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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Against Hybridity. Social Impasses in a Globalizing World* by Haim Hazan

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**Hazan, Haim:** *Against Hybridity. Social Impasses in a Globalizing World.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015. 178 pp. ISBN 978-0-7456-9070-4. Price: £ 15.99

A major strand of this book concerns old age. The author did two earlier books on old age and is co-director of a Tel Aviv institute on studies of the end of life. This strand involves ethnographic work on aging and extreme old age, chronic pain, and autism. According to the author, “the main narrative [of the book] is that of aging ... with subplots including additional repressed and silenced topics such as pain, the Holocaust, autism, fundamentalism, and death” (2). This strand involves thoughtful observations, criticisms of medicalization, and uses notions such as the “neurotypical” hegemonic gaze (derived from Davidson, p. 26). Twinning questions of old age, pain, and autism with the language of cultural studies (Foucault, Agamben, etc.) yields engaged perspectives, but also comes with limitations, as in these two quotes: “Global, postmodern society considers these islands’ [of non-hybrids] failure to assimilate to be subversive, deviant, ominous, and intolerable. ... The processes of globalization were generated by the claim for universalization and standardization as the general logic of converting the indigenous into the global, followed by a demand for hybridization” (13).

This presents several problems. 1) Reification – “post-modern society considers”; 2) labeling and generalization – “global, postmodern society”; 3) ideas shape processes (“globalization generated by claim for universalization,” i.e., ideas presented as causes). This presents so many problems one does not know where to begin to untangle them. This approach mixes up ideas and attitudes, concepts and processes. Terms such as “assimilation,” slipped in casually, carry heavy undertones. All this unfolds in an entirely discursive world, a world of ideas, in which ideas (only) shape history. Reification is recurrent and modernity, postmodernism, globalization continually parade as actors that carry ideas (or are ideas). This comes with phrases such as “the logic of globalization” (115) as if there is only one. It comes with judgements that are predictable or simply clichés. Perhaps this reflects a humanities rather than a sociology approach to cultural studies, but saying so does disservice to humanities. At any rate, using a grind like this it is difficult to brew decent coffee.

This leads to a wider argument “against hybridity,” the other main strand of the book. Hybridity, according to Hazan, is porousness and non-hybrid is immutable, untranslatable (28). Hybridity is politically correct and “normative” and is associated with globalization, postcolonialism, and neoliberalism. These attributions (rather than definitions) are abstract and generalizing. (There may be a place where globalization, postcolonialism, and neoliberalism are somehow the same, but would it be an interesting place?) The author argues that extreme old age, pain, autism as well as the Holocaust and fundamentalism are “non-hybrid.” However, “I am not arguing for the actual existence of non-hybrid essences, such as in the form of old age, pain, or autism. My claims are all made within the epistemological realm of social constructivism. When analyzing something as a non-hybrid, my guiding

rationale is *it is constructed*, in contemporary postmodern western, midlife, neurotypical culture, as being non-hybrid” (3).

Right away this involves difficult moves. First, old age and pain and, on the other hand, the Holocaust and fundamentalism are quite different. Second, old age and pain are at the periphery of where hybridity thinking usually applies, which is okay as long as the argument is pertinent, though it requires finesse of language and analytics to pull it off. Third, since the issue is not that old age and pain are non-hybrid but that they are so constructed, the author must show and give examples of such constructions. However, this only happens through general attribution, labeling, and allegation (as in postmodern society, global society, globalization ...). Fourth, it is not clear why this exercise should be an argument “against hybridity.” Hybridity approaches are usually concerned with unpacking mainstream constructions, which is what Hazan does in relation to old age and pain. Hazan criticizes the way (extreme) old age is represented – “the outcast old”; reduced to “bed and body work” (121, 43), reduced to “bare life” (80). He criticizes the underestimation of what he calls the fourth age or fourth space. His discussion recovers agency in old age and in pain. He shows there is agency even at the extremes of chronic pain or in autism, effectively so through interviews, yet this effort also undermines his claims.

