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Summoned. Identification and Religious Life in a Jewish Neighborhood

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Author

Fourcade, M

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Iddo TAVORY, 2016. *Summoned. Identification and Religious Life in a Jewish Neighborhood* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016)

A self-described “pragmatist” (however overworked that label may be today) with a taste for the fine grain of social life, Tavory has already made a series of important theoretical interventions about the collective construction of identity through social exchange, ritual, and temporal alignment. His signature approach has been broadly phenomenological and interactionist, focusing on the myriad ways in which our social environment makes us into certain kinds of beings. That is, of course, a longstanding agenda in microsociology but Tavory’s way of working out the argument is quite unique and new. The empirical centerpiece of this research agenda is without a doubt Tavory’s dissertation, now a University of Chicago Press book. *Summoned* offers a brilliant exploration of self-formation in La Brea, an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles (and the largest concentration of Orthodox Jews on the West Coast of the United States).

The stroke of genius comes from the deployment of *this* particular setting for *this* particular analytical purpose. By looking at a close-knit ethnic community, Tavory renders visible processes of identification that may be more subdued in other social locations. In that setting, he shows, everyday life is rhythmically organized by constant calls upon one’s identity as an Orthodox Jew—through social expectations about what one such person is supposed to do, how they are to navigate the neighborhood, organize their day, etc.; but *also* through the unequivocal recognitions, categorizations and summonses—in other words, the processes of *identification*—formulated by non-Orthodox community members. And this is where the choice of setting becomes most advantageous. Tavory could have superficially analyzed the process of summoning *only* through the lens of the closed community he belonged to for three years, focusing on the internal processes by which selves are collectively sustained, as in the ideal-typical image of the homogeneous and collectively regulated ethnic enclave. But he would have missed the most interesting “social fact” about La Brea: alongside the Orthodox Jews, the vast majority of neighborhood members occupy the space in a totally different way and follow

a totally different tempo—that of a hip and profane city, adjacent to West Hollywood and its effervescent, extravagant, and ostentatious atmosphere. By problematizing that which seemed unproblematic (the spatial coherence of the community, the clear boundaries), Tavory gets a lot more analytical mileage. To paraphrase Fredrik Barth, the boundary, and not simply “the culture that it encloses,” becomes the focus of analysis. The question is not so much: “how does the group shape its members?” but “how do people manage to maintain their sense of identity and community in a place that is so much at odds with everything that they (collectively and individually) stand for?” How is it possible that the non-Jewish 70-80 % of the neighborhood remain largely irrelevant and almost invisible to them? Summoning, as it were, is central to this process of world making.

The core idea behind summoning is simple, but devastatingly effective. Brubaker and Cooper¹ have been urging scholars of ethnicity to analytically go “beyond identity” since 2000, but what concept should take identity’s place? This is one of the best candidates I have seen so far. As Tavory reminds us, “summoning” is an adaptation of Althusser’s notion of “interpellation,” which refers to police arrests in French but also to calling on someone out loud. The word capture not only the interactive but also the embodied, deeply felt nature of the process by which a certain kind of self is activated, accomplished and finally produced in everyday life. On the one hand, summoning evokes labeling theory and identification through membership categorization. On the other, it indexes a moral and emotional process—the mediation of what Arlie Hochschild would call “feeling rules,” or “knowing what kinds of emotions one is supposed to be overcome by” [11].

This is a relatively short book, but it is thick with evidence and extremely well constructed, going from the history of the neighborhood to its current organizational structure, to life at synagogue, to the revelation of subtle distinctions among Jews, to the balancing acts by which Orthodox Jews choreograph their difference with non-Jews, and finally to the barely self-conscious mental cartography through which they navigate their immediate physical environment and its morally treacherous passages, such as button-operated crosswalks. It is beautifully written and a pure delight to read. *Summoned* is erudite, occasionally but always appropriately referencing works of literature (e.g. Italo Calvino, Thomas Mann, Jane Austen, and so on), but not pedantic. And something has to be said about Tavory’s sharp use of

¹ Rodgers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 2000, “Beyond Identity”, *Theory and Society*, 29: 1-47.

metaphors and vivid images to convey his point. Thus when wanting to describe the thick, over-determined character of the life he experienced there, he writes: “living an Orthodox life in the Beverly-LaBrea neighborhood was like swimming in honey” [3]. The final scaling up of the argument to other social worlds in the last pages of the conclusion may be a bit short but still offers perceptive remarks about, for instance, the difference between the Orthodox Jews, who “set themselves up to be summoned” and the homeless or, in a very different way, the celebrities, who may try to escape identification, “only to be summoned by others.”

Now do I have any criticisms? Well, yes, some. I do wish at times that Tavory’s writings showed a bit more of an edge. Riding the pragmatist bandwagon has led him down the path of theorizing the self’s careful, if not fastidious, adaptation to its social environment. But where is the pain, the conflict, the resistance in dealing with summons from within? Where is the history of violence and where are the political conditions that make certain kinds of external summoning possible—for Jews and others? Tavory recalls an incident that involved a car driving by him and a friend strolling down Melrose. As the car passed them, a passenger stuck his head out, gave them the finger while shouting the word: “Jews!” [140]. In the relatively protected space of the neighborhood, the friend is unperturbed and shrugs at what he brushes away as the ambient and generic anti-Semitism of the local population. How many centuries, one may wonder, does it take to produce that interpretation and that shrug?