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Palestinian City. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania
Press, 2018.**

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Tamara Neuman, a political anthropologist who completed a Fulbright Fellowship in Amman, Jordan, is affiliated with the Middle East Institute at Columbia University in New York City. Neuman was also the acting chair of the Peace and Conflict Studies program at Bryn Mawr College. In *Settling Hebron*, she examines land claims made by the Jewish settlers in the military occupied Palestinian West Bank and focuses in particular on the seven thousand Jewish “ideological settlers” of the Kiryat Arba community. In this book, Neuman provocatively connects two seemingly unrelated notions: religion and territoriality (space) and indirectly asks the reader to reflect on a number of important ethical questions.

Neuman’s focus is on Kiryat Arba, a heavily militarized enclave with a large number of children, which was established illegally and recognized retroactively, after its members proclaimed their religious “right” to inhabit the region. Neuman emphasizes that the territorial claims made by the ideological settlers of Kiryat Arba serve as a means for investigating identity creation. The book is composed of six chapters. Chapter One focuses on three populations: the ideological settlers, soldiers, and Palestinian farmers. These three groups present drastically different perspectives. While settlers speak of Jewish origins on Palestinian lands, a religious Israeli soldier focuses on the danger these settlers place on fellow soldiers tasked with their protection, and a Palestinian farmer underscores the hardship inflicted by settlers on his and his family’s life, which he terms “a double subjugation.”

Chapter Two turns to a brief historical overview and pays particularly close attention to what settlers term the Jewish “origins” of the contested region, which is situated within the “legal gray zone of military occupation” (p. 22). To illustrate, Neuman discusses how Jewish religious holidays (*e.g.*, Passover) were used to establish settlers’ initial presence and to reinscribe territorial boundaries. Chapter Three further builds on this reinscription of boundaries and introduces another angle, namely, “the lens of gender.” Here Neuman focuses on maternalism and motherhood as a means of political ideology. She explores the roles played by women in forming and assisting the ideology of settler identity. In Chapter Four, Neuman turns to the concept of ethnicity and addresses its redeployment and transformation, which served to align it with “interpretative reorientation of Jewish tradition” (p. 99). In Chapter Five, Neuman directs the reader’s attention to Judaism’s legal traditions and practices. She emphasizes religious violence and explores its exhibition in the context of the partitioned space of the Tomb of Patriarchs. Here she offers her analysis of the 1994 Goldstein massacre,¹ which took place inside the Tomb. In this chapter, she also outlines how Jewish beliefs and practices came into conflict with Islamic practices. In the final chapter, Neuman returns to the question of settlers’ insistence on Jewish spatial origins and their quest to “[bring] Jews back to their presumed place of origin in Hebron” and demonstrates how settlers “bypass [the] law and use rabbinical authority as a cover for [doing so]” (p. 24).

Neuman stipulates her period of investigation of the ideological settlement as starting right after the failed Oslo accords in 1994, when public opinion turned negatively against Israeli ideological settlers, particularly those in Kiryat Arba. To orient the reader, Neuman explains that the ideological settlers of Kiryat Arba established their settlement in military occupied Palestinian Hebron because “they were deemed to be exception to the security strategy pursued by the Israeli government at the time” (p. 7). She reminds the reader that the assassination of Israel’s Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who worked tirelessly on peace initiatives, had ties with

Kiryat Arba. She writes that her informers (settlers) often perceived themselves “as under siege and targets of government surveillance” (p. 21) based on their interpretation of the Israeli national community’s negative views of settlers. She clarifies that the definition of the term “settlement” relates to its colonial origins and highlights that the argument over the contested space is related to the perceived absence of borders, noting that the Jewish settlements are “cojoined to an existing state that has never entirely defined its borders” (p. 7).

