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CONTENT

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A Dancing Nation - Cultural Sociology of Dancing in Israel: An Introduction

Some form of dance has existed in social lives since the early days. For example, ballet as a formalised form of dance that has existed since 15th century Italy, and from Italy it spread to France and then to other countries. At first, ballet was intertwined with opera, but theatrical ballet quickly found its place as an independent form of art. Meanwhile, the wider population developed traditional folk dances, which today form part of national cultures. In history, dance has nevertheless contributed towards creating friendship and understanding. For example, in newly established communities of British settlers in Australia dancing helped newcomers to interact with locals, and establish friendly relations[1].

At first, the majority of work on dance focused on the history of dance and representational practices of dance, however, that started to change and scholars engaged in other forms of research on dance, such as ethnography, phenomenology, anthropology, etc.[2]

When it comes to sociology, sociology of dance still remains of marginal interest. The exceptions are works by sociologists Francis Rust (1969) on history of social dance[3], Edith Cope (1976) on small dance companies and interactions among dancers[4], and Helen Thomas (1995) who established sociology of dance[5]. However, the interest in dance among sociologists – and especially cultural sociologists – is almost non-existent, and especially if we compare number of works on other forms of arts, or with work on the media and popular culture. The fact sociologists are not very interested in studies of dance, is even more peculiar if we take into consideration number of sociological studies on nationalism and ethnicity, and the fact dance is also considered as an ethnic form of art.[6]

When it comes to cultural studies and explorations of dance, cultural studies usually encompass "poststructural approaches to investigate representational practices (literary texts, films, fashion, music, advertisements, theatrical events, among others", and "cultural studies scholars strive to reveal the complicity of certain representational systems with continuing systems of social oppression and to better understand how social "subjects" (the individuals who make up collectivities) are constituted by and, in turn, manipulate these representations and their meanings".[7] However, as Desmond (2000) warns, cultural approach to dance studies has resulted

> "in a focus on dances as "texts" rather than on the practices that result in such texts, or the acts of engagement with those "texts" (…) Most of the theoretical vigor of dance studies in the last decade has not come from its engagement with ethnography".[8]

Some authors also claimed that many scholars study dance by taking it out from its social context, even though dance study should encompass both social and artistic

component.[9] An ethnographic inquiry into dance practice means engaging with a dance community, and the researchers are free to join any community to study dance in its everyday life manifestation. As suggested by Desmond (2000)[10], scholarly work on dance should combine ethnography, historical research and cultural studies to encompass all forms of dance and its multiple meanings. This, furthermore, means that by deploying this approach we can gain an in-depth understanding of "how "dancing" happens, when and where, and what meanings and pleasures people attach to it under specific conditions".[11] This also means that social scientists often fail to contribute to discussions in dance studies by not sufficiently engaging in all aspects of dance when debating this form of art. Furthermore, this means we need to answer the following questions

> "What is dancing? What happens when we do it? Why do we do it? How does doing it constitute a "we"? And "I"? A "you"? A social relation? A social history? In what ways is dancing unlike other social/aesthetic practices? Like other commercial practices? In what ways is the same? Why and how does it matter? To whom?"[12]

These observations are confirmed by a sociologist of dance Helen Thomas (1995) who defined dance as a form of art that is "simultaneously a feature of the socio-cultural context of its emergence, creation and performance and a reflexive practice realised through the medium of the body", and emphasized that "such an approach needs to be interdisciplinary in character".[13] She continues by explaining that "the activity which commonsensically we understand as dancing does in fact take a number of different forms and occurs in a variety of social contexts which straddle the spectrum of the high art/popular culture divide in contemporary western industrial formations. As an art form, like the other arts, dance is a minority concern (and a minority concern with the arts), which is participated in by a minority and viewed by a minority of the public. As such it can be seen to reside within the confines of the tradition of 'high' culture".[14] Thomas, nevertheless, acknowledges that dance "is not just something that we look at, it is also an activity that takes place in different social contexts, in mainstream popular culture and in subcultures", as well as "a social activity which has a tradition of popular appeal".[15]

