2.9. THE 2011 "SOCIAL PROTEST" IN ISRAEL AND ITS AFTERMATH

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Introduction

These lines are being written shortly after the January 2013 parliamentary elections in Israel, which saw a tremendous change in the composition of the Israeli parliament (the Knesset): nearly half of all incumbent members (a total of 53) will not be coming back, and will be replaced by new MKs -most of whom (48 in numbers) are new to this post. Existing parties -most notably the Kadima party, which had nearly 1/4 of all seats- have shrunk to near-oblivion, and in their stead new parties and new constellations -most notably "Yesh Atid"- have risen to great success. Much of this change is due to the eruption, in summer 2011, of the "Social Protest"—a contentious movement of unprecedented national scale, which mobilized at its height some 450,000 people -about 6% of the state's total population.

Who Were the Mobilized Groups, and What Did They Demand

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The “Social Protest”, as it is often referred to in Israeli discourse, is actually an umbrella-term for several protest movements and contentious collective actions which mobilized around the same time, in the summer months of 2011. Like most phenomena of its kind, it is a question of analysis to draw its boundaries: what is included under this title, and, consequently, when it started and ended.

The months prior to the Social Protest experienced strikes of workers in a few important public sectors: social workers (in winter 2011) and the protest of trainee-physicians, which were backed by the national Medical Association (which began in spring 2011 and carried through the summer, parallel to the Social Protest). Perhaps one of the first signs of a large-scale social unrest was the “Cottage Protest”: a facebook-organized mass boycott on domestic dairy products -mainly the popular cottage cheese- in order to pressurize dairy manufacturers to drive the exaggerated products’ prices down.

But the Social Protest is, more than anything, known for the Tent Protests: a huge-scale mobilization across lines of sector and profession, concern and location -and which mobilized both online and in the streets. The Tent Protests were started by a small group of Tel-Avivis in their 20s, who were (most still are) mainly students and/or professionals belonging to the “creative class”:[2] journalists, film makers, and so on. They initially established a tent encampment downtown Tel-Aviv in July 2011 to protest the shortage of affordable housing, but were soon joined by thousands of other activists, individuals and members of various groups: from university students to un-unionized workers (such as free-lance workers or contracted workers), from migrant workers and homeless to parents -each with their own needs, interests and agenda. Most individuals and small groups quickly formed horizontal links, supported by web2.0 social media, similar to those seen in the Indignados or Occupy movements. Few institutionalized groups with official power of representation also joined the movement and turned central actors: the national Students Union, Dror Israel youth movements and the Histadrut trade union.

[2] Florida, 2002.

They had existing pool of resources and network of constituents, and, by contrast, theirs was a hierarchical form of organization.

On the whole, the Social Protests raised a whole range of issues concerning the rising cost-of-living, the retrenched state of welfare and general questions of national priorities -in particular redistributional inequalities between center and periphery, the super-rich and the middle strata, etc. In every domain, they presented demands both for greater regulation and enforcement, on the one hand, and for larger direct services and transfers, on the other. For example, they demanded cuts in the military budgets and greater investments in education and health, especially in the periphery; making public housing more accessible, and regulating the housing market; reduction of universal indirect taxes and increase in taxation on capital -including a progressive inheritance tax; governmental supervision over the prices of staple foods; lowering the prices of public transportation services; increasing the minimum wage; putting a halt to all privatization processes; direct employment in all governmental ministries and branches, and so on and so forth.

Many of the demands of the “Social Protest” concern the “Democracy” part of “Social-Democracy”. As in the Occupy movement, the Wisconsin uprising, the Spanish Indignados, the Greek Aganaktismenoi and other global contemporary examples, Israeli protesters incorporated many demands for democratic freedoms, civic and political rights and greater participation. First, Israeli protesters quickly adopted the participatory model of General Assemblies, with their own rules of safe-space and hand-gestures to ease their management.[3] The protests gave a “boost” to the ideas of direct (or “fluid”) democracy, and several groups are currently trying to promote such models. Second, protesters fought for greater democracy, transparency and accountability in decision making at large -and budgetary policy making, in particular. Thus, for example, one of the central claims has been the abolishing

[3] An Israeli activist who had spent time with the Indignados in Madrid, came back to Israel when the movement first erupted, and taught local activists how to run General Assemblies.

