The careful reader may feel it is quite odd the author of this review of *Normalizing Occupation: The Politics of Everyday Life in the West Bank Settlements*, a collection edited by Marco Allegra Ariel Handel and Erez Maggor, has no research experience on Palestine/Israel. Indeed, I am one of those that have read and used a number of texts on Palestine/Israel despite having been studying very different urban and territorial contexts. As such, full disclosure: I shall not be able to discuss what this book adds to literature on the historical and geopolitical dimensions of the Palestine/Israel conflict. Rather, my goal is discussing the contribution that *Normalizing Occupation* brings to the field of critical urban studies and urban geopolitics—though I shall not refrain from briefly providing my (political?) perspective on what the book tells us of the conflict itself.

In the last decade or so, the works of the likes of Oren Yiftachel (2009), Eyal Weizman (2007), Alessandro Petti (2007) and Hazem Abu-Orf (2013) have been quoted and used by scholars interested in understanding contemporary urban transformations virtually everywhere around the globe. To cut a long story short, the architectural and planning strategies used by the Israeli state to reshape the geography of the West Bank—which include, but are not limited to, the strategic location of settlements and the construction of a system of road infrastructures that connect the settlements with the Israeli territory and disconnect Palestinian villages—have been considered prototypes of urban processes replicated all around the planet (fragmentation, fortification, militarization, polarization…). In short, many critical accounts of contemporary urban geopolitics have discussed how the “exceptional” processes of Palestine/Israel are “creeping”—using
Yiftachel’s idea of “creeping apartheid”–into the fabric of metropolises and cities worldwide. This endeavor has been useful to uncover horizontal connections among places at the core of contemporary urban transformations (and particularly global cities such as London, New York or Rio de Janeiro). Recently, however, growing attention to the dynamics of “ordinary” cities (Robinson 2011) has emphasized the need to balance between global and local dynamics, structural and conjunctural explanations, hegemonic and discursive processes; and refrain from using a few (most of which, exceptional) cases to explain urban transformations worldwide. My contribution to this project has been focusing on urban places outside the core of neoliberal and global geopolitics (see Tulumello 2017).

*Normalizing Occupation* takes one further step: it brings the perspective of ordinary cities to the core of urban geopolitics, emphasizing the “normal” (or, better, the normalized) at the core of the exceptional, in Palestine/Israel. And it does so by mobilizing a variegated set of conceptual approaches to the issue of Israeli settlements–see, as examples of the different, if not opposite, approaches included, the Marxian take of Danny Gutwein (Chapter 1) and the constructivist (at moments too constructivist?) perspective of Hadas Weiss (Chapter 5). As the editors emphasize in the introductory essay (p.7-11), they intend problematizing the mainstream conception of the settlements as an exception to the fabric of the “multi-cultural” Israeli state and society–an exception described as made up of lunatic extremists portrayed with a Torah and an AK-47–and rather show how the settlements have become a “mundane” part of wider processes of transformation of Israel, and particularly its state’s neoliberal restructuring. The book does so in three parts, which respectively focus on: [i] the policy/politics of settlements in amid processes of suburbanization and privatization; [ii] the diversity and heterogeneity of settlements and their populations; and [iii] the prospects for the (forced) coexistence of Palestinians and (Jewish) settlers.
Not only does this endeavor add up to the understanding of how and why settlements have become a naturalized component of Israel and Palestine—and how there can hardly be any solution to the matter without a structural rethinking of the Israeli state; it contributes, and this is where my core interest lies, to building a more global approach to urban studies (cf. Robinson 2016). I find this contribution in *Normalizing Occupation* mobilizes a set of theories and explanations developed in ordinary urban contexts; and employs them in a place that has always been presented as exceptional, and whose processes have almost exclusively been discussed as the product of the Israeli colonial project—in a way, putting upside down the Western imperialistic approach to urban studies.

Examples from different chapters show the coexistence of the geopolitical colonial project with the Israeli version of global processes of neoliberalization; and how these two dimensions sometimes reinforce each other, sometimes clash. For instance, Chapters 2, 3 and 11 focus on “suburban” settlements, those located at commuting distance from the centers of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and inhabited mostly by “settlers” that are not pushed by ideological reasons. In Israeli metros, the authors convincingly show, settlements have become an answer to the housing needs of middle-classes affected by the retrenchment of the welfare state—hence they normalized the occupation for groups who are not ideologically committed to the colonial project and often even think of themselves as “liberals”. Two other examples show the coexistence of, and contradictions among, different logics. Wendy Pullan and Haim Yacobi (Chapter 11) show the dilemma of “integration” and “inclusion” of Palestinian middle-class households that have bought houses in East Jerusalem settlements. The tension between spatial inclusion and (generally) missing social integration shows a case in which territoriality (the geopolitical goal of ethnic cleansing underscoring the Israeli settlement politics) and market economy (which allows wealthy Palestinians to settle in some settlements) clash. Amir Paz-Fuchs and Yaël
Ronen (Chapter 10) expose how occupation produces cheap labor and, at the same time, a process of “creeping annexation”, while Palestinians employed by Israeli companies fight for treatment under Israeli labor laws. In a way, these examples provide another, ultimately very ordinary, example of problematic intersections between dynamics of “race” (and racialization) and class—and I would have enjoyed if the book had adopted an explicit comparative perspective with, for instance, US-style suburbanization and White flight.

*Normalizing Occupation* shows the importance of keeping together different explanations and theoretical frameworks when attempting to unravel socio-economic and political relations in complex places such as Palestine/Israel. While the superficial reader may suggest that the focus on normalization silently “justifies” Israeli politics—see the editors’ response to this risk (pp.11-13)—my perception is that it rather ends up showing the violence of occupation with more evidence, by exposing how the daily life of the middle-class can be mobilized as an instrument of apartheid. In this sense, the reader ends up wondering whether “normalization” is a politically correct version for a process of “banalization” of the occupation, after all (a term the editors use, quite carefully, once or twice [p.3]). As Miki Kratsman and Ruthie Ginsburg argue, in a photographic essay and interview (Chapter 4), the normal/normalized settlement may well be the ultimate depiction of the “political dream” of Israeli colonialism.

Let me conclude by mobilizing a metaphor that is not used in *Normalizing Occupation*. The book depicts Palestine/Israel as an especially dense, at the same time banal, porous, and violent, *border* between what is often called the “West” and what is often called the “Global South”—a dyad I prefer to North/South because it displaces the symmetric, and rigid, dichotomy of the latter. Palestine/Israel can, from this perspective, be understood as a space of frontier [i] that is shaped at the small scale by relations of uneven development, which tend to have a more global nature elsewhere, and [ii] where such relations are incorporated within a historically dependent, geopolitical project. In this
respect, Palestine/Israel can be considered, rather than an exceptional case, a paradigmatic one (cf. Flyvbjerg 2006): It shows, at a glance, a spatially concentrated version of processes with a multi-scalar and global nature; and a particularly stark version of the capacity of the neoliberal project to adapt to very different contexts. In a way, the study of Palestine/Israel shows how longstanding geographic differences, and particularly the West/South divide, are being blurred and made more complex and multi-faceted in times of late capitalism—something that has been discussed, but not articulated in a territorial perspective, by much postcolonial thinking (see, e.g., Mezzadra and Rahola 2006). As such, despite it not adopting a comparative perspective—something that I would had appreciated from my particular point of interest—this book contributes to enriching comparative urban studies conceptually. And, though this goal was probably not explicitly sought by its authors, Normalizing Occupation ends up showing how adopting “ordinary” thinking to “exceptional” places is a powerful strategy to decenter urban studies and make them more global.

References


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