Neuman demonstrates various approaches used by Hebron settlers in their attempts to legitimize their demands for and rights to the land. Neuman first explores the strategy used by ideological settlers of disregarding and, in some cases, manipulating the past. She writes that this strategy results in “an ideological medium of change that can be actively used to shape forms of domination” (p. 8). Specifically, settlers redefine the space by recalling select historical events (*i.e.*, those that substantiate their claim to the region) while overlooking the events that would undermine their claim. Settlers also, she says, overlook key historical details that would weaken their claim to the territory. For example, settlers claim an uninterrupted Jewish presence in the contested territories, presenting the Jews as “not strangers in Palestinian areas” but as having been present in the region “from Biblical times to the present” (p. 33). Neuman does not dispute that there is evidence that Hebron has long been considered sacred to Jews and that there is documentation that an Arab-speaking Jewish minority lived in the city during the Ottoman period, but she reminds the reader that the Kiryat Arba settlement was established in 1968, long after the biblical epoch to which settlers refer and long after a sustained absence of Jewish residents in the region. The assertion regarding the historical presence of Jews in Palestine also overlooks a key difference, namely the fact that while an Arab-speaking Jewish minority was embedded into a predominantly Muslim society, it was never an armed minority.

Rejection of territorial change (*i.e.* after conquest), says Neuman, is linked to the approach to memory in which any form of local memory is erased. This erasure of memory “reconstitutes the diasporic and transportable features of Jewish tradition” and replaces it with “precise Biblical sites” (p. 11). The transportability of Jewish history and locality are presented as stable and unchanged. Biblical literalism is used to apply a legalistic aspect of Judaism to make territorial claims. Further, these claims are connected to the place-bound communities characterized by self-enclosure and the absence of any interest in participating in a wider Israeli national community.

In addition to the manipulation of the historical past, Neuman asserts that settlers also re-interpret Jewish traditions and thinkers as a means of supporting territorial claims to the region. Neuman notes the reconstitution of the idea of redemption, which ideological settlers form by basing some of their arguments on the writings of Rav Kook² and the subsequent writings of his son, Zvi Yehuda Kook.³ At the core of the settlers’ actions, says Neuman, is the fact that they “circumvent Judaism’s admonition not to conquer and blur the divide in Judaism’s legal tradition between hypothetical laws that are only to be implemented in the future and those intended to be observed in the present” (pp. 15-16). Neuman writes that the settlers’ remaking of the tradition “entails the wholesome reorientation of [Judaism’s] primary texts, ethical obligations, and rabbinic interpretations, in effect narrowing and particularizing the tradition’s interpretive possibilities” (p. 28). Settlers also invoke textual resources, including making references to the medieval thinkers such as Maimonides and Isaac de Leon. They postulate that if these thinkers could have known of the current state of affairs, they would have supported “settling.” In this approach, says Neuman, settlers are using a “retroactive consensus of opinion across time” (p. 119) by ignoring the true essence of these thinkers’ thought. To make their demands, Neuman

says, settlers used the matter of exclusion rather than inclusion of certain Jewish texts, “in effect rejecting Judaism’s multivalent and multilayered form of observance” (p. 29).

Another strategy discussed by Neuman relates to the settlers’ use of linguistic resemblance between Hebrew and Arab to support the “worthiness of Jewish settler claims” (p. 35). Neuman notes this approach collapses difference “into...sameness” and renames Palestinian places in order to “actively reorient a cognitive field” (p. 35). Neuman also discusses a number of what she calls “gray areas.” An example of a gray area is in the role played by the military authorities. Whereas it was argued that the military was supposed to prevent any permanent Jewish presence in the contested region, the facts do not substantiate this claim. She also points out another gray area, namely the carrying of weaponry on the Sabbath, which is disallowed unless there are exceptional circumstances. Neuman notes that to avoid breaking the prohibition, settlers invoke “being in ‘mortal danger.’” However, invoking this principle neglects the fact that they live in the settlement of their own free will rather than being forced to live there.⁴ Carrying a gun on the Sabbath thus violates the premise of equalizing differences (p. 87). Neuman also addresses the preferential treatment of the adherence to divine authority at the expense of following the secular law. She notes that in the cases when secular law calls to adhere to the interests of everyone and not just a specific religious group, it becomes ignored. She points out to the instances when rabbinic authority is invoked for ideological purpose, including cancelling the need to follow international law (pp. 140-142).