When it comes to cultural sociology, the discipline is centred on "meaning-making. Cultural sociologists investigate how meaning-making happens, why meanings vary, how meanings influence human action, and the ways meaning-making is important in social cohesion, domination, and resistance".[16] In this, cultural sociology encompasses "meaning-making in everyday action, the institutional production of meaning, and the shared mental frameworks which are the tools of meaning-making".[17] There are different ways to define culture, but one that is often accepted is a definition that emphasizes sharing certain worldviews and codes of behaviour with members of the same community.[18] This, however, differs from author to author, and from school to school. For example, the Birmingham school of cultural sociology defined culture as a totality of processes that constitute our everyday lives, while French theoretician Pierre Bourdieu defined culture as "the best that has been thought and said, regarded as the summits of achieved civilization".[19] Nevertheless, culture also encompasses art such as opera, music, literature, as well as dance. However, different scholars study different aspects of culture, and Spillman argues that these problems can be overcome by considering culture as a

> "*process of meaning-making* - such processes may operate in different sorts of social locations (in more specialized arenas or more generally) and may be evident in all sorts of social

practices and social products. The central concerns of those who study culture are to understand processes of meaning-making, to account for different meanings, and to examine their effects in social life. This view can encompass both culture as specialized realm and culture as an attribute of groups, and can include all the various things, from artifacts or principles, which scholars have thought to be important parts of cultures. Cultural sociologists might investigate culture as "a separate sphere of society", or culture as a "whole way of life"".[20]

Jacobs and Spillman (2005) also argued that cultural sociology is "not limited to the study of specialized cultural systems such as art, media, or science but rather that it is an analytic perspective on any social arena", and "a shift to analyzing specific meaning-making *processes,* from earlier conceptualizations of culture as an integrated whole…"[21] Therefore, we can argue that cultural sociology "makes a distinctive contribution by providing conceptual tools for handling the intersection of macro-level social dynamics and micro-level subjectivity in meso-level processes", and this sub-discipline within sociology is thought to build "on the examination of cultural processes in concrete contexts".[22]

In Judaism, dance presents a social tradition since early times because Jews have always expressed joy through dancing. For example, Torah describes Miriam leading the dance ceremony after escaping slavery in Egypt and taking part in Exodus that happened around 1270 BCE[23]. The practice of dancing for joyful occasions continued after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 when Jews danced on the day modern state of Israel was established, and Israeli state has a rich dancing culture: both folk and artist[24]. The importance of dance in Judaism has its tradition going back to the origins of Judaism, and it can be said that the Jewish dance "like Jewish art, music and theater, is an expression of the civilization from which it arises".[25]

When it comes to the State of Israel, its dance tradition derives from Diaspora and struggles to develop Hebrew culture on a newly re-gained historical land. During 1940s, Jewish community was seeking its right to self-determination, and Jewish communities developed Hebrew culture as a national culture that will foster new national Jewish identity.[26] Dance also had an important position in creating the state and particularly the artistic dance performed mostly by European settlers. Jewish communities also developed folk and modern dance inspired by their countries of origin and the Zionist movement.[27] During 1950s, American dance groups came to Israel and this helped in spreading expressionism in dance techniques.[28] Various dance companies were established during the 1960s, and while folk dances were created from all distinctive traditions in the land of Israel and from Jews who came to Israel after the creation of the modern state of Israel[29], modern and art dances are flourishing in Israel until the present day. Nevertheless, Israel presents an unavoidable place on world's dance map, and the importance on dance in Israel can also been seen in efforts of the State of Israel to establish Israeli dance institutes abroad, such as Israeli Dance Institute in London. It can be stated that dance has an immensely important place in Jewish religion and tradition, and nowadays it is possible to follow evolution of Jewish dance as an initial expression of incorporation of art in everyday lives of Jewish women[30], as well as dance as a means of identification among both secular and Orthodox religious groups in Israel (see articles in this volume by J. Schmidt and L. Naon, S. Katz-Zichrony and T. Perlshtein).