The arguments about the Holocaust and fundamentalism do not fare better. It is best to quote the author: “The image of ultimate evil, the Holocaust, has similarly raised attempts to assimilate the non-translatable, locating the banality of evil within Hitler’s executioners or otherwise placing the Holocaust as the final realization of one of the possibilities inherent in the very project of modernity ... ‘Fundamentalism,’ another example perceived in the postmodern as a non-globalizing, non-hybrid essential, is often designated in terms of mutual exclusivity resulting in inevitable warfare. ... It is that ‘non-hybrid otherness’ of Islam – perceived and articulated within western, neoliberal, secular, middle-aged, socioeconomic and political circumstances – which engenders a sense of fear and aversion” (5f.).

In the chapter devoted to the Holocaust Hazan appears to be on all sides of the argument. He cites Bauman (*Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca 1989) about the Holocaust as part of modernity, using the technologies of modern bureaucracy; he refers to the “*Shoah* business” (and alludes to show business, 96) while he also views “the cultural site of the Holocaust as a void of unadulterated evil” (8). So which is it – is the Holocaust part of modernity and thus hybrid, or is it not? Pol Pot’s killing fields in Cambodia wedded French colonial bureaucratic methods to Maoist ideas of worker and peasant rule. Both the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge were profoundly hybrid in character.

So-called fundamentalism also carries major modern features both in its Protestant and Islamic versions (urban, textual, clerical, use of contemporary communication technologies and media, etc.; cf. Nederveen Pieterse, “Fundamentalism” Discourses. *Enemy Images*.

*Women against Fundamentalism* 1.1994/5: 2–6; Mitchell, McJihad. Islam in the US Global Order. *Social Text* 20.2002/4: 1–18). This is the point of the large “fundamentalism project” conducted at the University of Chicago (Marty and Appleby [eds.], *Fundamentalisms and the State*. Chicago 1993 [The Fundamentalism Project, Vol. 3]). A large literature extensively analyzes political Islam as a modern phenomenon (“Islamic Jacobins”) and as an alternative or rival globalization project. As such it is quite “translatable.”

Thus, Hazan evokes and then partly refutes clichés and constructions which have been thoroughly refuted already. He attributes to “postmodernism” views on Islam which are the opposite of those that are generally held. Who would argue that Samuel Huntington, author of the clash of civilizations, was a postmodern thinker? Quite the opposite. Hazan does not believe the non-hybrids actually are non-hybrid – or perhaps he does given his choice of words in describing them (“ultimate evil,” the “non-hybrid otherness” of Islam, etc.).

It does not make sense to place the Holocaust among “repressed and silenced topics” (2) and at the same time refer to the “*Shoah* business” (96). Fundamentalism likewise does not belong there. It has been one of the most salient, widely discussed topics since the nineties. Autism does not belong either because it receives wide and growing public attention in countries such as the United States as the topic of TV documentaries and growing medical and therapeutic attention.

About the very old, pain, the Holocaust, and autism, the concluding chapter asks – “what then are we, as anthropologists sensitive to these islands of non-hybridization, to do with these extra-cultural elements of our global society?” (131). However, he has just argued that they are not actually non-hybrid. And does it make sense to call them “extra-cultural”? He further refers to the “hybridized non-hybrid” and then makes a plea for “working at the interstices of hybridized non-hybridity” (140), at which point as a reader I have difficulty keeping track of the ball.

This general project is an inversion [non-hybrid] of the inversion [hybrid] of an inversion [hybrids miscast as essences], or rather, it is just a partial inversion [the hybridized non-hybrid], etc., all of which is a very wordy (rather than worthy), very slippery undertaking. If this summary sounds confusing, may I suggest that 143 pages of it do not make it less confusing.

There are two ways of interpreting this book. One is quite straightforward. The book is a sequel to the author’s earlier work on old age (which is in the author’s words “the main narrative”). This is in many ways a serious, engaged, and meaningful work, though perhaps not spectacularly interesting to a wide audience. Interspersed with this are cultural studies, along with against-the-grain readings of previous against-the-grain readings, in the elevated genre of critique of the critique of the critique. This strand, in contrast, often comes across as sloppy. Confounded and confusing, not well done, not quite thought through, with a complexity that does disservice to the argument (such as it is), rushed, with references messed up,

and so forth. A banal reading is that the author felt another book on old age would not do well; so combine it with cultural studies and, why not, with a critique of hybridity, even if this marriage of convenience produces major inconvenience.

