

The Rise and (so far) Demise of Social Protest in Israel

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A wave of social protest swept in Israel in the summer of 2011. It erupted on July 14th – the most symbolic date one could have chosen for an explosion of a popular protest; the same day in which in 1789 French masses stormed the Bastille and heralded the turn on the "third class", the "commoners", into the "people". The events in Israel were dramatic indeed, yet not on a par with the French Revolution, perhaps more so on a par with the students revolts of 1968. Drove of protest tent-encampments spread out in the country and hundreds of thousands of protesters poured into the streets of Tel Aviv and other cities Saturday after Saturday, between mid-June until the end of August, and demonstrated and shouted with great determination "the people demand social justice" ("ha-am doresh zedek hevrat"). It is without precedent in Israel that such large number of people takes into the street to protest; it is even rarer that such a turnout is related to social issues; and it is no less surprising that the media provides such an event a totally enthusiastic cover in front pages and prime-time broadcasts. In short, in the summer of 2011 Israel experienced a social event that has no precedence its history.

The immediate trigger for this protest was the swelling prices of housing. The prices of apartments had been soaring and one upshot of it was greater pressure on the (very small) renting market, especially in Tel Aviv. In the decade between 1999 and 2009, the share of young families who own an apartment fell from 51% to 43%, and the rate of rent for this category soared in 16%.¹ Daphni Leef and Stav Shafir – the women who would turn to be "face" and "voice" of the protest – are students from Tel Aviv who initiated the placement of the first protest tents in Rothschild Boulevard, when they realized that they cannot afford the rent anymore. Before long the Boulevard was filled with hundreds of tents, and in the whole country protest encampments were set up with approximately 2500 tents.²

The upsurge of the protest came after a period of local incubation, in which consumers mounted protests against retail chains because of high food prices, and concerned citizens campaigned in several cases against the "tycoons" – the contemporary "robber barons" of Israel. The upsurge of the protest also came

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simultaneously with a global wave of protests that took place in U.S.A., Latin America and Europe, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and shortly after the storming of Arab authoritarian and corrupt regimes in North Africa and the Middle East. The intersection between the local dynamics and the global atmosphere ignited the vital – but hardly organized and evidently unstable – movement of protest in Israel.

Israel had been founded and formed by socialist parties (the Labour Movement) in the pre-state era (the 1920s to 1948), and was dominated for long time by a centralized developmental state, that operated a strong "visible hand" in planning and directing the economy (1948-1977). In 1977 a right-wing coalition came to power, composed of nationalist and liberal parties (the Likud), and since the mid-1980s it had gone through an intensive transition to a neo-liberal regime, post-industrial structure and populist politics.³ This resulted in growing and eye-pocking inequality, in growing squeeze on the middle classes, and in growing impoverishment of Israel's poor. The data is astonishing: 20 business groups, mostly controlled by families, own half of Israel's financial market;⁴ with an inequality Gini index of 0.378, Israel is but second to the US in the developed world in its social gaps;⁵ and the rate of poverty in Israel is 21%, compared to an average of 11% in the OECD countries.⁶

These social failures look even worse, considering that Israel is highly placed on the world ladder of income per capita, which stands on \$28,800, which is 84% that of the OECD average and 62% that of the American GDP;⁷ and taking into account the fact that Israel was relatively unaffected by the crisis that begun in 2008.

The protest of 2011 was the first spike stuck in the wheels of the neo-liberal transformation, that rolled uninterruptedly for some 25 years and fashioned a non-contested hegemony of the American model of capitalism. Yet, in September the tent encampments and mass demonstrations terminated. It was expected that the "street phase" of the protest will exhaust itself with the approaching of high holidays, the winter and the return of students to the universities. Nevertheless the sudden fading of the social protest to the pre-summer level was as astonishing as had been its very outbreak just two and a half months before that. Whether the protest signals a change of course of the neo-liberal regime, or just a momentary interlude in it, is yet to be seen.

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The protest was initiated spontaneously, and had been led throughout its summer peak period by a group of young academics, of the ages 20 to 35, students and employees in communication, media and journalism or with associated skills, who live and work in the old-gentrified districts of the city of Tel Aviv, the hub of Israel's secular culture, youth entertainment and business headquarters. Two organized movements that joined the protest and mobilized many participants, were the Students National Association (headed by Itzik Shmueli) and the "Dror Israel", a movement that uplifts the

pioneering and social values of the bygone historical Labour Movement. These three core groups of the protest are affiliated with what is roughly described as the "middle class", and the protest was identified by and large as representing this class. Nevertheless, as the protest amplified it was joined by masses from peripheral zones in Israel (especially in the north and south of the country), and by a significant number of people who belong to the "lower classes".

