

Israeli Anthropology and American Anthropology

SMADAR LAVIE

In March three registered NGOs, Ahoti (Sistah, Hebrew), Israel's feminists-of-color movement; the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow; and Mossawa, the Advocacy Center for the Palestinian Citizens of Israel, filed an official complaint to Israel's State Comptroller against anthropology departments in all Israeli universities.

These NGOs advocate Mizrahi (Arab-Jews of Asian and North African origins) and Palestinian-Israeli human rights. The complaint was researched and co-authored by Yifat Hillel, Nurit Hajaj, Vardit Damri-Madar, Rafi Shubeli, Smadar Lavie and by the late Vicki Shiran, founder of Israel's feminist-of-color movement.

In this complaint, the NGOs sought clarification on the almost complete absence of tenured Mizrahi faculty, and the total absence of Palestinian-Israeli faculty in anthropology departments in Israeli universities. Such absences are in complete violation of any principal of equal opportunities employment. Mizrahi and Palestinian citizens of Israel consist of about 70% of Israel's citizenry.

They also noted the total absence of Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli women in both junior and senior faculty positions in Israeli universities' anthropology departments, violations of our Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli intellectual and cultural property rights, and the complete absence of an ethics code for the practice of anthropology in Israel.

COMMENTARY

They argued that Israeli Ashkenazi (European Jewish) anthropologists have made social and financial gains through the appropriation of Mizrahi and Palestinian cultures. Sixty-seven percent of Israeli anthropologists study Mizrahi and/or Palestinians. Ashkenazim consist of about 30% of Israel's citizenry and over 90% of Israel's university faculty body.

The complaint juxtaposes the data about Israeli academic apartheid practices with data about the present gendered-ethnic FTE distribution in major US anthropology departments.

It also reviews the careers and influential publications of Mizrahi and Palestinian anthropologists who, after being rejected by Israeli academia due to alleged "collegial incompatibility," have made names for themselves in Western European and US universities.

Responses

The Ahoti-Rainbow-Mossawa coalition team emailed and faxed English translations of the complaint to the AAA, the Royal Anthropological Institute of Britain, the European Association of Social Anthropologists and the Canadian Society for Anthropology and Sociology. The Society for Cultural Anthropology and the American Ethnological Society, sections of the AAA, discussed the complaint this spring, along with the AAA Executive Board, as it continues to generate ongoing discussion on the AAA Middle East Section's listserv. We now have over 700 subscribers to our monthly news updates.

The Israeli State Comptroller has yet to substantially address the concerns raised in the coalition's complaint, although he acknowledged its receipt. Currently the Israeli Anthropological Association is developing an ethics code in response to the complaint.

We find this ironic given the benevolent colonialism of the so-called progressive edition of Israeli anthropology. Even those Israeli anthropologists who pose as radical—and as part of this pose have even expressed their support in our activism—actually preserve the master Ashkenazi-Zionist narrative of anti-Arab apartheid when deciding about their choice of departmental colleagues, whether in FTE allocations, merits or promotions. In some instances when our coalition has tried to address alleged issues of Ashkenazi ethnographic beneficence or institutional racism, we have been silenced through threat of lawsuit. Yet our silence ought not be interpreted as evidence that such acts of racism do not exist.

US Anthropology's Role

In May, UC Berkeley anthropologist Lawrence Cohen visited Israel as the keynote speaker of the Israeli Anthropological Association and the Israeli Queer Studies Group. Members of the coalition met with him on May 9 to discuss the reasons for the American-focused campaign, and to request further assistance. Cohen was generous with his time and ideas, and also suggested that we organize or consult with Native American activists. Nevertheless, he expressed the fear that by siding with equal opportunity, anti-racist struggles outside the US, the AAA might appoint itself a cop of the world, so to speak, Bush-administration style. Considering the so-called "special relations" between Israel's and the US's white neo-conservative elites, however, such a fear is difficult for us to grasp.

From the onset of the Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli anti-racist struggle,

and elite anthropologists are not considered worthwhile of invitation. Perhaps because about 85% of diaspora Jewry is Ashkenazi, these US anthropologists overlook the apartheid practices of Israel's academe.

After such visits to Israeli anthropology academics, US anthropologists are then requested to reciprocate with weighty career evaluation letters that decide the fate of Israeli anthropologists' merits and promotions, invitations for sabbaticals, and assistance in getting Israeli articles admitted to prestigious periodicals and US-based university press collections.

Israeli anthropologists get promoted in Israeli universities on the basis of English-language publications mainly in US periodicals. Academic English is not accessible to the majority of Israelis. The coalition worries that given the monochromatic, elitist and insular composition of Israeli anthropology fac-

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Israeli anthropology has been applied as an arm of governmentality to better suppress it and to design pacifying policies of cooptation. This was done through in-situ cross-cultural application of the works of Victor Turner or Talcott Parsons on our transit camps, neighborhoods and villages. Paradoxically, however, Israeli anthropologists cynically quote US anthropology from the 1960s, focusing on the liberation struggles of women, minorities, immigrants, queers and other subjects under post-colonialism. The coalition finds this an empty gesture of interpolation in order to sail through the anonymous review procedures of scholarly periodicals and grants.

A largely decontextualized version of US anthropology has dictated appointments, promotions, research grants and publications politicking of Israeli anthropology at least for the last two decades. For example, many endowed visitors invited to speak at annual meetings, seminars and to guest teach in Israeli anthropology departments, are Ashkenazi Jews who are on the faculty of US Ivy League and elite universities. Non-Ivy-League

ultly, these scholars' English-language publications, written in the absence of any human subjects procedures, thereby provide a slanted view of Israeli society, and concurrently hurt the scientific reputation of academic US periodicals.

