Israel's 'tent protests': the chilling effect of nationalism

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The Israeli 'Tent Protest' movement came and went over the space of 6 weeks in the summer of 2011. The movement started on 14 July when Daphni Leef, a freelance video editor from Tel-Aviv, pitched a tent on Rothschild boulevard in the city center, after having to vacate her rented apartment for renovations and discovering that a new flat would be beyond her means. Leef created a Facebook event for her protest and was joined by several friends. Within 24 h, dozens of tents were standing on the grassy sidelines of the promenade, and over the coming fortnight more than 60 encampments appeared in almost every Israeli town and city. The protests' agenda rapidly widened from housing prices to the high cost of living, and from there to the government's social and economic policies and the high concentration of wealth in Israeli society (OECD, 2011). Calls for a return to the old welfare state were widely heard.

It was doubtlessly the largest protest movement in Israel's history. Weekly Saturday night demonstrations drew increasing numbers of people, with over 400,000 participating in the last major demonstration, on 3 September. Though the participants largely represented the faltering middle classes, polls indicated up to 90% support for the movement amongst the general public. On the streets, a sense of empowerment and community was palpable. The tent cities became sites of direct democratic selfmanagement, practical cooperation and public discussion of social affairs. It was a breath of fresh air in a society that had become increasingly atomized and consumerist. For many people, it was the first experience of collective mobilization, and the first opportunity to educate themselves on social and economic issues.

Although the Israeli protests preceded the American Occupy movement, they followed close on the heels of the Arab Spring and the Spanish *Indignados* mobilization—precedents which were not lost on the tent-city dwellers. Some activists situated their mobilization within the Middle Eastern context, with a placard on one street corner even renaming it 'Rothschild–Tahrir', yet direct connections with protesters in Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain were nonexistent. The *Indignados* movement, on the other hand, had a much more direct influence in seeding the Israeli movement's practices of popular assembly. Aya Shoshan, an early activist at the Rothschild camp, had just returned from Spain and was quick to teach the protest instigators about hand signals, stack-taking and facilitation. Though never adopting a formal consensus process (decisions were usually adopted by what protesters came to call a 'clear visual majority'), its more deeply sig-

nificant elements—active listening, compassion and a sense of common purpose—were widely on display. These practices were so different from the usual Israeli mode of impatient and conflictual argument that for many protesters they were nothing short of a revelation. Within two weeks, assisted by media attention to 'twinkling' and other curiosities, they spread throughout the country.

Yet compared to similar events around the world, one is tempted to designate the Israeli tent protests as the tamest specimen in the current global wave. Not only did calls for discrete welfare policies replace any explicit anti-capitalism, but there was a widespread insistence on the movement's 'apolitical' nature and an avoidance of any direct confrontation with the Netanyahu government or calls for new elections. Instead, protest leaders repeatedly expressed a desire that the current government itself would solve the country's social problems, somehow abandoning its own explicit neoliberal ideology.

One explanation for this is that Israel has been largely isolated from the world financial crisis, and has experienced relatively low unemployment, steady growth and no special austerity measures. But a more substantive explanation follows from noticing the elephant in the room (or the boulevard): the fact that a movement mobilizing around social justice effectively ignored the social conditions of millions of Palestinians living under their own government's military occupation, with an often minimal standard of living and few if any political rights. This was an Occupy movement that ignored the other, real occupation taking place in its own backyard. Some obvious factors in the lack of spending on education, welfare and social services—namely a bloated security budget and the heavy subsidizing of settlements in the West Bank—remained largely unmentioned. Instead, the Palestinians continued to be viewed as extrinsic to Israeli society, rendering the occupation irrelevant to questions of social justice 'inside' Israel.

This lack of discussion discloses the central factor impeding the Israeli movement: the chilling effect of the patriotic, state-loyalist discourses which have reached unprecedented prominence in Israeli society in the past years. Indeed, the movement is best understood as an all-too-brief interlude in Israel's ongoing move away from democracy, evident in the recent wave of legislation against minorities, refugees and human rights organizations and in the McCarthyist campaigns against opponents of the occupation in academia and civil society.

Left-Wing Protest in the Israeli Context

What is important to understand is that in Israel today, any association with the term 'left' is by itself enough to brand one as disloyal and outside the mainstream consensus. Israeli society is becoming increasingly entrenched in its siege mentality, viewing international censure of the occupation as a threat to the very existence of the Jewish people. In such a context of collective hysteria, aligning oneself explicitly with the 'left' is tantamount, in the eyes of many Israelis, to consorting with the enemy.

