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Seriously Discussing Play and Game: A Few Anthropological Comments

Limor Shifman, *Televised Humor and Social Change in Israel, 1968-2000*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2008 (Hebrew).

Tamir Sorek, *Playing with Identities: Arab Soccer in a Jewish State*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011 (Hebrew).

The last decades have witnessed a growing interest on the part of students of the social sciences and the humanities in the “non-serious” aspects of socio-cultural life. As the two books discussed in this review article demonstrate, Israeli researchers have jumped on this band-wagon, even though they are still trailing somewhat behind.

A few decades ago such an interest would, at least, make people raise an eyebrow. Indeed, interesting and thought-provoking researchers were rejected by university departments due to their work in such fields. The reluctance to study issues and themes such as music, leisure, tourism, food, play, game, and so many other activities that suspend the seriousness of human actions revealed an odd postulate, correlating the non-serious nature of the behaviors under study to the seriousness of the research itself; or worse, of the researchers themselves.

The growing body of research on such “frivolous” activities seems to have finally done away with that presupposition, mainly by differentiating between the subject-matter studied, the theoretical concerns, and the researcher. These new studies deepen our understanding of the human condition. One means of doing so is by unraveling its structural formation. I refer here to the distinction between a “game” and a “play”.

The two books reviewed here serve, each in its own unique way, as a springboard for discussing one of these two frameworks. Shifman’s book sheds light on questions about play by means of dealing with televised humor in Israel. Sorek’s book, on the other hand, exemplifies ideas about game, while dealing with Palestinian football (called by North Americans “soccer”) in Israel. My treatment of the two different frameworks – play and game – enables one to draw a fruitful comparison between the two books, while revealing the deep structures forming these non-serious activities.

Game, as an ideal type, is structured by several series of formal, rigid and agreed-upon rules. Competitive football, for instance, is performed on a standard field. Any deviation from the (international) standards would disqualify the game. Such, for example, is the rule concerning the maximum number of players. Moreover, in the specific case of competitive sport activities referees decide in case of disagreement. Note that such a disagreement does not concern the rules themselves, which, as stated, are rigid. Referees decide only about the performance of the players. Like signs (traffic signs, digits, and so on), the rules of the game do not yield to personal or collective interpretation.

On the exact opposite side stands play (satire, jokes, buffoonery, caricature, and the like), that suffers from a chronic lack of formal rules. More accurately, play reconstructs the rules of the serious world. The work of *bricolage* with the building blocks of social life is the very essence of play. The *bricoleur*’s action ridicules the normative social order, as it is its *raison d’être*. Yet the message conveyed by the play is shrouded in a meta-message of non-seriousness, and thus it attenuates its sharp criticism of “normative” life.

Unlike play, which is interested in conveying messages to the serious world, game is indifferent to it. Herein lies its forte.