

‘Mizrahim: A success story’

Prof. Meirav Aharon Gutman is fed up with hearing about the discrimination of the communities that comprise Israel's social periphery. Her vast body of research paints a very different picture

Or Kashti

In December 1999, a few months after Ehud Barak defeated Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel's elections and promised a “dawn of a new day,” and just before the millennium celebrations, a three-day conference was held at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, titled “Society and Culture from a Mizrahi Perspective.” It was the first conference of its kind, bringing together leading scholars, social activists and educators.

At the event, Mizrahi identity (that is, relating to Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent) was not treated as a social problem but rather as a starting point for a new analysis of Israeli society. The gathering marked a celebratory moment for critical theory in the country. In the closing session, Meirav Aharon Gutman, a young master's student in the sociology department at Tel Aviv University, took the stage and told a packed audience that the emperor had almost no clothes.

She argued that the conference, which had promised to focus on the Mizrahi perspective, had largely concentrated on decoding mechanisms of Ashkenazi oppression. Aharon Gutman sought the perspective Mizrahim had relating to themselves.

When given the floor, she contended that reality was far more complex than “adopting naïve categories defined and formulated for us by the elite-making factory, rather than arising from the Mizrahi experience.” The ensuing discussion was heated and provoked furious reactions. Some participants even accused Aharon Gutman of sabotaging the early stages of “the critical project.”

A quarter of a century has passed. Aharon Gutman is now a professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning at the **Technion** – Israel Institute of Technology, specializing in urban sociology. Her recent book, “Standing on Their Own: On Urban Sociology and Mizrahiyut in Israel” (published by Lambda Scholarship – The Open University of Israel/Ben-Gurion University), explores how concepts developed by the so-called critical community were appropriated by the right and projected onto the public as a threatening shadow, contributing to the unraveling of Israeli society.

At the same time, Aharon Gutman does not spare the critical approach from critique, arguing that it has become frozen in time and has failed to document or understand the rise of the Mizrahi middle class. Nothing irritates her more than the portrayal of Mizrahim as victims. She rejects the claim that injustices, institutional discrimination, racism and condescension erased the agency of Mizrahim and “Mizrahiness” (which she refers to as *mizrahiyut*).

Even in the harshest conditions of oppression, she told Haaretz, “People keep their voice. Despite all the hardships they endured, immigration did not crush Mizrahi immigrants. In in-depth interviews spanning decades, they view it as the beginning of redemption, both collective and personal. This is the day they were reborn.”

In her view, the failure of the critical approach may stem from importing the language and concepts of European-American sociological research and imposing them on Israeli reality. Furthermore, the constant emphasis on the various mechanisms of oppression employed by Ashkenazi Jews against Mizrahi immigrants – in education, the labor market, geographic space and beyond – actually preserved the Ashkenazi “white gaze,” even after its dominance had diminished.

“In most critical studies, Mizrahim and Mizrahiness are presented as subjects of their circumstances. The discourse adopts the passive voice of ‘weakened’ and ‘marginalized’ Mizrahim, and in doing so unequivocally assigns responsibility for a variety of situations to the social structure and the establishment,” she says.

What's wrong with this kind of analysis?

“Focusing on state institutions and large social structures signaled to individuals that they didn't need to scrutinize themselves harshly, as there was a reason their children were enrolled in vocational rather than academic education. They weren't stupid – but were simply directed there. There's something very liberating in recognizing a greater

power, but alongside it came anger, and the combination created a social energy that became political fuel. This blocked any possibility of criticism of Mizrahim and Mizrahiness, whether from outside or within. Any criticism was dismissed as racism. A group without the ability for self-critique is a stagnant group.

“Moreover, people don't focus on social gaps in their daily lives,” the scholar continues. “They remember the conditions in which they were raised, compared with those they now provide for their children, and feel considerable satisfaction. The ‘victim mindset’ allows them to have it both ways: to enjoy an improved standard of living while continuing to see themselves as victims of circumstances beyond their control.

“My question is: when will we know that this has been resolved, that this tension has been pacified? Aren't we dealing with a thirst that will never be quenched, no matter what happens or how much social mobility occurs? The claim that there's a victimized sector and an oppressive establishment creates a circular argument

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in which Ashkenazi Jews, identified with the establishment, are always blamed for the social condition of the Mizrahi community.”

