



Normalizing Occupation: The Politics of Everyday Life in the West Bank Settlements, edited by Ariel Handel, Marco Allegra, and Erez Maggor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. 244 pages. \$90.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper, \$34.99 e-book.

REVIEWED BY BRANWEN SPECTOR

When discussing Israel and Palestine, the words “settlement” and “normalization” are often mentioned in the same context without explanation. In defining and exploring these terms, *Normalizing Occupation: The Politics of Everyday Life in the West Bank Settlements* attempts to lift the veil on what lies behind the occupation and the settlement enterprise. Alas, it does so from the outset using an overwhelmingly Israeli narrative. In addition to a near-complete absence of Palestinian voices or viewpoints regarding the settlements, the settlers

themselves are represented, despite the authors’ best efforts, as a homogenous body without agency or political motive. While the editors of the book attempt to distance themselves from the occupation machine wing of the Israeli state, its contributors use occupation language and habits throughout the book in their representations of space, presenting a particularly complicated relationship with the concept of “normal.”

In the introduction, *Normalizing Occupation* states that the book intends to challenge the stereotype of settlers as fundamentalist religious nationalists, though it is not made clear to whom this stereotype is relevant and why it should be challenged. Furthermore, while the editors establish that settlement is intrinsic to Zionism, at no point do they acknowledge that they and their contributing authors are, by their own reckoning, settlers themselves. Hadas Weiss’s chapter on Ariel, for instance, emphasizes that the settlement has an air of “physical normalcy” (p. 82) without ever addressing what the standards of normalcy are that might pertain to an Israeli academic.

Marco Allegra, one of the only non-Israeli contributors to the book, gives this idea further purchase. Interviewing residents of a large settlement east of Jerusalem, he establishes that the majority do not consider themselves settlers but commuters, viewing the settlement merely as continuous with Jerusalem. Whatever his intention, the result further solidifies the notion of settlements as normal.

Contributor Erez Tzafadia explains the difference between a settlement and an informal outpost without addressing the fact that both terms are those used by the occupation regime in a bid to neutralize the (il)legality of the settlements. Keen to impress upon the reader a sense that outposts

are normal patterns of Zionist colonial expansion, Tzafadia fails to interrogate and instead reproduces the problematic category of (Israeli) “state land”[†] in the West Bank.

Contributing author Assaf Harel claims that settlers see themselves as “powerful agents of change” (p. 130), and Daniel Gutwein’s chapter unpacks the initial processes of neoliberalization that led to the retraction of the welfare state inside Israel “proper,” and the use of settlements as “compensatory mechanisms” (p. 21) with which settlers are kept loyal through subsidized land and cheaper services. Since these settlers are not consulted or represented in the chapter, their political desire to settle new land for Israel is silenced, and they are portrayed as being without agency.

The same treatment is used by Lee Cahaner writing on ultra-Orthodox settlers who choose to live segregated from the rest of society. She describes ultra-Orthodox settlers as relocating “out of material necessity determined by more structural considerations and constraints” (p. 113). In light of the significant influence that ultra-Orthodox settlers play in Israeli politics, this statement is questionable.

Throughout the book, Palestinians are commented on sparingly and in tellingly limited terms. In writing that “Palestinian acts of violence provide a stark contrast to [the settlers’] own professed peacefulness,” (p. 83) Weiss, for example, casts Palestinians as “violent” without further explanation. In their chapter examining labor laws in settlements, Paz-Fuchs and Ronen also appear uninterested in a contemporary Palestinian voice. They expertly explain the nuance between the differential use of Jordanian and Israeli law as a form of “creeping annexation” (p. 177), but fail to elaborate on how this affects Palestinian workers, or to include their testimony.

In the only chapter contributed by a Palestinian, Honaida Ghanim shows how the term “settler” has evolved in Palestinian usage, identifying it as “a direct translation of the Hebrew, ‘one who makes his land into his homeland’” (p. 158). However, this analysis draws heavily on academic and intellectual resources and provides no contemporary Palestinian conceptions of settlement.

The book’s final chapter makes reference to some forty-five hundred Palestinians described as having “infiltrated” (p. 194) the East Jerusalem settlements in which they live—a hostile term used by the Israeli government to describe non-Jewish attempts to reside in Israel. This and other notions of “heterogeneity,” widely applied across the volume to describe the settler population of the West Bank, are ironic, given that only Jewish Israelis may purchase or rent land in West Bank settlements.

While *Normalizing Occupation* is an early contribution to a growing body of (English) literature on Israel’s illegal settlements, it reproduces several of the problems it seeks to illuminate; in its attempts to portray the region as heterogeneous, the book offers a one-sided, normalizing, and biased representation of it. And in silencing Palestinian narratives and histories, it ignores the Palestinians’ integration into the fabric of the settlements as builders, service workers, traders, neighbors, and the dispossessed of their land. The overwhelming impression the book leaves with

[†] This term is used throughout the book without interrogation. “State land” refers to West Bank land that the Israeli state has seized as public property and whose legality cannot be questioned. Given that international law does not recognize the seizure of land by coercion, this category of land ownership is extremely problematic.

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the reader is that Israeli scholars have a complicated relationship with the concepts of “normality” and “occupation,” which is not a new phenomenon for residents and scholars of Palestine.

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