow waistline with wide hips, short torso and Asian height (14)

\textsuperscript{5}Goyim – non-Jew; Arab
involving much more money than any Mizrahi single mother may produce. In other words, “Government bureaus are where the Divinity of Chance meets the Divinity of the State” (84).

Speaking about this “Divinity of the State”, Zionism is another central factor linked with bureaucracy and torture.

Defined as a “European ideology of Jewish nationalism whose main goal was to colonize Palestine in order to establish a Jewish State” (61), an ideology which perceives Arabs as “primitives”, Zionism is the “destruction of Palestinian villages” (61) and the portrayal of counter-reactions as “pogroms” (61). Today, it means a huge social-economic gap between the Ashkenazi ruling minority and the Mizrahi lower-class majority. It means discriminatory education, employment and wages, plus the denial of “Arab culture and Orthodox Judaism”. It means the master narrative of the fight against the Goyim. And it means that “from the cradle to donning military fatigues at age eighteen, all Israel citizens tracing Jewish lineage learned that their most vital responsibility to the state was in creating new generations of Jewish citizens. Judaism is citizenship” (61). Finally, for Smadar Lavie, it meant not being allowed to study Jewish intra-racism as a tenured professor, the only recommended field being the binary Israel-Palestinian conflict.

The last two inter-twined concepts, “agency” and “identity politics” are direct consequences of GenderRace and Zionism. We are talking about Hebrew media stereotypes of Mizrahi single mothers and we are talking about the denial of their agency through the “mirage of Mizrahi Ashkenazi Jewish unity to narrate how all Jews should fight on a single front so Israel – the little David – can survive surrounded by Arab Goyim Goliath” (79). As Smadar Lavie explains, this is just a mask to hide the State’s use of bureaucracy “to crush, marginalize, contain and buy out individuals or groups within social protest movements”. The only protests allowed are those that “showcase the ‘chosen people’s’ national unity devoid of race, class or religious observance. Movements that do not showcase this national unity are ignored. Eventually, all Mizrahi movements become sucked into the Palestine-Israel binary and then disappear from the public sphere” (80).

Another way of denying such agency is the impossibility of turning bureaucratic pain into discourse. According to our author’s direct observation, single mothers did not even make the connection between the moment of opening and reading a letter about a new allowance cut or a new paper to be filled in, and their consequent burning of food or yelling at their children.

Unfortunately, Smadar Lavie’s Knafoland has no happy end. Being a book about reality, one of Israel’s realities happened to be a “Palestinian suicide bomber” who killed 23 and injured 130, thus ending both the truce between Israel and Hamas and the national and international media attention towards the Mizrahi feminist protest. No solutions to their problems. Only the warning that, should their children fail to be at school come 1 September, they would be reported “as delinquents to the Youth and Family Courts. The judges could then order the removal of the children from their homes to be forcibly placed into boarding schools” (145).

Only one possible ending:

In a press corps’ caravan, they sped across town to cover the carnage at the border. Afterwards, they went to the American Colony Hotel Bar to get drunk. So did I, with my converted food coupons to purchase a drink I would muse for hours and my California English to gather info. Forever the anthropologist, forever collecting data (145).

---

6Mizrahi single mothers: “bleached blonde hair, skinny jeans, smoking expensive import cigarettes – proof of their loose morals and wastefulness” (68)