Taking into consideration criticism of cultural studies[31] and largely non-existent work on dance in the field of cultural sociology, this volume engages in exploration of Jewish dances in Israel by considering dance as a meaning-making

process that operates as a contextual cultural practice on all levels of the society. In that, the volume looks at Jewish dances in the State of Israel, a country that had to re-create identities after re-creation of the state in 1948 where dance served, and still serves, as a meaning-making process on all levels, i.e. among state officials who see it as a means to achieve cohesion among citizens and create a strong national identity, among various groups within Israeli society who use dance as an expression of their identities and personal struggles and desires, be them secular or Orthodox in their religious beliefs; and among Jewish Diaspora. Dance, in other words, became a central notion of identification and a part of culture that identifies the everyday lives of Israelis and extends its outreach to Jews in the US and elsewhere. This volume, therefore, analyses dance through the prism of cultural sociology by understanding culture as both separate sphere of the society, and a way of social life. The volume encompasses theoretical, ethnographic and historical considerations of the dance in Israel, in an attempt to offer a comprehensive (albeit not exhaustive) inquiry into dance in Israel, and help in answering at least some of the questions discussed earlier in this introduction, i.e. "What is dancing? What happens when we do it? Why do we do it? How does doing it constitute a "we"? And "I"? A "you"? A social relation? A social history? In what ways is dancing unlike other social/aesthetic practices? Like other commercial practices? In what ways is the same? Why and how does it matter? To whom?"[32]

The Structure of the Volume

In the first paper, Ruth Eshel offers a history of the development of dance in Israel that helps in understanding other papers in the volume. In that, she elaborates how dance in Israel has evolved from a characteristic of a new, desired Hebrew culture that participated in realising Zionism to the founding part of the Hebrew culture that was eventually established. The Hebrew culture faced opposition as Jewry in Israel divided to two camps before the creation of the present State of Israel where one camp wanted to abandon the Diaspora concept and form a new Israeli culture while the other opposed to this idea. At first, dancers collaborated with Europe and participated in dance manifestations until WWII when they faced cultural isolation. This isolation, however, created a local culture that presents a mixture of influences of all countries from where Jews fled to Israel. At present, dance is blossoming in Israel and while, at first, dance presented an expression of dream and collective expression of belonging, nowadays it is also turning into an expression of individuality and celebration of life. However, dance still maintained its involving character, and dance as a form of art presents personal expression of ideals and desires incorporated into Israeli mentality and culture.

In the second paper Henia Rottenberg writes about Yardena Cohen, dancer and choreographer who significantly contributed to Israeli dances. Yardena Cohen combined influences of the Jewish Diaspora and newly founded Israeli cultural and political scene. In that, the newly founded Israeli state created the Hebrew culture and made an attempt to change the body image, and dance clearly had an influence in that process. By combining narratives of the Zionist ideology, dance influences of the Jewish Diaspora and new dances based on Israeli narratives, life and work of Yardena Cohen and the Israeli dance scene she also influenced demonstrates central place of Jewish dances in Israeli society, culture and politics. The article also shows how Jewish identity – be it the one from Diaspora or the one from Israel itself – is profoundly determined by dance.

The third paper, written by Amit Assis, offers an in-depth analysis of one of the main characteristics of new Hebrew culture, i.e. the Hora dance. Hora is a dance that originates from Hassidic religious background, and it contains religiousness in its dance and lyrics. Nevertheless, the dance presents a religious expression of a secular attempt to create an alternative to traditional Jewish life. This dance also presents a form of community singing that is central to Judaism, and the notion of community that indeed has an important place in Jewish customaries and faith. Hora as a communal dance is one of the main cultural expressions of culture of new immigrants who came to join the Zionist project of building a Jewish homeland. As such, this dance symbolised a new life style, identity, belonging, and a new family. It was envisaged that this Zionist dance would be danced until the Zionist project ends, and dance took a form of faith and hope for a better future. Later on, as the next paper will explain in more details, this dance became part of new Hebrew culture and went into an institutionalised form financed by the State of Israel.