Such a public atmosphere does not arise on its own. On the contrary, it is inflamed both by the discourse of existential threat that is repeatedly used by governing politicians (most prominently by Prime Minister Netanyahu in reference to Iran's nuclear program) and by a wide array of institutional policies. The present Knesset has approved, or is debating, a slew of anti-democratic bills directed primarily against the country's Arab minority and human rights organizations. Laws already approved include a law allowing to imprison, without trial, asylum seekers and refugees, as well as their children, who enter Israel through the border with Egypt; a law enabling civil lawsuits against individuals who call for boycott of settlement products; a law authorizing to revoke the citizenship of persons convicted of terrorism, espionage or disloyalty; a law authorizing

to relinquish state monetary support from any body or institution that marks the date of Israel's establishment as a day of mourning for the displacement of Palestinians in 1948 and a law permitting acceptance committees to villages and communities to turn down a candidate that does not fit their 'social fabric', effectively barring Arabs' access to Jewish communities (ACRI, 2011).

This legislation evinces a power trip on part of an utterly stable right-wing coalition which enjoys an unprecedented parliamentary majority. Add the fact that many of these bills have been supported or even initiated by members of the major opposition party Kadima, which has recently joined the coalition, and the picture becomes one of a groupminded right-wing parliament that is attempting to revise the ground rules of Israeli politics by exorcising elements which it considers disloyal to the Jewish national collectivity.

Alongside these parliamentary efforts, a number of extra-parliamentary organizations including NGO Monitor, Israel Academia Monitor, Yisrael Sheli and Im Tirzu have for the past several years been conducting a McCarthyist campaign against critics of the occupation in universities and civil society. This has included the conspicuous filming and recording of left-wing academics' lectures, 'blacklist' websites stalking their publications and public utterances and right-wing counter demonstrations at gatherings of the small remains of Israel's peace movement.

Accusations that the protests were left-wing surfaced early on. Settler leaders were first, with Ariel mayor Ron Nachman stating that 'all kinds of left-wing organizations have taken over the protests and are keeping us away', and Efrat mayor Oded Revivi stating that the only apparent goal of the protests was to topple the government (Breiner, 2011). More insidiously, the Prime Minister's office used its battery of paid comment writers to bombard news websites and Facebook pages with comments—apparently from unaligned readers—to the effect that the protesters were at best 'spoiled shirkers' who 'expect the government to fund their housing', and at worst 'antisemitic', 'communists' and 'traitors' (Avrahami, 2011; Genosar, 2011). Senior politicians from the governing Likud party soon joined in. Two weeks into the protests, the Israeli parliament (Knesset) convened to debate motions of non-confidence tabled by opposition on the back of the protests. Replying on behalf of the government, minister Benny Begin accused the protesters of hiding their political agenda, and 'pretending as if it is all spontaneous and that there is no assistance, no speech writers, no advisers, among them surely also people with a distinct political agenda, which first of all targets the personality and status of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu' (The Knesset, 2011a, p. 85). In the same session, Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin went as far as to say that he identified 'buds of anarchy' in the protests (p. 94), echoing culture minister Limor Livnat's statement earlier that day that the protests were instigated by 'particular anarchist groups' (Wolff, 2011).

The tiny Israeli anarchist movement, it should be clarified, hardly participated in the protests and was certainly far from being their instigator. When activists from Anarchists Against the Wall tried to set up their own group of tents on Rothschild Boulevard a few days into the protests, they were vocally denounced by other protesters for bringing in an explicit anti-occupation agenda, and soon decamped to the 'Lewinsky' tent city opposite Tel Aviv's central station, which had a large presence of actual homeless people and African refugees—constituencies with which they had been in active solidarity for several years. For the most part, however, Israeli anarchists ignored the protests and remained focused on joining nonviolent Palestinian demonstrations in the West Bank.

A further assault came a month later, on the eve of the 3 September demonstrations, when right-wing *Ma'ariv* journalist Kalman Liebskind published an 'expose' according to which in

the previous March, leaders of the National Left (a shelf-party that mixes nostalgia for the Rabin administration with Zionist patriotism) had met with American Democratic Party strategist Stanley Greenberg, in order to discuss how a political upheaval could be initiated (Liebskind, 2011). The initiative was allegedly an effort to spawn a large protest, based on a multitude of groups and organizations, then to use the mass of individuals who would rise to decide future elections. The fact that the National Left had later donated several tents to the Rothschild protesters was considered enough to establish a causal link with the March meeting.