The umbrella identity for all these groups became that of the "people", and in the explicit discourse it was emphasized that the protest represents "all the people", with no distinctions. This self-portrayal of the movement as the movement of the people is an important novelty in Israel, where the common identity is usually marked by the "nation" in its ethno-nationalist sense (the Jewish nation; or the Palestinian nation etc.). It is the first time in the public discourse that to such an extent the term "people" acquired such an inclusive trans-national and trans-ethnic sense. The support of the protest was really the widest possible, and reached at its peak some 88% of the population.

With that, the protest was still coached within the confines of the dominant Zionist national ideology. This was expressed above all in the republican discourse of the protest, based on the logic of: "we serve the state (through military service and taxation) and it owes us in return social services". Such position of "her majesty's opposition" was nicely symbolized by a national white and blue flag covering a wall building in the boulevard, only dotted with tears, as well as by major speeches of protest leaders who praised the "new Israelis" as inheritors of the Zionist founders of the nation.

Playing the "new Israelis" card was inclusive in some sense, yet it also left out some social sectors, or gave them an excuse to stay out. And so it came to be that not all of the people joined "the people" of the protest, or even supported the protest. Some public opinion polls that were taken at the time of the protest show that the support of it was conspicuously divided politically, between Left and Right respondents, as well as between secular and religious respondents. Left and secular respondents (who tend to be "middle class") were more supportive of the protest than Right and religious respondents (who tend to be "lower class"): among voters affiliated with the Labour party, 98% supported the protest; among Likud (nationalist) party affiliates the support declined to 85%; among the Shas party affiliates (lower class Mizrahi and traditionalists) the support declines to 78%; and among Jewish Home party affiliates (middle-class Ashkenazi religious-nationalists) the decline is to 50%.⁸

Five sectors of Israeli society either took minor active part in the protest or even actually ostracized it: Palestinians citizens of Israel, who felt the protest to be too Israeli in the Jewish sense; Jewish immigrants from Russia, who felt the protest to be too much Israeli in the "native Israeli" sense; orthodox Jews, who felt the protest to be too secular; religious-nationalist Jews who felt the protest to be too leftist, and thus prioritizing (potentially) social welfare over expenses on the Jewish settlement in the

occupied territories; and the main worker's federation, for which the protest was too "yuppie" (and it refused to play second violin to the leaders of the protest). A sixth and major "sector" that was caught by surprise was the wealthy elite, the high bourgeoisie and the industrialists, the reaction of which wavered between caution and dismissal.⁹

Considering this social configuration, one may conclude that the "people" were in the main "the middle". In the last twenty-five years the center allied with the upper classes and supported neo-liberal policies. Yet, as of recently the middle class found itself under distress and unable to afford what it considers the level of services that it is entitled to.¹⁰ This social concern has been combined with a political aggravation: the repugnance of this sector from the neo-nationalist and ethno-religious stance of the ruling coalition, and its frustration from years of government preference of two sectors: the Jewish settlers in the occupied territories and the Jewish orthodox community. The social distress and the political aggravation are interconnected, because, arguably, the state divests huge budgets from welfare inside the "green line" to the occupied territories and to the social sectors who settle there.¹¹ It is on this compound background that in July 14th 2011 parts of the middle classes, especially of the young, educated and liberal sections, allied with parts of the weaker and peripheral population to conjure the new demands of "the people" for "social justice".

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The root cause of the protest were, as mentioned, the social consequences of the economic turn of Israel towards thorough neo-liberal policies since the 1980s and the direction of state resources to the ethno-national sectors. But why was the protest fanned through extra-parliamentary channels such as street encampments and mass demonstrations, rather than via the articulation of demands through the mechanism of political parties? The reason for this was a deep crisis of representation, and a consequent widespread feeling of distrust of the political system as a whole.

One of the major features of the protest was that it was declared by its participants as "non-political" or "a-political". This was expressed in dodging identification with any political party and in avoiding ties with any political figures. The heads of the protest were especially careful to deny any leftist inclination (though most of them are leftists) or even an anti-government intention, in the face of right-wing accusation that the whole protest is about toppling the Netanyahu government. In the particular circumstances in Israel, declaring oneself as "a-political" means above all that one does not side with any party with regard to the controversy over the future of the occupied territories and the relations with the Palestinians. The protesters indeed avoided this issue by all means (even though it has a great economic relevance). To raise it, would have meant an immediate split in the unity of "the people" which they aspired to present.

