BOOK REVIEWS


Mock-Degen’s study offers a variety of excellent observations, but leaves a number of intriguing questions unanswered because of the chosen theoretical perspective: Glaser and Strauss’ grounded theory. In 1919 sociologist and philosopher Max Weber proclaimed the world’s disenchantment as the task of science. Fifty years later the era of big narratives – Christianity, Socialism – and “big theories” was felt to be over. In lieu of starting from abstract and alienating theoretical thought, research was to focus on the description of lived reality. Practice came to be studied as local practice – a term coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. According to Flick (2002), Habermas was the first to recognise a different tradition in qualitative research, related to names like Goffman and Garfinkel. Based on the new principle of openness, which came to be known as naturalistic sociology, it was assumed that the object would present itself. Cultural anthropologists, opposing themselves to positivistic research, “just selected their tribe, learned the language, and kept a field diary. The hope was that somehow meaning would emerge by itself” (Silverman, 1997). In the 1960s, this belief was supported by Glaser and Strauss’ grounded theory: “The apparently a-theoretical position of some ethnographers itself derives from a theory: just hanging out, with the aim of faithfully representing the subject's world. [It was] a myth, called naturalism” (Silverman, 1997).

In grounded theory, preference is given to field study as against theoretical assumptions, which are to be discovered. It implies that the researcher should suspend a-priori theoretical knowledge. In Mock-Degen’s study the inductive perspective is neither anti-theoretical nor a-theoretical. On the contrary, reference is made to various theories on for example mother-daughter relationships, coping with religious transformation and potential stress, and the Shoah. The principle research questions are: “How do returnee women and their mothers perceive and interpret the return to Orthodox Judaism? In what way has the return to Orthodox Judaism impacted their intergenerational relationships? How did the Dutch Jewish women participating in this research become
involved in Orthodox Judaism and construct a religious lifestyle they felt comfortable with?” The dissertation offers a rich view on the dynamic process the interviewees went through, their caveats and ambivalences, and the impact of choosing a kosher lifestyle on their relationships with friends and relatives while safeguarding shalom bajit. The author argues that from this study emerges an overarching analytic narrative: the respondents saw Orthodox Judaism as a way of giving meaning to being Jewish. From an analytical perspective, the final conclusion could have been more informative. The analytic statements made throughout the book correspond to the grounded theory approach. As a result, theory-building remains rather fragmentary and leaves a variety of pressing questions open.

The aim of the study was to explore how the return to Orthodox Judaism is experienced, perceived and interpreted by the returnees and their mothers. How did the daughters’ religious change affect intergenerational relations? There are indications of four patterns of becoming observant: the peer group pattern (orthodox Zionist youth movement Bně Akiwa), the partner prompted-pattern (involvement with religious practice unfolded as a consequence of meeting an observant partner), the wanting-to-connect pattern (a desire for contact with other Jews), and the by-chance pattern.

In contradistinction to American returnees, many of whom went through a period of political activism and spiritual experimentation before discovering Orthodox Judaism, ba’alot teshuvah in the Netherlands did not abandon the “corrupt” Western world. They found their way back to Judaism more or less silently. A fascinating and puzzling question was why educated, secular women would be attracted to Orthodox Judaism with its traditional gender roles and considered feminism selfish, individualistic, and career-orientated. Becoming Orthodox was not a protest against or even a response to feminism. The returnees were not rebels, with or without a cause, but meaning-seekers who became observant as a natural consequence of being part of the overlapping micro-systems at the Jewish school and the Orthodox youth organisation Bně Akiva. “Their increasing observance came gradually, and developed as they acquired more knowledge, internalising and committing themselves to the behavioural norms and values of an orthodox Jewish life” (2009:221).