Then there is yet another option. This is also a work of Israeli exceptionalism. Then the book, implicitly, says never mind Western postmodernists, celebrants of hybridity, and all that, here in Israel we know that the Holocaust (“ultimate evil”) and Islam (“other”) are really non-hybrid, are not translatable, and cannot be assimilated within the Western postmodern (midlife, neurotypical) gaze and framework, although we cannot or do not want to say so upfront in so many words (also because some of us have not quite made up our mind). Thus, two discourses are merged, the shallowness of medicalization perspectives on extreme old age and dying (which is reasonable) and, on the other hand, the discourse of hybridity, porousness, translatability (the critique of which is *outré*). The two have virtually nothing to do with one another, are dragged together, which makes the book an exercise in hybrid rock climbing. This interpretation (what other interpretation would make sense?) may explain curious sentences such as this, following the text about the “non-hybrid” otherness of Islam, cited above: “Said’s (1978) original argument concerning orientalism can thus be recontextualized, reflecting one case among others of the postmodern repugnance toward perceived non-hybrids” (6).

This is precisely what Said did *not* say. This is the position of Bernard Lewis, a position that Said criticized. Said criticized orientalism for creating (mis-creating) others and criticized Western media for the alienating and polarizing way in which they covered Islam (Said, *Covering Islam*. New York 1981). Hazan misappropriates Said’s views to the point of falsification. Said’s authority is dragged in to give legitimacy to *outré* views, views that of course also misrepresent “postmodernism.”

This book is an exercise in Israeli exceptionalism in cultural theory – in disguise. It passes as a critique of hybridity thinking – indirectly because the non-hybrids are only constructed that way and are actually hybrids, and so forth. The book is obtuse because the position is obtuse and the way it is treated lands us in “the interstices of hybridized non-hybridity,” in other words, in the twilight zone.

*Anthropos* invited me to review the book and I accepted out of curiosity about what might be new in arguments against hybridity. I have earlier written a critique of anti-hybridity views (Hybridity, So What? The Anti-Hybridity Backlash and the Riddles of Recognition. In: S. Lash and M. Featherstone [eds.], *Recognition and Difference*. London 2002: 219–246, updated in 2015: *Globalization and Culture*. Global Mélange. Lanham). At times the celebration of hybridity gets tedious. After all, it is in sync with media, marketing, and advertising trends. Arguably in some ways, hybridity is the new normal – just as essentialism was the old normal. Yet essentialism is by no means past; it is alive and well wherever there are contested boundaries. Think of Donald Trump on Mexican immigrants, of Buddhists in Myanmar such as Wiratu on

Rohingya Muslims; of Thai state Buddhism in relation to Muslims in southern Thailand; of Sinhala Buddhism in Sri Lanka in relation to Tamils; of Boko Haram and IS (Daesh) about nonbelievers, and so forth. Wherever politics unfolds at ethnic boundaries (i.e., constructed and represented as ethnic or religious) they tend to be essentialized because such is the shortcut political language of mobilization.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse

**Heppell, Michael:** *The Seductive Warp Thread. An Evolutionary History of Ibanic Weaving.* Phillips: Borneo Research Council, 2014. 189 pp. ISBN 1-929900-16-3. (Borneo Research Council, Material Culture Series, 1) Price: \$ 50.00

Anthropologist Michael Heppell discusses the historical development of the textile culture of the Ibanic people in Borneo. Heppell focuses not only on exquisitely crafted textiles, he also deals with textiles of lesser quality, and this may also support his overall argument of historical and ethnological interests. This viewpoint observing the lesser-quality textiles of the people is supposedly significantly challenging the collection policies of museums and galleries, where only the very best examples of the artworks are sought out, and that huge body of information of the material culture is lost as a consequence. Heppell clearly emphasizes that while the textiles once functioned as a sort of memory bank for the Ibanic people, embedded with meanings and messages, they were lost over time due to those stringent museum and gallery policies, among other reasons.

