

PLACE AS A SOURCE OF IDENTITY IN COLONIZING SOCIETIES: ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS IN GAZA

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ABSTRACT. The tendency to reduce the role of places in the formation of sociospatial identities and to emphasize the impact of sociopolitical structures on place making is growing. We argue that, under certain conditions, places may become salient sources of identity formation. In addition, we suggest viewing different types of places on a continuum from mythical “big places,” to everyday-life places, to parochial “little places.” We further suggest a distinction between mythical and everyday-life senses of place. Following Zali Gurevitz, who describes the characteristics of West Bank Jewish settlers’ mythical sense of place, we demonstrate how Gaza settlers only partially internalized their conception of place, adopting an everyday-life conception of thereof. Yet place became a main source of identity for Gaza settlers, who viewed their experience in the settlements as an empowering process that helped them escape their marginality and join the national elite. *Keywords:* everyday-life place, mythical place, senses of place, West Bank and Gaza settlers.

The threat of evacuation posed by the Israeli government on Gaza settlers in 2005 and, later, the actual evacuation and the settlers’ resistance to it give us a unique opportunity to highlight the relevance of place to identity. In this article we show that the settlers’ mobility—relocating from the southern periphery of Israel to Gaza—had a tremendous impact on the empowerment of their self-images and identities. We contend that, unlike the “mythical sense of place” developed by the core of the settlers in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), in Gaza an “everyday-life sense of place” was more significant to settlers than was the mythical one. We also highlight the main dimensions of the settlers’ sense of place and their significance in re-forming their identities.

FINDING ATTACHMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

We adopt a constructivist approach in unraveling settlers’ attachments to place and the ways in which place empowered their identities. Our sources were statements of settlers published in brochures, on the Internet, and in local newspapers, as well as local rabbis’ brochures distributed in synagogues between July 2004 and February 2005. In addition, we conducted thirty open, in-depth interviews with settlers during 2005, maintaining representational balance among religious, conservative, and secular settlers.¹ We contacted eighteen women, who were more readily available as respondents than were men, and twelve men. Nine settlers (30 percent) were of Ashkenazi origin (European, American, or Oceanic) and the rest were of Mizrahi origin (Asian or African, mainly from Arab and Moslem countries), giving slight overrepresentation to Mizrahi Jews, estimated to be about 60 percent of the Gaza

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