The interviewees were attracted to Orthodox Judaism because “it provided a code of apparently authentic pre-established meaning” (2009:222). Their return to Judaism was not a personal reinterpretation of disparate religious notions, nor did they set out to assert their right to bricolage. Their new lifestyle “offered an alternative to the permissive
adolescent sub-culture which emerged in Dutch society in the 1960s” (2009:223) and to the superficial social groups their parents associated with: “They found that this did not offer a profound sense of being Jewish” (2009:223). Returning to Judaism offered an opportunity to give a positive turn to being Jewish. They came to view their life as a historical link in a chain of Jewish generations, and more specifically a contribution to the continuation of Judaism after the Shoah. The Shoah provided a frame of reference for raising a large family. The Shoah and what Hirsch terms post-memory\(^1\) have continued to impact the lives of survivors and their children. Yet neither the returnees nor their mothers saw the Shoah as a reason for returning to Orthodox Judaism. So, what motivated them? Did it boil down to youngsters seeking whatever beliefs and practices they could identify with?

While elaborating on the presentation of the data, three issues in particular crossed my mind: the vitality of ethnicity, Jewish women and feminism, and the historical context at the time of the interviewees’ return to Judaism.

The ba’al teshuva movement originated in the 1960s and 1970s when Western students rallied against the war in Vietnam, smoked pot to deliberately upset their materialistic parents, attended chaotic Rolling Stones concerts, climbed the barricades of academic institutions, and left the Church since God was dead and church-goers were hypocrites. American returnees were anti-establishment and in search of a more authentic, spiritual Judaism, frequently stimulated by a desire for Kabbalistic knowledge. In France, Juifs de Retour opted for a radical, comprehensive style of Judaism in juxtaposition to the French mentality viewing religion as a private matter. Dutch Jewry considered Judaism an “afgelopen chassene” (the wedding was over), especially since the working-class had been almost completely wiped out in the Shoah. Yet, in this era of scepticism, democratisation and secularisation, there was an increasing emphasis on religious observance in Bné Akiva circles with adolescents attracted to strict, ultra and middle-of-the-road Orthodoxy. Interestingly, the author observes a trend toward increasing religious observance in Dutch Liberal Judaism as well. It raises the question as to whether the teshuva movement is an idiosyncratic, i.e. typically orthodox phenomenon. In my observation, quite a few progressive ba’alei teshuvah were encouraged to return to their Jewish roots by their non-Jewish spouses.

\(^1\) Post-memory: quasi memory experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, shaped by traumatic events than can be neither understood nor recreated.
Studies of ethnicity demonstrate that we were dealing, in the 1960s and 1970s, with second and third generation minorities becoming “Polish” or “Chinese” again. Some Dutch Jews who were active and leading members of leftist organisations became consciously aware of their Jewishness as a result of their involvement in immigrant emancipation programs. They envied the Turks and the Moroccans for their presumed clear cultural and religious identities. Many became Jewish again via the solidarity bypass. The question which interests me is, why the Dutch returnees in this study were indifferent or immune to the counter-culture which so obviously affected their American counterparts.

The author contrasts traditional Jewish gender roles with feminist views or more accurately with radical and ideological feminism. My question would be: Who is defining feminism? Is there one single authoritative concept or are there more feminisms? The interviewees rejected the sweeping individualism and selfishness of second-wave feminists. Meanwhile, the Dutch Jewish women’s organisation Deborah was campaigning for women’s right to be elected to community boards! The secular women’s movement in the Netherlands proclaimed itself egalitarian. In reality it was ruled by self-proclaimed leaders, some of whom advocated lesbian love as the alternative to male chauvinism. In terms of Jewish and for that matter Christian, Islamic and Humanistic basic values, it might be worthwhile to problematize the subjectivism, relativism and continuous search for meaning of the non-affiliated, and redefine feminism from a religious and philosophical perspective.

The book concludes with a number of suggested questions for further research, such as: How do men became observant and why would they perceive their return differently? My suggestion would be to build on this open-minded and impressive study to construct a comprehensive theory of the ba’al teshuva movement. One of my questions would address, why being and staying Jewish is an inevitable as well as deliberate choice.

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Literature consulted
Flick, Uwe. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*; London: SAGE, 2002.