

Sara Yael Hirschhorn, *City on a Hilltop: American Jews and the Israeli Settler Movement*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 368.

by *Caterina Bandini*

A study that is “half about ‘Jewishness’ in contemporary America, and half about ‘Americanness’ in contemporary Israel” (p. 18): this is the intent of Sara Yael Hirschhorn’s first monograph on the role of American Jews in the Israeli settler movement. Drawing upon a nearly decade-long research based on interviews, media, academic sources and archival materials, the book explores the motivations of young, well educated, mainly white-collar professionals American Jews who chose to leave their comfort zone to settle over the Green Line between the late 1960s and the late 1980s. The main object of inquiry is the combination of liberal values and an illiberal project, which is also the author’s personal concern as she identifies with American liberal Zionism from the very first pages.

The first chapter opens with a statistical and demographic profile indicating 60,000 people (an estimated 15% of the whole settler population) as the number of settlers of Jewish-American origins who hold citizenship in the United States, a large cohort among American-Israeli citizens living under Israeli jurisdiction. The author highlights the role of the Six-Day War in re-activating an important network uniting largely inactive American Jews, some of whom would later refer to this moment as the starting point of their commitment to the settler enterprise. It bears emphasizing that, as other scholars quoted in the chapter have pointed out, the 1967 turn did not create the sentiment of solidarity within this group – it awakened it. The sociological concept of abeyance structures, developed by social movement theory, would have helped clarify the continuity in Jewish American support to Israel between 1948 and 1967, when dormant networks were re-activated and led to further mobilization.¹

The war also represented a moment of intensive religious revival – merely sketched out in the chapter – that served as the basis, together with previous activist experiences, for Jewish immigration to the West Bank. Most of the future Israeli settlers were newly observant Jews coming from the upper middle class, whose primary identity was as liberal or left-wing activists engaged in the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam war protests. The interviews excerpts bring up that

¹ Verta Taylor, “Social Movement Continuity. The Women’s Movement in Abeyance,” *American Sociological Review* 54/5 (1989): 761-75.

settlement activity was perceived as an expression of Jewish American liberalism, as a struggle for freedom analogous to those of the Vietnamese or the African-American population.

This theme underlies the following three chapters, which present case studies of Israeli settlements established by American groups. In all three, modern-day pioneers aimed to conciliate religio-political imperatives with an alternative, communal lifestyle project. Interestingly, moving to the West Bank was not perceived as a break with their original background, but rather as a way of bringing America to the occupied territories. Two aspects of the settlers' experience are particularly well analyzed: the more or less successful connection of the various American groups with the Israeli bureaucracy, and the problematic relations between American settlers and other populations present on the territory (notably, Palestinian communities and non-American Jewish settlers).

Chapter Two constitutes the first attempt to narrate the story of the American settlers who founded Yamit in the Sinai. The first group of immigrants came to the Peninsula in the fall of 1975, less than two years before the general elections that would bring Likud's Menachem Begin to power as Prime Minister. From the beginning, the relationship between the Israeli government and the aspiring settlers was very tense, revealing a conflict of idealism and *realpolitik*. The Sinai Peninsula was a post-war strategic site for the State of Israel; the Israeli government had decided to give housing preference to the families of IDF soldiers who were going to work at the nearby military bases. Furthermore, the Begin administration was secretly consenting to exchange the Sinai for a peace deal with Egypt while publicly rejecting any plan to evacuate the Peninsula. The effect of the Camp David Accords on the settlers was devastating: a member of the American *garin* doesn't hesitate to refer to the demolition of Yamit in April 1982 as his "own personal Holocaust" (p. 92).

Efrat and Tekoa, both located in Gush Etzion in the West Bank, are the subjects of the following two chapters, respectively. Efrat was founded by an Israeli activist and an American Rabbi in 1983. Unlike Yamit, it is the emblem of a very successful cooperation between founders and the Israeli authorities, benefiting from access to the highest corridors of power from the very beginning of the project. Although Palestinian claims to the land were immediately raised, Efrat settlers had an initial alliance with local Palestinians against Gush Emunim activists, before the outbreak of the First Intifada and the Oslo process put a drastic end to this fragile cooperation.

Tekoa was founded as an outpost for military support after the Yom Kippur War in 1975. Four years later, Garin Lev Tzion, founded by Zionist activists from the Upper West Side in Manhattan, settled in the area. Of the three cases analyzed, Tekoa has experienced the harshest clashes with the native Palestinian population, with a long series of attacks and murders still ongoing today. Strikingly, Tekoa's late Rabbi Menachem Froman was the founder of a controversial religious peace movement. I should add that shortly after his death in 2013, his widow and two of his students founded a joint Israeli-Palestinian initiative for inter-religious dialogue and reconciliation based in Gush Etzion.

It appears clear that the attempt to conciliate Western universalism and Jewish particularism is a predominant characteristic of the American-Israeli discourse beyond the Green Line. The last chapter of the book highlights the antithetical paths chosen by American settlers: from acts of terrorism to public relations projects, with the latter being a reaction to the former. Against the backdrop of bloody attacks committed by some American-Israeli settlers, others invented a rights-based discourse to defend the settlements vis-a-vis the international community. Although it tackles the little-known history of settlers' diplomacy, the last chapter seems more a list of names and events than a cohesive reflection on the tensions pervading American-Israeli settler society at the dawn of the Oslo peace process. Advancing in time beyond Oslo to the mid-1990s, it would have been beneficial to portray the new generation of American settlers in greater detail.

The book under review is a highly readable, historically grounded, and nuanced account of a crucial component of the Israeli settler population. It heralds a second generation of scholars studying the settlers, but without the typically politicized preconceptions: approaching the settlers neither as fanatic monsters, nor, in my view, by focusing exclusively on their hostility towards the Palestinians or their praised contribution to the Zionist project. In doing so, the book echoes other recent works on the topic that underline the complex articulation of religio-political imperatives with lifestyle and economic concerns.² The author rejects most of the popular terminology used to characterize the settlers, including notions of extremism, right-wing allegiance, and zealotry. Instead, she describes her interviewees as “nice [people] engaged in a not-so-nice political program” (p. 11). In the conclusion, she emphasizes how settlements are far from being the only

² Marco Allegra, Ariel Handel, and Erez Maggor, *Normalizing Occupation. The Politics of Everyday Life in the West Bank Settlements*, (Bloomington-Indianapolis : Indiana university press, 2017).

obstacle to a future peace agreement, and calls for a deeper understanding of the “multiplicity of ideologies, constituencies, and discourses within this movement today” (p. 221) – which appears as an urgent scholarly and political imperative.

The author’s social proximity to her interviewees is definitely an ethnographic asset, and more details about this relationship would have been helpful. At the same time, her connection with the Zionist narrative brings about debatable choice of words (Palestinians who commit attacks against settlers are always referred to as “terrorists”) and informs the theoretical framework, as in her argument for the classification of *aliya* as a legitimate “ethnic return migration” (p. 18). More elaborate references to other historical cases (the India-Pakistan parallel is only invoked in the conclusion) would have helped inscribe the Israeli settler movement in the broader framework of settler colonialism. Finally, a more thorough examination of the economic backbone provided by American Jewry to the settler enterprise would have completed a portrait of the constituency under consideration.

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How to quote this article:

Caterina Bandini, Review of *City on a Hilltop: American Jews and the Israeli Settler Movement*, by Sara Yael Hirschhorn, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, n.17, September 2020

DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/1837