Israeli Anthropology and American Anthropology

SMADAR LAVE

In March three registered NGOs, Ahotti (Skust, Hebrew), Israel's feminists-of-color movement; the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow; and Mosassa, 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 Yiftah Hillel, Nurr Elitaj, Yair Ela, and the late Viki Shiran, founder of Israel's feminist-of-color faculty.

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 opportunity and employment. Mizrahim 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 ethic code for the practice of anthropology in Israel.

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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 50% 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.

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 a research conference on Native American activism. Nevertheless, he expressed the fear that by siding with equal opportunity, anti-racist struggles outside the US, the AAA might turn itself into a tool of the US, to speak and administrate on the basis of English-language publications mainly in US periodicals. A largely decontextualized version of US anthropology has dictated appointments, promotions, research grants and publications of Israeli anthropology at least for the last two decades.

A largely decontextualized version of US anthropology has dictated appointments, promotions, research grants and publications of Israeli anthropology at least for the last two decades. 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 work 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, queer 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 of Israeli anthropology at least for the last two decades. For example, many endowed scholars 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 faculty and elite anthropologists are not considered worthwhile of invitation. Perhaps because about 85% of diaspora jews is Ashkenazi, these US anthropologists overlook the aspirations and practical needs of Israel's academic community.

After such visits to Israeli anthropology academics, US 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 Israel's. The coalition worries that the given mono-chromatic, elitist and insular condition of Israeli anthropology fac-

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Israeli Anthropological Association Preparing to Call for Affirmative Action

ANDRE LEVY, PRESIDENT
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The complaint mentioned in Lave'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 as 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-

together. There is only one Arab amongst them and too few Mizrahi—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 standalone 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

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ratiom 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 distressful. 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 innuendo the article often resorts to.

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. In this context, the complaint of an attitude of discrimination or prejudice is perhaps equally as important as the need for a formal Complaint.

A formal complaint. Once in the post, this letter can be parsed globally in the hope that those less familiar with Israel will be persuaded that it has substance. At least six months old now, it is yet to produce a single inquisitive 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 independent 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 its individual members in an attempt to evoke caution, explain the campaign they have lined up or give us an opportunity to respond.

The IAA, which Edward Said chose as the only Jewish academic association to address in person, has had people like Victor Turner, Eric Wolf, Vincent Crapanzano, Kitt Narayan, Arjun Appadurai, Nancy Schepher-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 world affair forces our colleagues abroad to make a simple choice. They can side with a divisive move designed to wedge a cleat 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 by

COMMENTARY

The oddity of addressing a serious issue such as academic under-representation by focusing on anthropologists is matched by the ludicrous notion of filing this complaint with Israel’s State Comptroller. The comptroller’s case is 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

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