Weaving traditions of small groups in the world have rapidly declined in the 20th century, especially after the Second World War. Heppell contrasts this “economy of action” principle with the Ibanic, who were able to maintain their custom of weaving due to its cultural function in the sexual realm: women indicated their reproductive fitness to men through their weaving skills. Nevertheless, this “economy of action” principle proved relevant among the Ibanic after the 1970s, when modern education was brought widely to villages, and traditional values in weaving, as well as the meanings and messages associated with those values, were lost to a great extent.

As Heppell considers Ibanic weaving as a thing of the past, he narrows his discussion on the issues of memory, conservation, and dismemberment of Ibanic weaving. Heppell’s main fieldsites of the Lubok Antu District and other major Iban/Ibanic regions are experiencing it, but at the reviewer’s fieldsite, Kapit District of Sarawak, even though the local Iban consider it to be disappearing, there are still many women of all ages who actively engage in traditional weaving. These women do not partake in weaving for commercial purposes, however, even though the local government strongly encourages them to do so.

Heppell’s attempt at theorizing the waning of traditional weaving is accomplished through observing regions, ethnic traits (including Malays and others), and historical backdrops. Though Heppell considers the early 20th century to be a time “when weaving was still expanding with great vitality” (91), there exists a contrast-

ing observation by a Christian missionary from the early twentieth century, who reported that Iban weaving in Sarawak was a disappearing culture. Again, in the 1960s to 1970s, there were some studies that predicted that the Iban population of Sarawak would rapidly decline due to the advancing of modernization, though this evidently turned out to be false as they flourish today, comprising the largest percentage of the state’s population. The possibility of waning, remaining, or prospering in such a context is greatly varied, completely irreducible when it comes to particular regions, ethnic groups, or eras. As a mere matter of perception, the increasingly popular dialogue of the “waning of traditional culture” is not a solid fact but rather a matter of the observer’s view.

What, then, is particular about Ibanic weaving? I agree with Heppell that Ibanic textiles have been potentially seductive. Further, I would personally suppose that although almost unknown to the world, the earnest craftsmanship of the Iban, together with their usage of customary ritual activities, are perhaps worthy of global attention in a cultural heritage context. Heppell considers Ibanic weaving to be one of the most difficult subjects to ethnographically study due to its secretive nature; weavers are reluctant to speak about their woven design motifs (153). Heppell fully supports symbolic representations associated with cloth: “The extraterrestrial powers which could be captured in a cloth were dangerous and required sufficient spiritual powers on the part of a weaver to ensure that they were contained within the cloth ... Its complex iconography made important statement about their cosmology. On *pua*’ cloths, women depicted motifs the combination of which produced a symbolic statement about an event or idea a woman wanted to memorize” (138).

The Iban believe that spirits are captured in some powerful motif designs, and often manifest in real life and eat the people concerned. Accordingly, weavers are afraid to name the motifs for fear of awakening spirits that may curse them. In fact, there have been some reported cases of such instances actually occurring among the people (cf. p. 155). Although the locals do explain these instances in such a way, do they really believe in those spirits? Heppell further explains: “Every motif represents something from the human, the extraterrestrial, the animal and the plant worlds and exemplifies their attachment to their beliefs about universe and their forefathers” (117).

Although addressing such cosmological and symbolic ideas as meanings in textiles, Heppell’s assertion is that these are lost entirely and no longer traceable. It is also necessary to consider that neither weaving nor similar rituals assign or involve much verbal information. Therefore, this may make fact-finding efforts difficult, and certainly poses a conundrum to ethnographers.

Symbolism, the 19th-century artistic movement, has been the generally accepted perspective of cultural anthropology since the 1960s, and is still predominant today. This 20th-century scholarly tradition, especially of Iban/Ibanic weaving, can be traced back to the study of A. C. Haddon, the pioneer of Iban textile studies who led the famed Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits in 1898. He proposed the theory that wo-