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Themed Book Review on Gender and Conservatism

***Righteous Transgressions: Women's Activism on the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right*. By Lihi Ben Shitrit. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. 304 pp. $70.00 (hardcover), $22.95 (paperback).**

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A popular belief in some circles — that if a festering conflict were left up to women to manage, swords would naturally melt into ploughshares — is challenged by looking at the role of women in right-wing organizations in various conflict zones. Lihi Ben Shitrit trains her lens on four such movements among Israelis and Palestinians: Hamas, the Islamic Movement in Israel, the settler movement, and the ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi political party Shas.

Shitrit is particularly intrigued by what she calls "righteous transgressions" (4). These are episodes in which women stray from their ordinarily prescribed gender roles to engage in particular forms of activism. To explain these transgressive episodes, Shitrit points to the idea of "frames of exception" (12). As the political cause justifies the behavior, in their eyes, they experience these episodes as an "exceptional temporality of struggle" (15).

But Shitrit notes that not all movements enable equally transgressive behavior: the two nationalist groups among the four — Hamas and the settler movement — enable a higher degree of transgressive behavior than do the Islamic Movement and Shas — the ones that are more

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focused on proselytizing over nationalism. Proselytizing movements, by contrast, see more compliant behavior on the part of their women members. (However, Shitrit notes that all four movements indeed have a proselytizing component.)

There is a suprapolitical aspect to Shitrit's project, something that comes through in her discussion of case selection. By comparing two Israeli cases with two Palestinian ones, she tells us, she is able to challenge some essentialist notions of Islam. The promotion of dichotomous gender roles — gender complementarity, in the language of the book — is not specific to one religion. And she takes care to point out that maintaining differences among the sexes within particular communities is, paradoxically perhaps, a function of modernity rather than existing in spite of it.

Her descriptive, ethnographic treatment is useful for understanding less obvious angles of these four movements across two cases. Her overall research question, though, may be less satisfying for those seeking a more overtly explanatory account where the observations are surprising. And so while the division of the four movements into nationalist versus proselytizing helps us understand the variation in women's activities, one could argue that it is not particularly surprising that nationalist movements would press for more gender transgression than would proselytizing movements.

Nevertheless, the ethnographic approach allows for some gems. Two examples stand out as being particularly fascinating: one is an extended quotation from Shlomit, a settler woman, who points out that her apparent rage in a confrontation (caught on video) with peace activists and Palestinians and Israeli soldiers is "all an act" (in Shlomit's words). "As Shlomit explained, she was able to perform this unruliness because she was doing it for a greater cause" (142). The episode reminds us that political activism is often as much about performativity as it is about passion.

Another intriguing moment — one laden with gender complexity — is the message left behind by Reem Riyashi, a female suicide bomber from Hamas. Her message contains a strong rebuke of Palestinian masculinity — thus perhaps underscoring the importance of underlying gender expectations even as she, by acting as a suicide bomber, challenges typical gender norms. "You [Palestinian women] are responsible," Riyashi writes, "for leading this nation to victory and to strength and honor after the pseudo-men had brought her to this present lowliness and shame" (174).

Other notable parts of the narrative are where Shitrit lets us in, early on, on how she constructs her role as researcher. To contend with the idea that

some of her interlocutors in these political movements "do not necessarily have … a commitment" to liberal-democratic pluralism, she deploys a method she calls "acting as if." By this she means "[a]cting as if I can listen and hear, acting as if I could be open to eventually reevaluating my commitment to the principles of liberal pluralist democracy. In other words, acting as if openness is present on my part in this conversation" (27–28).

The reader might appreciate an even fuller interrogation of her subjectivity as it pertains to her role as researcher. While she does not owe the reader an answer to these questions, useful insights might be revealed by discussing how her Mizrahi background (she mentions that her name is of Mizrahi heritage) might affect her perceptions and interpretations of the Shas experience, for example. Or how her Israeli identity might affect how she engages with the Palestinian experience, and so on. (There is no obvious answer to either of these questions, of course.)

Moreover, given that part of the framework relies on describing self-other relations as understood by the respective groups, it would be useful to paint a more detailed picture of the various directions in which these arrows point. How does having two obvious "Others" — the government and the Israel Defense Forces, at times, in addition to the Palestinians — affect settler activism? This also means that "price tag" attacks (as revealed by their name) are intended to rattle the government as much as they are instances of actual violence enacted on Palestinians and their property. For Shas, the Other could be the Ashkenazi establishment and/or secular Israelis more generally, while the party's attitude toward the Palestinians is somewhat more nuanced than we might expect. (Shas lent its coalition support to the Yitzhak Rabin government in the early 1990s enabling the Oslo process to proceed.) How might having more than a single "Other" affect the actors' own understandings of gender complementarity — something that draws on a certain binary way of organizing social reality?

Overall, the book serves to uncover new ways of thinking about gender, religion, nationalism, and politics in the context of protracted conflict. It is a valuable addition to understanding the politics of Israel-Palestine while serving to amplify voices that have been rendered less prominent across much of the literature on conservative, religious-national groups.

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