According to Aharon Gutman, her colleagues' emphasis on the persistence of social gaps even into the third generation of Mizrahi Jews “prevented all of us from seeing that Mizrahim were creating new pathways of social mobility. Mizrahim are a remarkable success story.”

The real elitism

Aharon Gutman, 52, was born in the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona, the youngest of six children. Her mother immigrated from Iran and her father from Iraq. She vividly remembers the first Lebanon war of 1982. “Alongside the hardships of war, it was a story about endurance. We didn't feel peripheral; we felt like a distant frontier – the frontline of the Zionist effort.”

Her parents emphasized the importance of education, and many of her childhood friends went on to become academics. “When you live in a generally homogeneous community, talking about social gaps isn't part of daily conversation – not in family circles nor in social ones,” she says. “The understanding was that we were really, really smart. Moreover, our self-perception was that we were the salt of the earth: We were children in a war, in Israel's distant frontier, while those in central Israel didn't know what real life was. We were like Yaron Zehavi of ‘Hasamba’

[a reference to the hero in a popular children's book series].”

At age 12, her family moved to Yavneh in central Israel, to an area straddling the villas of the new military neighborhood – with its lawns and private gardens – and the apartment blocks typical of the older part of town. There she encountered social distress and crime, unfamiliar to her and her family.

After serving in the Israel Defense Forces as an education officer in the Golani Brigade and later as an officer at the IDF's Leadership Development School, Aharon Gutman began studying sociology at Tel Aviv University. In the mid-1990s, it was difficult to pursue studies on the fifth floor of the Faculty of Social Sciences without being immersed in a heavy dose of postmodern thought, with its post-colonial nuances and post-Zionist reflections. Critical theory, she recalls, was seen as the most appropriate and vital lens for social analysis. The reverence for it was almost religious, “with sacred texts and masters whose names rolled off the tongue with awe, without being challenged.”

Aharon Gutman also completed her master's and doctoral degrees at TAU. In her dissertation, she examined the relationship between urban planning and social structure in the southern city of Ashdod, exploring social institutions such as the Andalusian Orchestra and the local Likud party branch. She later completed one postdoctoral fellowship at the Hebrew University and a second at Columbia University in New York. Since 2013, she has been a faculty member at the Technion. She also served as academic chair of the institute's Social Hub, which focuses on research education, and community-based technological engagement, and as a senior research fellow at its Samuel Neaman Institute for National Policy Research.

Aharon Gutman's new book draws on her research and that of her students over the past 20 years, focusing on cities within the geographic belt surrounding Tel Aviv. She begins in northern Israel with Hadera and Givat Olga, continues through centrally located cities such as Rosh Ha'ayin and Ariel, and goes south to the area between Ashdod, Yavneh and Ashkelon. She refers to these cities as the “central belt” – the series of mid-sized communities, the largest of which, Ashdod, has a population of around 230,000. This vast area represents a critical mass of Israelis, with a significant representation of the Mizrahi middle class. “Mizrahim built the mid-sized cities, and the cities built them,” she notes.

She explains that research on the community has rarely addressed the urban element, focusing instead on the so-called development towns – the locales built in the country's geographic and social periphery in the 1950s-'60s, largely for Mizrahi immigrants – and on distressed neighborhoods and immigrant communities. This may not be a mere oversight, she says, noting, “Perhaps it's a refusal to acknowledge fragments of reality that do not align with the compelling ideology of researchers and activists.”

“A group of researchers who study Mizrahiness has adopted a perspective frozen in time, whose analytical power was effective for studying Israeli society only until the 1980s,” Aharon Gutman wrote in the introduction to her book, which sharply critiques the dominant stream of



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Rami Shilush

sociology in Israel. “Some scholars of Mizrahiness have failed to properly identify and conceptualize social changes, and especially failed to recognize the rise of Mizrahim across diverse social arenas,” the introduction reads. “As a result, this community of researchers, radical in appearance but conservative in practice, preserves the notion that Mizrahim are victims of the Zionist movement and the Israeli project.”

In 2003, Aharon Gutman moved to Ashdod to conduct her dissertation research. She refers to it as a “modern national city,” with a planning framework advanced for its time and a deepwater port that, after a struggle, provided residents with organized labor and social rights. In other words, the residents fought and gained entry into the so-called First Israel. Gradually, the port workers became a political pressure group that, for many years, supported Likud in exchange for negotiations over working conditions.