Through the public media, Israelis often learn about US intellectual interventions in sites of grave injustice outside the US, where the principals of human rights are at stake. The Ahoti-Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow-Mossawa coalition to end Israeli anthropology's apartheid merits AAA intervention and support.

If you wish to receive our updates, email ahoti_sistah@yahoo.com. ■

Smadar Lavie is a board member of Ahoti (Sistah, Hebrew), Israel's feminists-of-color movement. She wishes to thank Rafi Shubeli of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow for his helpful comments and critique. The text on the relationships between Israeli and US anthropology is a summary of the Ahoti-Mizrahi-Democratic Rainbow-Mossawa coalition's July 8, 2004, public meeting convened at the Rainbow offices in Tel Aviv to discuss and act around this particular topic.

Israeli Anthropological Association Preparing to Call for Affirmative Action

ANDRÉ LEVY, PRESIDENT
ISRAELI ANTHROPOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

The complaint mentioned in Lavie's article deals with a valid issue: Mizrahi Jews and Palestinian Arabs are underrepresented amongst faculty in Israeli universities. The Israeli Anthropological Association (IAA) has long been preoccupied with underrepresentation of underprivileged segments amongst faculty, and is the first, and so far only, academic disciplinary association in Israel to officially address the matter. In fact, its code of ethics now under prepa-

ration aims to include a call for affirmative action in faculty employment in all departments of Israeli universities and colleges. What is troubling about the article is the problematic packaging of the issue. First, is the unjustified focus on anthropology as an ostensibly rogue discipline. It is unclear to me what prompted those behind this campaign, who have yet to criticize much larger academic disciplines in Israel that marginalize minorities more blatantly, to begin their quest with anthropology. In terms of style and method, I find the frequent use of inaccurate terms and essentializing percentage figures distasteful. For example, the term "Mizrahi" is not easily definable and has often been contested. I, for one, am more comfortable labeling myself "Moroccan" than "Mizrahi." I am also astounded by the tactics of insult by insinuation the article often resorts to.

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Consider for example that Israeli anthropology, depicted in the article as an omnipotent kingdom of evil, amounts in reality to less than 30 full time tenured anthropologists in all of Israel's universities put

together. There is only one Arab amongst them and too few Mizrahim—a state of affairs we obviously disapprove of and would like to change. But, as every anthropologist employed in an Israeli university knows, it is an uphill climb. Not least since, contrary to the impression created in the article, no Israeli university has a stand-alone anthropology department. Usually, Israeli anthropologists are affiliated with joint sociology and anthropology departments. Others are affiliated with departments of Middle-East studies or history. At my own institution, Ben-Gurion University, anthropology is taught as part of the

department of behavioral science and two or three anthropologists are also employed in Middle East studies departments. Moreover, no department in any Israeli university has or ever has had a majority of anthropologists. In short, while having a degree of influence, anthropologists have never had control of who is finally recruited. a "formal complaint." Once in the post, this letter can be paraded globally in the hope that those less familiar with Israel will be persuaded it has substance. At least six months old now, it is yet to produce a single inquisitory phone call from the comptroller's otherwise diligent researchers to any Israeli university. Given the ridiculous storm-in-a-tea-cup signal this vitriolic and divisive document so obviously carries for every sensible Israeli, I am convinced that in its current framing the chances it will ever trigger change in resource allocation and recruitment practices in Israeli universities are negligible.

The zeal with which this offensive was launched against one of the smallest, most resource-hungry and dependent disciplines in Israeli academia is truly baffling. My bewilderment is coupled with a deep sense of betrayal when I recall that the author of this document never approached the IAA or any of us individually in an attempt to duly caution us, explain the campaign they have lined up or give us an opportunity to respond.

The IAA, which Edward Said chose as the only Israeli academic association to address in person, has had people like Victor Turner, Eric Wolf, Vincent Crapanzano, Kirin Narayan, Arjun Appadurai, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and many more distinguished and principled intellectuals amongst its guests and allies over the years. It is as determined as it has ever been to lead Israeli academia and society at large towards more justice, more equality and more freedom. For this, however, we need assistance from anthropologists abroad. This sordid affair forces our colleagues abroad to make a simple choice. They can side with a divisive move designed to wedge a cleft between Israeli anthropology and our community abroad; or they can help empower the IAA, and institutions like the IAA, in the ongoing, often frustrating effort to transform Israeli society. 

COMMENTARY

The oddity of addressing a serious issue such as academic underrepresentation by focusing on anthropology is matched by the ludicrous notion of filing this complaint with Israel's State Comptroller. The comptroller is a unit in the ministry of justice designed primarily to scrutinize government ministries and other state agencies for corruption and financial mismanagement—not universities for their recruitment policies. It seems to me that this particular and grossly ineffective measure was chosen because of one obvious advantage it does have: the ease with which a simple letter mailed to the Comptroller's office can be entitled

AAA AWARDS CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Deadline March 1, 2005

Franz Boas Award for Exemplary Service to Anthropology

... Service to the AAA is commonly recognized, as are outstanding applications of anthropological knowledge to improving the human condition.

AAA/McGraw Hill Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching of Anthropology

... Recognizes teachers who have contributed to and encouraged the study of anthropology.

Anthropology in Media Award

... Recognizes the successful communication of anthropology to the general public through the media.

Margaret Mead Award

... Awarded to beginning or mid-career scholars for particular accomplishments that interpret anthropology in ways that make them more meaningful to a broadly concerned public.

Robert B. Textor and Family Prize for Excellence in Anticipatory Anthropology

... Rewards the use of anthropological knowledge and practice to allow the public to make informed choices to improve societies' chances for realizing preferred futures.

For nomination procedures see
www.aaanet.org/committees/awards/awards.htm
or contact Kathy Ano
at kano@aaanet.org