of the Economic Arrangements Law.[4] Protesters also established a "Social Guard": a group of activists who join all meetings of the Knesset Finance Committee as observers, as a means to put pressure on its members and to constitute an independent channel of information to support citizens' advocacy efforts. Another group established a special website to follow up on the implementation of the Trajtenberg Committee recommendations and provide other information on legislation. Third, as in other movements—as protesters ran into clashes with the police and with local authorities who have tried to suppress the protests, much of protesters' energy has been directed at securing the democratic right to congregate and protest in the public sphere: re-building (and re-re-building) evacuated and demolished encampments, carrying out demonstration for the right to demonstrate, taking legal action, bailing protesters out of custody, and so on. Four, and perhaps more than any other contemporary movement, certain factions within the Israeli protest movement have become engaged with representative democracy in electoral politics: several activists launched a campaign to recruit members to coalition parties (mostly the Likud), with the hope of influencing from within, however this remained a contentious debate within movement ranks.

In different encampments across the country, activist groups pursued agendas pertaining to the problems of their communities. Several encampments for homeless and unemployed in the periphery of Tel-Aviv focused on long-term charity initiatives, and they bread ongoing projects such as soup kitchens. Palestinian citizens of Israel, who mostly live in homogenous communities segregated from Jewish publics, emphasized the issues of land confiscation and house demolitions they are facing. The protest, however, did not encompass all tiers of society: immigrants from the former Soviet block (aka "Russians"), Palestinian citizens of Israel and the working class were largely excluded from it. The one group which was almost completely absent from the struggles were religious and, in particular, the ultra-orthodox. Despite high

[4] This is a local version of Omnimus Law which has been in use since 1985 to detrimental effect; it overrides many of the Knesset's budgetary decisions, making them subjugated to governmental priorities—which have been, during this time, a reduction of its spending, vast privatization and other neoliberal policies.

levels of poverty it suffers, this public has established clientelistic relationship with the state, and is subject to patrimonialism. It mobilizes only under orders from its spiritual leaders, who -using their political adjuncts- manage to secure benefits for their constituents via politics of patronage.

Women played a central role in the movement. The Tent Protests notoriously started with the actions of 25-old Daphne Leef, a video editor who had just been evacuated from her apartment. She remains, until today, recognized as the single-most-important leader and a symbolic figure of the protests, but she is not alone -other women have been party of the small group recognized as “protest leaders”, and many other women played prominent roles in different protest groups across the country, including in the national organization of popular general assemblies. At the same time, gender as a topic and as a center of analysis was undermined in the mobilization. Leef herself refused to identify as “a woman”. While feminist activists did establish their own camps within the larger encampments, they channelled most of their work to some of the most marginalized encampments in the periphery, which housed unemployed, homeless and poor women, but where, consequently, they gained little visibility and influence within the largest movement. This, I stress, is a missed opportunity, for many of the grievances at the heart of the movement are, in fact, gendered. For example: the shift toward precarious modes of employment impacts men and women in different ways (since they are employed in different sectors of the economy, and because of unequal distribution of care work at home). Accordingly, many of the movement’s demands are, in fact, gendered: increasing eldercare subsidies, increasing pay for social workers and teachers, etc. The example of the Strollers March is a case in point. A distinct group of protesters, it consisted of thousands of young parents-to-toddlers from across the state, who were marching as a block with their children in tow. Their major demands concerned extension of existing benefits: extending free education to cover all toddlers from 3-months old, and extending the paid parental leave. While this group was, in fact, set up and led

by a group of women, in their formal discourse they refrained from speaking as "mothers" and instead spoke as "parents", in a gender-neutral language.[5]

Movement Structure, Organization and Agenda: Dilemmas and Tensions

One question that has bothered the protest from early on was leadership. Despite claims of "non-hierarchical" organization -which were true, when it comes to the masses- the small circle of Tel-Avivi youth who started the protest have been hailed, by most parties (the media, the government and many in the movement ranks) as its leaders; nevertheless they were also blamed for taking credit to the work of many and for making decisions alone, stepping over the General Assemblies. They were, on the one hand, pushed to represent the movement, and, on the other, scrutinized for doing so. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that they have, in fact, played the role of movement leaders: making speeches from above the central stages in all major demonstrations, publicly debating with the government via the press, meeting the president, and so on and so forth. This caused constant tensions between local encampments, especially in the periphery, and the Tel-Aviv central encampment, and between the national committee of General Assemblies and the circle of "protest leaders".