“The Mizrahi residents of Ashdod are the bosses in their city,” she says. “They are the urban elite across all social arenas: economic, cultural and political. Recognizing this was a turning point for me, as I understood the need for thinking and research beyond the familiar coordinates of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, high and low class, and beyond the world of Tel Aviv.”

Among other subjects, Aharon Gutman researched the founding of Ashdod's Andalusian Orchestra. From the interviews she conducted, it emerged that from the very beginning, the orchestra's founders – Dr. Yehiel Lasri, the current mayor of Ashdod, and Moti Malka – recognized they were undertaking a high-level cultural project: “One night they visited a synagogue to hear the *baqashot* [a Mizrahi collection of supplications, songs and prayers sung on Shabbat mornings] and realized they had a treasure in their hands: a cappella male singing, based on ancient musical structures.”

For the orchestra's inaugural concert, they decided to perform the music in two formats: In the first

part, the musicians sat on rugs in traditional attire, while in the second, they followed the conventions of a classical orchestra, wearing bow ties, facing the audience and reading from sheet music. However, after consulting with the audience, which included members of the North African Jewish elite, they opted for the classical format. In doing so, they shed all associations with poverty, hardship and struggle, transforming the performance into a sophisticated cultural presentation that later gained institutional recognition and funding.

According to Aharon Gutman, the Mizrahi community itself neither felt constrained by nor acted according to the so-called white gaze. The writer and educator Asher Knafo, for example, decided to name the organization he established in Ashdod to preserve the heritage of North African Jewry “Ziv Hama'arav” (Radiance of the West). When the professor asked him about this, Knafo insisted that this was precisely the point: the true West is in Morocco. “Knafo broke the coordinates, both metaphorically and literally,” she says. “From his perspective, Ashdod was strong enough for him to define where the West was, and not anyone else. There are situations and spaces where the ‘white gaze’ is meaningless. People stand on their own and retain their voice.”

A similar story can be found in the city of Yavneh. In research conducted by Aharon Gutman, based on Hadar Schwarcz-Avniel's dissertation, both argue that the driving force behind urban change was the members of the Mizrahi middle class – second-generation descendants of the large wave of immigration – who recognized that “the way to lift the community from its complex reality was by establishing the Savion neighborhood, built under Israel's ‘Build Your Own Home’ [policy], which would provide high-quality housing rather than more apartment blocks.”

One part of the neighborhood was marketed to air force personnel; another to locals and newcomers from outside the area. Trust-based relationships between then-Housing Minister Meir Sheetrit, city officials and representatives of the army's housing association facilitated this collaboration: “In Yavneh, all the conditions existed for the emergence of urban apartheid and open conflict between highly disparate social groups, yet it became a desirable home for Israel's



Ashdod Port, 1973. “Mizrahim built the mid-sized cities, and the cities built them.”

Moshe Milner/GPO



Kiryat Shmona, 1964. “We felt like a distant frontier – the frontline of the Zionist effort.”

Moshe Friedman/GPO/ Kiryat Shmona Archives

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Mizrahim: A success story

middle class. Mizrahim emerged there as urban mediators, effective bridge-builders,” she says.

In her studies of Ashdod and Yavneh, as well as in Acre (based on Dr. Sharon Yavo Ayalon’s dissertation), Aharon Gutman found similar patterns of social mobility: The transformation led by the Mizrahi middle class was not achieved through welfare programs or rehabilitation, but through models emphasizing quality and prestige.

Aharon Gutman builds on a body of research, particularly in the past decade, that reveals a narrowing of the gaps between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. She also highlights the work of TAU Prof. Ephraim Yaar, who already in the mid-1980s pointed to the Mizrahim’s use of alternative mobility pathways that bypassed higher education, among them small businesses and sports.

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Mizrahim quickly distanced themselves from poverty-generating factors such as early marriage, high fertility and low maternal education, she explains. This does not mean that other mechanisms of inequality disappeared – most notably wills and inheritance, subjects that remain under-researched due to lack of data. But in her view, the bottom line is that “mobility is stronger than glass ceilings.”

“There’s empirical evidence of social, economic and political mobility among Mizrahim, but it hasn’t been incorporated into a theoretical narrative or a new paradigm. Because no new terminology has been developed, the needle of consciousness – both academic and public – hasn’t shifted,” she says.