Even the demands for deep changes in the social and economic policies were implicitly presented as "a-political". It was declared that the political establishment as a whole is a problem and that the politicians have betrayed their duty of serving the citizens. Such stance is familiar from youth protest also in other western democracies, where the populace lost faith in its political representatives. In Israel the level of trust in the political parties is the lowest compared to all other institutions, and only about a quarter of the population trusts the parties and the politicians. 80% of the public place parties and politicians are at the top of a corruption ladder. Membership in parties declined from about 20% in the 1960s to about 6% in the first decade of the century. Voting turnout went down from the height of 85% in the past to only 60% recently.¹²

The causes of the crisis of representation are not detached either from the neo-liberal turn. The coalescence of all the large parties around the neo-liberal program tended to blur their differences and thus make the choice among them less relevant. This effect was augmented by the creation of center parties that conjoined past Left and Right senior figures, thus again questioning the very relevance of choice among the parties. The parties lost much of their major functioning as mediators between civil publics and the state and left the political sphere open to commercial mediatization, on the one hand, and to appeals to pre-political communal affiliation, on the other hand. In the post-materialist and post-modernist spirit of the last decades, socio-economic affairs were deferred to professional specialists and to non-governmental organizations. The novelty of the protest was to bring back to the forefront of political discourse questions of social justice; yet this could only have been carried through "non-political" means and rhetoric.

The new "non-political politics" was expressed not only in the negative attitude to conventional democratic politics (parliament, parties, representation) but also in the invention of forms of direct democracy and in the transformation of public spaces into places of and for the public. The tent encampments turned overnight into hotspots of a new hectic public culture that attracted tens of thousands of visitors from twilight to the small hours of the mornings. In every street corner of Rothschild, and in other encampments around the country, there were rock bands, artists' performances, circles of discussions, screening of social movies, all kinds of music, dancing and praying, eating and drinking. Observers were reminded of the Woodstock concert from 1969, that heralded the culture of the 1960s' (during the days the encampments were largely vacated because of the hot and humid weather, and because people continued their everyday lives and regular employment commitment).

Questions of political representation troubled the protest from within. The initial group that started the protest received a huge and positive exposure by the national press and media, and became overnight recognized as the "leaders of the protest", or the "Rothschild headquarters". But the homogeneous nature of this group, and its location in the symbolic and social "center" of the country, could not have passed unnoticed by "local leaders" of tent encampments from the country peripheries. The relations between center and periphery thus turned into an internal tension within the

protest movement, and there were discussions and attempts at the creation of a more openly democratic and representative leadership structure. But these moves never consolidated and when the protest wave came to its end it did not leave behind any operative organ that could have carried it beyond the summer.

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The main slogan of the protest was, as mentioned, "the people demand social justice". What in fact was meant by that? The protest emerged, as mentioned, spontaneously and without prior preparation, and led by students and graduates trained in communication skills. Except for the feeling of daily economic stress and the sense of not being able to make ends meet, they did not really come prepared with a social vision, let alone an economic program. In the first two-three weeks the very expression of rage against injustice and inequality was a purpose in itself. But with the passage of time the pressures grew to define the actual demands of the movement. The leadership used an existing document of the Dror movement in order to draft the first document of its demands.

The document opened with an indictment of the government for tens of years of policies which increase inequality and decrease social services. A line of issues that require a new orientation is enlisted. They include measures to reduce poverty, to enlarge the expenses for social services, to make the tax system more progressive, to intervene in the housing market for the reduction of prices, to offer free education to children from age 3 and so forth. The overall framework is moderately social-democratic and classic Keynesian (no direct challenges to capitalism or globalization are mentioned; no deep institutional reforms, only the mentioned proposals for improvement).

The instinctive reaction of the government was to admit that there are social failures, but it ascribed them to insufficient level of market competition in Israel. And so, from the government's point of view, neo-liberalism was not seen as the problem, but rather as the solution. More competitive market became the discursive framework into which the government translated the public challenge.