With so many participating groups, perspectives and interests however, finding a shared agenda has been an ongoing struggle for protesters -and a source for critique from the government and the media. In this vacuum, groups with pre-existing ideology, analysis and framing capacity took to the mission of "aligning" the movement to their ideological platforms, and helping it present a cohesive line of demands. One socialist-zionist youth movement (Dror Israel) quickly organized online tools which helped it reach-out to the masses and become an analytical compass. A group of academics from all major universities, research centers and think tanks held numerous hearings and

[5] Even though there is nothing "neutral" about the share of care work among Israeli couples.

issued a comprehensive report -which was published as a book- detailing an elaborated program.[6]

There were also attempts by various individuals and groups, whose agenda had little to do with the protests, to align with it in order to draw supporters, or even to co-opt it. Most notably, a group of right-wing fascist and racist activists, formerly from the "Kach" movement, have arrived at the central encampment in Tel-Aviv, and tried to join the protest with the suggestion that settling in colonies in the West Bank is a viable solution to the shortage in affordable housing. Movement leaders, who were afraid of being portrayed as "Lefties", refused to take definite exclusionary action toward the right-wing settlers, but certain groups within the encampment came into clashes with the latter, and eventually, although they tried to join many protest actions, those right-wing activists remained a separate block which had no bearings on the movement at large, and is not recognized as an integral part of it. Nevertheless it remains a critical point that the Social Protest refused to take any position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, out of desire to reach out to the broadest coalition possible, across dividing lines of "Left" and "Right".[7]

Reception and Achievements

The Social Protest has been almost instantly embraced by institutions central to the Israeli democracy—including political parties and the media. As they gained growing popularity very rapidly, they became a force no establishment could afford to ignore. For several long weeks, the protests have featured repeating central stories in all national newspapers, TV news editions, and so forth. Most media channels took an overall flattering tone vis-a-vis the protest movement, even if they had particular questions regarding the direction it was taking or some of its leadership. The most critical voice came from those

[6] See Spivak and Yonah, 2012.

[7] This may sound counter-intuitive to the European reader, but in Israel popular definitions and identifications of "Left" and "Right" pertain only to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and not to the economy.

media channels identified with Netanyahu and the Likkud rule.[8] The group of youngsters who have started the first encampment, together with the head of the national Students Union who joined forces with them were now seen as "protest leaders" and became celebrities overnight -with numerous interviews, in-depth magazine stories and so forth. They gained popularity, which -as had already been clear at the time- could be easily translated into electoral power. (As these things are written, two of them, Stav Shaffir and Itzik Shmuli, are newly-sworn members of parliament for the Labor party.)

Alongside the enthusiasm these protests drew, however, there was also critique. Many voices attempted to delegitimize the protesters as "slobs" or "spoiled brats" -quoting the fact that they have been sleeping outdoor for so long as testimony that they are not working hard enough. Even among the more sympathetic commentators, challengers scrutinized the polyphonic character of the protests. In light of the creative mess of the protests, which encompassed multiplicities of intersecting groups, agendas and events, it was difficult for the "Old Guard" politicians and analysts to understand "where this was going", and they lamented the lack of direction and leadership, referring to protesters as "childish", "naive", "idealistic" and "impractical". Leef caught most of the fire herself: she was often referred to as a "girl", and there were repeating attempts to besmirch her image. By contrast, the male-leaders of institutionalized organizations within the movement—especially the National Students Union and the Histadrut—were taken for "the Responsible Adult" (and considered themselves as such). Right-wing political activists attempted to "unmask" the Social Protest as a "Leftist Plot", quoting past affiliations or actions of some of the core activists with leftist parties and/ movements to end the occupation.