Aharon Gutman goes on to place responsibility on what she calls the “plunderers of Mizrahiness” among Israel’s political right. Unlike intellectuals who sought to drive change and rectify injustices through welfare policies, land reform or educational initiatives, Mizrahi politicians such as Transportation Minister Miri Regev, Regional Co-

Terms such as ‘false consciousness’ or ‘politics of closeness’ aren’t part of the critical discourse itself, but critiques of it, often from the right. Theory should be expanded, not thrown out with the bathwater.”

Social activist Tom Mehager also rejected Aharon Gutman’s conclusions, criticizing Aharon Gutman’s book on Facebook, writing, “In case you were missing white supremacy and racism in the country, it turns out they’ve found the ‘Mizrahi researcher’ who claims that it was the Mizrahi struggle itself that led to societal decline.”

‘Plunderers of Mizrahiness’

Aharon Gutman, who also served for five years on Israel’s National Planning and Building Council, recounts in her book the cynicism of the so-called plunderers of Mizrahiness she describes as she encountered it in policy debates. One such moment arose during discussions, both in the council and in the Knesset, about the petrochemical industries in Haifa Bay.

“The proximity of polluting industries to population centers, the high disease rates in the area, and the shortage of land for housing created public pressure to close the plants,” she says. “At one council meeting, the mayor of a major Negev city – himself representing a community long surrounded by polluting state facilities and plagued by illness – exclaimed passionately: ‘Bring the industries to me!’ He mocked the environmental groups pushing for Haifa’s clean-up and spoke about job creation as though his city were still stuck in the 1980s.

“I listened with frustration and astonishment,” the professor continues. “I thought of generations of Mizrahi researchers and activists who had fought against vocational tracking in education, against employment stagnation in development towns and against inequality in health and life expectancy. And then, in 2020, a Mizrahi mayor of a distinctly Mizrahi city, aligned with the ruling party, did not demand new industries, green energy or innovation. His entire vision of development was simply to bring more polluting factories to Mizrahim.”

In her book’s final chapter, Aharon Gutman takes aim at the very notion of “Israel’s periphery” and calls for a new agenda. The outlying areas, particularly the Negev and Galilee, must be released from “the suffocating grip of the periphery concept,” which is “biased by its fixation on backwardness and marginality.”



Miri Regev and David Amsalem, whom Aharon Gutman calls “plunderers of Mizrahiness.” Amit Shabi

operation Minister David Amsalem and Culture and Sports Minister Miki Zohar – along with intermediary figures like right-wing journalist Avishay Ben Haim and Channel 14 commentator Prof. Moshe Cohen-Eliya – have stripped the concepts of equality and justice of the context in which they were developed. While the first group highlighted social gaps, the latter trade in them.

“Despite decades in power, these ‘plunderers’ do not aim for reform,” she says. “They fuel political anger and thereby repel any criticism of their rule. They criticize and humiliate the academy as a ‘white,’ racist and exclusionary institution, yet at the same time turn a blind eye to the systematic exclusion of Mizrahi girls in ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi education.”

Not everyone agrees with her conclusions. “I value her original research and thinking,” says Dr. Gal Levy of the Open University, currently a research fellow in Judaic studies at the University of Pennsylvania. However, he argues, urban sociology is inherently part of critical theory, not a rejection of it.

“It’s legitimate and important to recognize its limitations, for example the tendency to focus on rigid structural aspects and sometimes overlook individual agency,” he adds. “Critical research always demands renewal and innovation.

Social activist Mehager: ‘In case you were missing white supremacy and racism in the country, it turns out they’ve found the “Mizrahi researcher” who claims that it was the Mizrahi struggle itself that led to societal decline.’

These areas, with their rich histories and striking landscapes, she says, “have been coded in Israeli consciousness as spaces of hardship, where residents appear to have no choice, as if they were victims of circumstance.” But life on the frontiers, she insists, “is not merely or primarily a default. It offers closeness to nature, opportunities for collective organization, and access to resources tied to frontier status. These regions also carry historical and religious significance, providing society at large, and Mizrahim in particular, with proximity to heritage landscapes. Many people choose to live there precisely because it offers an alternative to the socioeconomic order represented by the center.”