Avoiding 'Leftism', Endorsing Nationalism

Against this background, it is not surprising that protesters did everything to remain in the mainstream. Although Leef and her friends were indeed aligned with the left, the public atmosphere led them and the vast majority of movement participants to avoid at all costs being perceived as 'leftists'—a term which these days in Israel is all but synonymous with 'traitors'—and created deliberate self-censorship which not only silenced any engagement with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but also defused confrontation on socio-economic grounds. Efforts to recreate a welfare state were not presented as a matter of social conflict along class lines, but instead through appeals to social unity as an expression of 'true Zionism'—rhetoric that panders to Israelis' nostalgia for the collectivism and republicanism of the early state. At the same time, the protests functioned as a kind of safety valve for social dissent, allowing it to vent itself over issues which had never been strongly associated with questions of national security or demographics, and thus still part of the legitimate public discourse.

In this context, it is worth noting that several Arab communities also established protest sites—in Umm el Fahem, Tira and Jaffa among others. Though this was never said explicitly, it seems fair to interpret their mobilization as having been enabled precisely by the protests' lack of radicalism. The widespread declaration of an a-political stance created a safe space for Palestinian citizens of Israel to express their discontent with decades of discrimination and underdevelopment, without it being seen as a sign of disloyalty.

Perhaps the most striking example of the unholy matrimony between social justice and nationalism in the language of the Israeli protests came after the military escalation that took place a week into the mobilization. On Thursday 18 August, a group of Palestinian militants crossed the Egyptian border near Eilat in southern Israel, and attacked a public bus, an Israeli army patrol and a private vehicle, killing 8 and injuring 40. The Israeli air force retaliated with attacks on multiple targets in the Gaza strip, killing 15 and injuring dozens, including unarmed civilians. Palestinians in turn fired rockets into Israel, killing a civilian and injuring close to a dozen. Exchanges of fire would continue for another week.

The military escalation did not take the protest movement by surprise. Indeed, one or another version of such a turn of events had been widely anticipated among tent activists. One leading Israeli security commentator even raised the possibility that the prime minister would initiate a military adventure to distract people from the social protests— though concluding that chances were slim (Melman, 2011). In any event, protest organizers decided that the demonstrations planned for that Saturday would still go ahead, but as silent candle-lit marches without speeches or music. From this point on, movement spokespeople's statements began to pander directly to sentiments of vulnerability and patriotism. In her call for the silent march, protest leader Stav Shaffir explicitly sought to assimilate the movement's goals into the hegemonic discourse of security:

> full of sorrow for the loss and anxious about our country's fate, we bear the responsibility of continuing to act […] without societal security, there is no security at all. Without social justice, there is no security at all. Our security is our home, and our health, and our welfare, and our education. The unity of our society—is our security (Shaffir, 2011)

The call-out for the silent march from a representative of the Jerusalem tent city went even further (Anon., 2011):

> Quietly, but resolutely. Because the nation demonstrating is the same nation absorbing the blows of fire from our enemies, and its staunch demand for a deep change in economic priorities and for overall social justice does not come at the expense of the struggle against terror—on the contrary. A nation whose sons are bound by mutual guarantee, and fight together for the future and the fortitude of the State of Israel, is a strong nation who can face all its enemies.

Such wording would probably shock any movement participant in New York, Barcelona or London. But in Israel it came quite naturally and remained unchallenged.

Prospects

Six months after the last large demonstration, it seems that Israel has returned to business as usual. A state-appointed committee made a set of recommendations on education, taxation and welfare, which the government endorsed but is unlikely to implement in practice (70% of government decisions in Israel are never implemented— The Knesset, 2011b, p. 19). While sporadic protest events continue to take place, and while a second wave of mobilization may yet materialize this coming summer, society seems to have sunk comfortably back into its proverbial couch, consuming its usual cocktail of fear, consumerism and reality TV. Daphni Leef was last seen in the UK, where she accepted an invitation from the Israel Ministry of Public Diplomacy (Hasbara) to speak at campus counter events during Israel Apartheid Week. 'I am not here to say what a wonderful place Israel is', she told a London paper for Israeli ex-pats, 'I am here to explain that there are wonderful things happening within Israeli society and there is a very complex socio-economic reality in Israel' (Glasser, 2011). Even more disappointing is the fact that the protests have had no effect on projected voting patterns. All recent polls show the governing Likud party increasing its share of parliamentary seats, and retaining a secure coalition with the right-wing and religious parties (Verter, 2011; Ynet, 2011). This, if anything, indicates that Israeli voters continue to desire a strong right-wing government that will resist international pressure to end the occupation, even if this same government continues on its path of neoliberal impoverishment of the 99%.

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