Urban integration of Israeli immigrants in the 1990s: a comparison of Be’er Sheva, Ashkelon, Kiriat Gat

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Abstract: As a result of the opening of the borders of the former Soviet Union, Israel has been the destination of numerous immigrants. This article deals with the impact of immigration between 1989 and 1994, upon three towns in the south of Israel, Be’er Sheva, Ashkelon and Kiriat Gat. These towns correspond to three socio-economic levels of urban area in the southern region. On the one hand, the immigrants from the former Soviet Union arrive with specific demands, on the other hand the political, economical and social context in Israel is very unusual. The successful integration of immigrants and the constructive development of the host country depend on the conformity of these demands and proposals. What the government offers in terms of housing, reception and employment in each of the three towns plays a key role: the town’s social and economical heritage influences the integration of the new population while at the same time the arrival of a new workforce influences the development of the local area. Every town wants to grow and reinforce its position in the region, but only the large town, Be’er Sheva, is able to offer a certain diversity and therefore answers more fully the needs and wants of its new population. Government decisions and policies are not made to oppose the liberal economic system and to suppress the spatial inequalities despite some measures aiming at a more equal balance. The importance of heritage and the lack of communal development schemes within regions together ensure the continuation of qualitative inequalities in the south of Israel and even accentuate the problem.

Keywords: Immigration, Israel, town planning, urban politics, urban growth, living conditions, regional development

Introduction

This article deals with part of the southern region of Israel (Map 1) through the study of three towns: Be’er Sheva, Ashkelon and Kiriat Gat. These towns are situated to the north of the southern region of the country, a region mainly occupied by the Negev desert (Debuchy 1989). The three towns are established in a transitional zone between a desert area and the regions of ancient civilisations, including Jerusalem, Jaffa... By their arid countryside and their lack of vegetation, the towns belong to the desert zone and stand in contrast to the north of Israel, with its rolling hills, woods and greenery.

Added to this opposition between north and south, there is another one between the Mediterranean coast and the inland areas. The population is very unevenly distributed in Israel. The Jewish colonization in Palestine (Kimmerling 1983) has essentially developed since the end of the nineteenth century and has been concentrated in the coastal areas. Within this period the population was for the most part concentrated in urban centres around the ports. Two capital cities have gained greatly from the influx of immigrants: Tel Aviv and Haifa. Jerusalem too held a strong at-
traction as an historical and spiritual city. Until the creation of the Zionist State in 1948, the distribution of the population was due to spontaneous settlement (Eisenstadt 1967, 1985; Elon 1972; Friedlander et al. 1979) and thus it favoured the birth of large urban centres (Efrat 1984). The problem of spatial inequalities arose very quickly. With the creation of the Israeli State, policies to reduce these inequalities were implemented (Bein 1982). Facing the problem of the concentration of population on the coast and in the centre of the country and the small size of the territory, the redistribution and dispersion of the population over the whole of the national area became a priority. From then on, the north and the south of the country have been considered pioneering regions (Golany 1979). The distribution of the population in these areas is the order of the day. At the same time the State wants to provide a better socio-economic integration of the immigrants (Pasquier 1981).

'Development towns' (Map 2), a new concept in the policy of national and regional development of the Israeli territory, provided a way to succeed in these two objectives. Created between 1948 and 1963 with the aim of integrating immigrants and to aid their distribution across the country, it meant the foundation of new built-up areas for the majority of these towns. Very few were the result of the enlargement of previously small towns.

The three towns studied correspond to three levels within the Israeli urban area: the large, the medium and the small town. These three towns are situated close to one another. It is therefore interesting to study the impact that the arrival of a large new population (Efrat 1991) has had upon a precise area since 1989. Between this date and the end of 1996, Israel received 668,900 immigrants from the ex-USSR (Central Bureau of Statistics, 17 February 1997). But did this influx benefit the three towns in the same ways, or did it cause them to develop differently? Was Be’er Sheva the focus of the majority of the population, investments and policies, thus reinforcing its position as provincial capital city, or did it try to balance out the region by dispersing population and actions? The aim of this article is to observe the interdependencies and the development of these three southern Israeli towns faced with a relatively high level of new population. It is a question of understanding which towns profit most from this gain. Does the large town concentrate wealth and advantages, or does it redistribute them at lower levels? This is only one of the factors encountered by regional town planning in Israel. We will limit ourselves to the study of these three towns without touching upon the policy of directed establishment particular to the Israeli context.

To this end an inventory and a brief history of each town are required. A comparative evolution of the three towns since the end of 1989 shows the relative inequalities of development and attraction favouring the large and medium sized agglomerations. Finally a case by case study of the towns allows an understanding of the difficulties and the isolation of each of them when faced with a migratory phenomenon and with government policies.

The sources are primarily based on investigations carried out with the local councils involved, of studies on the spot and of official statistics (Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem).

Be’er Sheva, Ashkelon and Kiriat Gat form three very different types of development town.

The foundation of Be’er Sheva is very ancient: at the time of David and Solomon this town — under the name of Bersabee — was well known because of its sanctuary. It was a centre of pilgrimage and a stopping place for caravans. This town is in fact situated at the crossroads of the desert routes and constitutes the last