The fourth paper, written by Nina S. Spiegel clearly demonstrates the importance of dance in forming the Hebrew culture, concept of a new Jew, development of Tel Aviv, urban Zionism, and shaping of the Tel-Aviv, the first Hebrew city. In a nutshell, dances had an important place in the life of old Jewish communities during the British Mandate of Palestine where dance was central to everyday lives and Jewish culture, and this prominent role of dance in shaping everyday lives and culture continued with development of large cities after establishment of the State of Israel where dance continued to be a means to express joy (e.g. after building the first harbour, etc.). Tel-Aviv today, therefore, hosts several dance festivals and world's renewed dance centres, and today's situation emerges from the history of the city. Dance, and Hora dance in particular, played a very important role in shaping the concept of a new Jew that will be strong, tough and vibrant, and thus different from the Diaspora Jew. While Hora obviously has roots in socialist Zionism hostile to Jewish Diaspora, it also became a symbol of the new urban culture developed in Tel-Aviv, the first Hebrew city that has a new Hebrew culture embedded in its everyday life and culture.

The fifth paper, written by Sari Katz-Zichrony, describes a teaching practice of the Jewish religious college Orot Israel where dance and religion are intertwined to form an everyday life reality of pupils educated to be religious teachers in Israeli public religious schools. In this religious college, dance is seen as divine given the fact it is presented in Torah, however, respect of religious practice also requires adherence to the principle of religious modesty. This, in practice, means that pupils are taught to dance while preserving the modesty principle in their behaviour, dress code, etc. Dance classes follow the same structure as every other dance class with a difference that these classes also encompass Torah learning, as well as learning about the Jewish tradition. These classes show importance of dance in the Jewish culture, and the prominence of dance within the culture brought to bridging a gap between religion and art where children no longer need to choose preferences or give up from one interest for the other one.

The sixth paper, written by Talia Perlshtein, examines religiously observant dance teachers employed in Israeli public religious schools on aspects related to their work, as well as their work satisfaction. In their work, teachers have to live modest lives and give an example to pupils. In other words, teachers have to combine art and education with halachic rules. According to the research results, teacher's motivation comes largely from personal characteristics such as skills, inclinations and needs, and not from convenient work conditions or similar characteristics. At the same time, teachers are highly motivated and emotionally attached to their jobs to which they attach

divine attributes to dance, as it allows them to enjoy art while fulfilling religious requirements.

The seventh paper, written by Joshua Schmidt and Liora Navon, discusses Israeli trance-dance parties within two groups, secular and Orthodox. In these parties, music and dance are at the centre but there are differences in understanding parties. In other words, with secular parties participants tend to understand this form of dance as a dance therapy helping them to cope with intense Israeli society, and dance thus becomes a means to communicate a different discourse. Individualism is highly cherished for participants dance individually with which dance becomes a form of protest against collective identification. On the other hand, Orthodox participants dance both individually and in groups, and use these gatherings to look for partners to marry. They do not express any protest or individualism with this form of dance; this dance also serves them as a means to integrate in predominantly secular Israeli culture. However, both groups seem to fulfil their desires for changes rather than actually protest since their code of conduct is similar to the one of their parents they are allegedly trying to change, and the dance clearly fulfils this need by making participants feel something has changed and modernised.

Finally, the eighth paper, written by Dina Roginsky, discusses development of Israeli dances and their influence on the identity creation process amongst American Jewry. The dance here reflects identity struggle amongst American and Israeli Jewry. Israeli folk dances are seen as a part of communicating national identity and as an authentic form of expressing cultural identities, and this brought crisis amongst American Jewry that developed its own Jewish identity and Jewish dances. Israeli folk dancing, therefore, became a part of negotiation of a cultural identity that had a symbolic meaning, as Israeli folk present a symbolic attachment to Israel. However, meaning differs amongst Israeli and American Jewry because Israeli dances have religious meaning in the US while those same dances have cultural meaning in Israel. Dance, therefore, becomes a means of cultural display people can consume like, for example, ethnic food, and its influence on the cultural identity and attachment to Israel amongst American Jewry has an immense value.

Acknowledgements

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