Market forces could not afford to remain aloof to the national agitation, which put them under close scrutiny. After many weeks of persistence, most dairy producers drove-down the prices of many products—including, of course, cottage cheese. The CeO of Tnuva, the largest dairy marketers in the state, was

[8] Especially the Israel Hayom daily. It is owned by American casino taycoon Sheldon Adelson, who has been funding Netanyahu (and Mitt Romney)

forced to resign after she had taken much of the public fury when she initially refused point-blank to any price considerations. The chairwoman of Strauss group, the second largest food manufacturers in Israel (and 6th largest coffee company in the world), agreed to meeting with protesters in the privacy of her own house, and later admitted that the company's prices were indeed too high.

The political system, too, was troubled by the protests. Many members of Knesset -especially from the opposition, but also a few coalition members- visited the protest encampments and joined the mass demonstrations, showing solidarity, rendering support and, of course, riding the tide of popularity. At the same time, all heads of the large parties, whether from the coalition or the opposition, refrained from approaching the protests, and the movement remained nonpartisan. The government recognized that they have a genuine problem of legitimacy. Some prominent ministers (including Finance Minister) even expressed sympathy with protesters' "justified claims" although, of course, they were not so quick to concede to the latter's demands. Instead, following the 450,000 demonstration on August 6, PM Netanyahu established a committee to negotiate with protest leaders and suggest action directions to the government.

The Trajtenberg committee was met with skepticism on the part of most protesters, who thought this was little more than lip service. Indeed, most of its recommendations -concerning solutions to unemployment and precarious employment, dealing with the housing shortage, budget expansion and the provision of more social services, or tighter regulation on industry concentration and cross-ownership- were never implemented. Nevertheless, the government did carry out several changes to its policies: it increased the taxation on capital (although it also increased indirect taxation on many consumer goods) and expended few welfare benefits (mostly for elderly). Arguably, of all protesting groups, the "Parents March" scored the most significant victory: the government stepped-up the implementation of free education from age 3 (a previous decision which has been frozen); already at the end of July 2011 -and separate

from any other concession- the government voted in favor of allocating 1 billion NIS to establish new daycare centers and upgrade existing ones.

It is perhaps not surprising that the group of parents managed to gain the largest concession out of the government: in contrast to some of the more "socialist" demands of the movement which benefit the poor and working class, such as public housing, here was a group of middle-class tax payers who require child-care in order to allow both parents to work full-time. In other words: they represent a strong socio-economic strata, and their demands for social services "pay off", in terms of national economy, as they will these young professionals to spend more time on the job. Furthermore, Israel is a highly pro-natalist state; it goes to great effort in order to promote fertility among Jewish women,[9] especially upper-middle class women. As part of this gender regime, the state is sensitive to questions of child-care, which are seen a necessary part in the facilitation of fertility among this social stratum.

Long Term Impact

The protest had a longstanding cultural and political impact in Israeli society, where questions of economic policies had rarely been discussed in a polity over-shadowed by geopolitical conflicts. Socio-economic topics have since taken up much more space and attention in the media, and many of the civilian groups formed during the protests are still active. Prior to the 2013 parliamentary elections, a couple of the "protest leaders", Stav Shaffir and Itzik Shmuli, ran in the Labor Party primaries and eventually succeeded in becoming MPs. Others within the Social Protest insisted on extra-parliamentary grassroots work. Leef herself founded a new movement, Israel Machar.[10]

[9] As a means to secure a "Jewish majority" in the state.
[10] Meaning Israel Tomorrow, a spinoff on the Netanyahu-loyal daily Israel Hayom (Israel Today).

The protest's impact on the party system have been somewhat ironic, but telling. One the one hand, the ruling right-wing "block" did not lose any power, and PM Netanyahu's popularity decreased but little, when considering the amount of scrutiny his government has been subject to. His is still the largest party in parliament.[11] Left-wing parties increased their power only a little. The most dramatic change happened within the "Center" of the map: parties which were not recognized with any socio-economic agenda (such as Ehud Barak's Atzmaut) vanished completely from the political map, and others (such as Tzipi Livni's new HaTnua) had to re-invent themselves as parties who speak to the need for economic reform. By far, the largest political winner, Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party, succeeded in co-opting much of the protest's discourse, while in fact advocating a neoliberal economic policy and deriving support from the upper classes. In short, despite the many changes in the party system, there is very little true *shift* in political alignments.