Perhaps a most heart wrenching discussion relates to the spatial character of ethnic exclusivism intricately connected to interactions between ideological settlers and Palestinians on the boundaries of Kiryat Arba. Neuman maintains that these interactions remain largely unacknowledged and that this lack of attention is a result of “emotional indifference toward the other.” She argues that this approach of non-recognition of the other carries in itself the seeds for constant outbreaks of violence. This indifference is particularly problematic given the settlers’ and Palestinians’ direct exposure to and visibility of each other. Recalling the Goldstein massacre, she argues that the event “was not just a random act of violence, but rather the product of more systemic violence grounded in asymmetrical power relations and the evolving spatial arrangement of a sacred religious site” (p. 149). This highly disturbing event illustrates many aspects of “a preoccupation with the erasing the very limits that marked the viability of the Palestinian presence in Hebron and elsewhere” (p. 127). This example engages various forces and concepts, including military force, spatial separation, and Jewish religious services themselves. It also disturbingly highlights “a lived disdain for the other, as well as any limits set by law” (p. 150).

Neuman maintains that religious violence in relation to the interactions (or the absence of thereof) between settlers and their Palestinian neighbors reflects on settlers’ redefinition of the sacred space “within a militarized context” (p. 125). She argues that this redefinition of Jewish sacredness is shaped by spatial redefinition no less than it is by the settlers’ understanding of Jewish tradition. In her view, settlers use their understanding of Jewish tradition to make it fit, however superficially, their spatial claims.

Settling Hebron is a warning against religious extremism that aims to legitimize its claims by various means of manipulation and reinterpretation of history and selective application of religious tenets and traditions. In addition, the work underscores a set of other problems, including an internal struggle of pitting one Jew against another in the attempt to fashion one’s role and identity within Israeli society. The issue of formulating and maintaining Jewish identity becomes particularly problematic when one is confronted with settler ideology, which goes

against many central premises of Jewish teachings and Jewish ethics. Settler ideology rests on the premise of a long-standing Jewish past, which in many cases, has been remade to fit the settler ideology of expansion. At the same time, while this approach addresses the issue of sacredness by negating and erasing Palestinian spatiality, it also contests the Muslim relation to sacredness.

Newman argues that her ethnographic study “grapple[s] with various aspects of continuity and rupture, evaluating not only the ways Jewish tradition has been remade but its implications for equality, accommodation, and social justice with respect to a Palestinian population under occupation” (p. 183). This study indisputably troubles the reader’s conscience and calls the reader to recognize “the threat to democracy, personal freedom and human rights” (p. 184) posed by the ideological settlement of Kiryat Arba. This is a challenging but necessary read that enhances the reader’s understanding not only of the complexity of the contestation of claims to land but also the role of sacredness, visibility, respect, and ethics in unpacking the conflict surrounding territorial claims in the Palestinian West Bank.

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Notes

¹ Baruch Goldstein, one of Kiryat Arba’s three doctors, entered the Tomb of the Patriarchs carrying an automatic weapon with hundreds of rounds of ammunition and shot hundreds rounds into a crowd of over 800 Muslim worshippers (p. 123).

² Abraham Isaac Kook (1875-1935) was an Orthodox rabbi, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, also a scholar of Kabbalah and a renowned Torah scholar.

³ Neuman points to the fact that the Kook’s thought animated the actions of the Gush Emunim, the religious settler movement of the mid-seventies, which in turn informed the ideas for many of the first ideological settlements in the West Bank.

⁴ This is not the only example of settlers’ coming up with their own interpretations. In another example, Neuman discusses the settlers’ approach to Israel’s celebration of Independence Day. Neuman writes that settlers’ celebration of Independence Day differs from that of Israel proper. Settlers infuse this celebration with the message that “Israeli independence had not actually been achieved” since not all of the people of Israel have “return[ed] to their entire biblical land” (p. 101).