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***The Invisible Palestinians: The Hidden Struggle for Inclusion in Jewish Tel Aviv*, by Andreas Hackl, Indiana University Press, 2022. 230 pp. ISBN-10: 0253060826, ISBN-13: 978-0253060822\***

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## 1. Introduction

From the very first days of its birth, Zionism labeled Palestine a “land without a people”, deciding from the beginning to “willfully ignore” the presence or even the existence of the Palestinian people. Such a claim ultimately developed into one of Israel’s founding myths and has been repeated by prominent Israeli leaders and politicians, ranging from Golda Meir to, most recently, Israeli finance minister Smotrich. It is this denial of existence and rights, which has gone beyond words and statements and has been institutionalized in the different spheres of Israeli politics and

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society, and its urban spaces, that forms the basis of Hackl's ethnographic research. This book takes an inside look at what goes on with Palestinians who move within Tel Aviv, aiming to demonstrate how Palestinians have practically become exiles in their own land.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been approached by many scholars from a variety of perspectives; apart from the traditional geopolitical, legal, historical, and sociocultural aspects (Khalidi, 2020; Lesch, 2008; Shlaim, 2010), more diverse dimensions are also scrutinized either independently and in separate volumes (Masalha et al., 2020; Warshel, 2021) or in books that bring together a variety of disciplines and approaches (Bartov, 2021). Still, Hackl's work does manage to provide a new and interesting perspective into this decades' long conflict and to concretize its effects on Palestinian lives.

## 2. Description

In this book the author sheds light on the experiences of those who are often overlooked in discussions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and highlights the complex dynamics of Palestinians' identity in Tel Aviv. Different aspects of life in Tel Aviv, including education, employment, housing, leisure, and political participation are analyzed to reach this objective. The author adopts the concept of "Immersive invisibility" in describing Palestinian life in Tel Aviv, and as the book's running theme.

He wastes no time putting forward the tragic problem he aims to address in the first sentence of the introduction, confronting readers with the fact that Tel Aviv University is in fact built on the ruins of a Palestinian village. Chapter one then discusses the "suspended

arrival” of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, as well as the Palestinians from the West Bank, to Tel Aviv, the “first Hebrew city” (p. 24). The author argues that Palestinians are systematically marginalized and excluded from the mainstream Israeli society, and that this exclusion is reflected in their lack of visibility in public spaces, cultural institutions, and political discourse. The concept of "mobility equity" is referred to by the author to describe the difficulties that Palestinians face. Discrimination in access to public transportation, long waiting lines in military checkpoints, and the obstacle of obtaining work permits are some of the main challenges that have deprived Palestinians from their basic rights.

The second chapter shifts the focus to Tel Aviv University as experienced by Palestinian students, and the racism they face in Israeli higher education in general. The author states that the university conveys to Palestinians the rules of “conditional inclusion”; the modifications they have to make to their behavior – especially the political aspect - to make socioeconomic success possible. In other words, the university teaches them how to “become a good Arab” (p. 58). The challenge for these students is to balance between the Israeli requirement of modifying their identity, and their own family and society’s expectation of remaining faithful to their Palestinian identity.

Chapter three discusses the intersection of class and race, and the economic exclusion of the Palestinian citizens of Israel in Tel Aviv. Palestinian citizens of Israel face discrimination in the workplace and have to come up with creative ways of becoming “invisible”. This anonymity helps to moderate the dual challenge mentioned in the previous chapter, that of being included – at least partially – in the success of liberal, Hebrew Tel Aviv, and of avoiding the barriers that the Palestinian society places on them.

Chapter four focuses on Palestinian's exclusion from "urban leisure", whilst the fifth chapter examines a range of issues related to cultural identity and artistic expression.

The sixth chapter examines the rare, fragmented, but visible cases of Palestinian activism inside Tel Aviv. Such cases include tours (and smartphone applications!) dedicated to unearthing the Palestinian identity of places within the city, protests coordinated through social media, informal and spontaneous events like staging the Dabkeh<sup>1</sup> in the middle of Tel Aviv and posting videos online, and the subsequent reactions of Israelis to such violations of invisibility: "One passerby shouted, 'Die Arabs!' toward the demonstrators. Another angry man spit at them from his car window" (p. 140).

Chapter seven aims to demonstrate how fragile this "immersive invisibility" arrangement is. Recounting his observations following the tensions of 2014 and the ensuing war (operation Protective Edge), the author explains the way in which the "polarizing events" as well as the existing racism and antagonism against Palestinians, which is "built into the very core of Israeli liberalism" (p. 161) bring the enmity to the forefront and disrupt hopes of peaceful socioeconomic activity in Tel Aviv for Palestinians.

In the concluding chapter Hackl attempts to provide a window into the future of Tel Aviv and its Palestinian "users" (rather than "urban minority"). The realistic future he predicts is a bleak one, where although Palestinians contribute to Tel Aviv in many ways, the ever-present colonialism and occupation has brought about what the author terms a second form of exile, where people

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1. Traditional Palestinian/Arab folk dance.

are not forced out physically but denied their right to political expression.

### 3. Analysis

Through its central theme of “immersive invisibility”, this book explores cultural identity and the ways it is shaped by geographic and political factors. It highlights the challenges of expressing cultural identity in a society that often denies the existence of Palestinians, and in a city that “was built in opposition to Palestine and the Palestinians” (p. 185). Interestingly, the obstacles that Palestinian residents of Tel Aviv face from within their own community are also addressed, thus demonstrating an aspect of the identity issues (hybrid identity, identity dilemma, identity crisis) that Israeli Palestinians face, upon which previous scholars have touched. Although relatively few scholars have approached this question from a similar perspective (see (Herbst-Debby et al., 2022) and (Masry-Herzallah & Cohen, 2023)), the extensiveness and depth of this book is what distinguishes it from similar work. The descriptions of various events and the many quotes from individuals relevant to the research demonstrate the depth and authenticity of the ethnography that is carried out, and contrary to what one might think, does not become tiring since each instance provides valuable information and insight.

Hackl also meticulously brings to light the contradictions inherent in the case under study; he perceives the liberal identity of Tel Aviv versus its illiberal treatment of its Palestinian inhabitants, the “white city” and the “black city”, the Palestinian's eagerness to reside and be included in Tel Aviv and their subsequent estrangement with the city, etc. He also attempts to situate the case

within the overall context of settler-colonial/indigenous relations. In doing so, he proposes, and also borrows from other scholars' thoughtful and innovative conceptual frameworks and expressions that can be very helpful in understanding and explaining the complicated Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a conflict that is omnipresent in the lives of Palestinians. W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" (p. 127), Foucault's "subjugated knowledges" (p. 143) and Fanon's seminal work, "Black Skin, White Masks" are some examples.

The inclusion of maps and images that demonstrate the reality of occupation is another insightful aspect of this book; such content allows readers to visually grasp the practical difficulty of Palestinian's lives in a way that words cannot explain, and ultimately reach a more realistic understanding of the occupation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Hackl's approach, which incorporates extensive interviews and on-the-ground reporting, adds depth and authenticity to his work. However, it is essential to critically examine the methodology employed and consider potential limitations, such as the risk of bias in participant selection or the challenges of capturing a diverse range of perspectives. Hackl's ability to weave together personal stories, historical analysis, and broader social context makes this book an essential read for anyone interested in understanding the invisible struggles of Palestinians in Tel Aviv. The author's detailed observations and in-depth analysis within the framework of settler-colonial studies and his willingness to go beyond what is apparent and simple, and reveal complexities in a clear way to the reader are what make the book worthwhile, although the repetition of some concepts and themes does in some cases become tedious.

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