These consequences paint the Social Protest in critical light: while it marks a point of awakening for many Israelis, it did not lead to many results in the short term, and in the long term it failed to translate its potential to political power (electoral or extra-parliamentary). There are a few reasons for this "failure". First, there is no space of civilian, social political life in Israel until it does not resolve its status as a colonialist power. The national conflict dictates Israelis political affiliations even in times of economic difficulties. Second, the stratification of Israeli societies is reflected in the new make-up of the Parliament as it did in the movement. The alienation of the Social Protest from many publics ("Russians", religious and orthodox, Palestinian citizens and the working-class), and the tensions internal to it proved detrimental to forming a long lasting coalition that may challenge existing ethnic and class divides.

Conclusion

[11] The ruling Likud party's reduced power is as much a result of the sharp decline in support for their ally Liberman who, for various reasons, received a strong no-confidence vote from his Russian constituents.

To sum-up, there are some of the characteristics of the Israeli Social Protest that it shares with other contemporary protest movements, namely:

It was inspired by the Arab Spring.

Even though Israeli establishment was openly suspicious of the Arab Spring, protesters used the symbols of Tahrir Square, and often invoked references to the Arab Spring, for example in a slogan which read: “Bibi, Mubarak, Same Revolution”.[12]

It mobilized unprecedented levels of support:

The movement drew participants from a wide range of groups: students, young families, unemployed, homeless and people living in public housing, workers employed in precarious conditions—including non-unionized jobs and independent (free-lance) professionals, consumer groups and many more. Traditional trade unions (mostly Histadrut) have also shown their support. This has been an unprecedented coalition of forces in Israel. At the height of mobilization some 450,000 people (about 6% of the country’s population) marched in the streets in the largest demonstration in the history of the country, which took place in several locations simultaneously. Most national media sided with the protesters during the long weeks of protest, as did many politicians from the opposition and even coalition parties.

It utilized innovative strategies and tactics alongside more traditional protest repertoires:

Protesters took to the streets on numerous rallies and demonstrations; they marched to the Parliament to be present while important decisions were taken; they used the “old media” to their best advantage -holding press conferences, giving many interviews, and even letting TV crews escort them for whole days. In addition, they employed many forms of protest which have been globally diffused in recent decades, and especially in this wave of protest: spatial “occupations” of public spaces, democratically-run mechanisms of deliberation and decision making (the General Assemblies) and extensive use of new social media.

[12] Bibi is the common nickname for Israeli PM Netanyahu.

It adopted a socio-democratic agenda while distancing itself from much socialist rhetoric:

Recent research shows, that the Middle Stratum[13] in Israel resembles the sociological characteristics of the Working Class.[14] Nevertheless, the Israeli Social Protest did not speak as a "working class" -a terminology which invokes Marxian analysis of class as relational position in the processes of production- but rather on behalf of a "Middle Class" -a definition based on perceived status and living standards, which invokes a gradational definition of class. While trade unions backed the protests, they did not play a leading role; the most important workers's strike at the time (by the National Medical Association) ran parallel to the Tent Protests, but not in conjunction with it.

It has integrated an agenda of socio-economic justice with a struggle for deeper democracy:

Protesters supported models of participatory and direct democracy. Parallel, they established mechanisms to monitor the actions of parliament and government and hold them accountable to their policy promises. As the protests gradually met with more forceful legal and political repression -including police brutality- they used various grassroots and legal means to defend their democratic right to congregate and demonstrate in public spaces.

At the same time, the Israeli Social Protest do have a few distinctive features, within this wave of protests:

The movement DID engage with the political system: through negotiation over particular demands, and engagement with party politics.

While movements such as *indignados* or *Occupy* rejected any connections with institutional politics, Israeli protesters welcomed any and all politicians into the encampments, and joined forces with some of them when trying to act in parliament. Through an official document -and later and elaborate, research-based report- the Israeli Social Protest movement demanded specific policy changes with regard to cost-of-living, privatization, deterioration of employment security, labor rights, public spending, and more. While the movement refused to be affiliated with or co-opted by any political party during the months of protests, in the following months -leading to the 2013 elections- central protest activists joined the Labor Party and several other parties identified as the "Left".

[13] Households with a monthly income of between 75%-125% of national median income.
[14] See Dagan-Buzaglo and Konor-Attias, 2013.

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