There is a well trodden manner by which governments defer public pressures for change: they establish a committee. In this case, Prime Minister Netanyahu decided upon the establishment of a committee to investigate the demands of the protest and consider how the government can meet them – without reopening the already given governmental budget. The committee was manned with mainstream professionals, close to the government. As its head was nominated Prof. Manuel Trachtenberg, an economist of the conventional school, though a person of the best intentions. He conducted a process of public hearing of social and economic demands, which in itself was an exemplary democratic event. In his report, which was published in the end of September, he adopted the view of the protest as an expression of young working families of the "middle classes", who make the backbone of Israeli society,

in military service and in productive work, but are not receiving their fair retribution from the government. He listed a long number of policy proposals to redress this situation – but without transgressing the neo-liberal framework. At the end, the recommendations were adopted by the government in a declarative gesture, but not really implemented. In fact the main effect of the Trachtenberg Committee was, as the radical protesters feared, to defer and diffuse the impact of the protest.¹³

As a response to the creation of the governmental committee the heads of the protest felt the need to summon up a committee of experts on their own, which was filled by tens of volunteering experts from universities and non-governmental social associations, headed by Prof. Aviya Spivak and Prof. Yossi Yona. The process of the working of the Spivak-Yona teams was also an exemplary for democratic hearing and mobilization of popular experts and intellectuals for the service of social causes. They produced a more far reaching program of change, but also in this case there was no anti-capitalist radicalism involved, no deep reforms aiming to overcome capitalist modes of production, distribution and consumption, but rather a good old common sense Keynesianism, i.e., a demand for more state intervention in the economy for the attainment of social goals and the reconstitution of the welfare state.¹⁴

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All in all then, the protest in Israel was indeed a radical event, pulling out to the street hundreds of thousands of angry citizens in protest against the economic and social inequality and injustice that the neo-liberalism of the last 25 years generated. It was the first show of force of its kind, and as such it was very impressive. Yet the protest movement had its drawbacks. The major shortcomings of the protest were the following: 1. That it did not articulate a legacy of radicalism that can tackle head-on the neo-liberal hegemonic project, but rather occupied itself with "solutions to problems" attitude; 2. That it did not establish any organizational foundation that could have turned the initial energy that it mobilized into an infrastructure for an ongoing political social movement; 3. That even when it formulated a more inclusive understanding of the people (as demos), ultimately it did not succeed in building a cooperative, stable collaboration with the the social and geographical peripheries and with the Arab minority (nor did it resolve to tackle the question of the occupied territories); and 4. That it was not able to overcome the limitations of the individualistic ("consumerist") approach to social policy, thus failing to address the concerns of organized labor.

When the tent encampments were folded and streets demonstrations faded the supporters of the protest comforted themselves with the thought that this was just the "end of the beginning" of the protest, the end of the first phase of it. But would there be a next phase, and what shape would it take, was unclear then, and remains so to the days of drafting this essay in the end of December 2011. The promises of the government to be responsive and to implement a reform came to naught. This is not surprising since Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud (nationalist party) Prime Minister, is

an avowed free-market neo-liberal (or in American terms neo-conservative). Some months after the blow-up of the protest, different forms of social activity may still simmer subterraneously, and the heads of the protest are still in search – yet each on his or her own – for a way to continue the protest in a new way. Daphne Leef declared the initiation of a stocks business group dedicated to social projects; Stav Shafir is involved in extra-parliamentary student politics; Shmueli will most probably find his place in one of the political parties of the center. The radical democratic organizations and the organizations in the peripheries remain relatively small and so far unable to provide an alternative leadership at the national level.

The question many wonder about these days, is whether and in what manner will the protest affect the next national elections, which are due in 2013. But politics in Israel, and in the Middle East at large, is so volatile, that any prediction made when drafting this text, may not worth the paper it is printed on at the time when it is being read. After all, in the morning of July 14th 2011 nobody was aware that an outstanding movement of social protest would sprout in that very evening.



"Justice" sign and Daphni Leef: The "face" of the protest. The social protest in Israel, 2011. Cell phone photograph by Uri Ram.



The major tent encampment; Rothschild Avenue, Tel Aviv. The social protest in Israel, 2011. Cell phone photograph by Uri Ram.



The Weeping Flag. Tel Aviv. The social protest in Israel, 2011. Cell phone photograph by Uri Ram.

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- ¹³ For the full text of "The Committee for Economic and Social Change" (The Trachtenberg Committee) see <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/1.1484032>.
- ¹⁴ For the Spivak-Yona Report see: "Document of Principles for Social Policy – Submitted to the Public by the Spivak-Yona Team". In the official site of the protest: <http://j14.org.il/spivak/?p=236%20%D7%9E%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%A8>