

New Associations or New Politics? The Significance of Israeli-style Post-materialism

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ABSTRACT: Over the past decade, in Israel, public interest has developed on a variety of issues related to the individual, his/her rights, preferences, body and identity, as well as his/her environment (mainly the ecological one). These issues are at the core of various forms of protest, guided by grass-roots organizations, non-profit associations, and new social movements. According to the government registrar of non-profit associations, there are close to 30,000 such associations in Israel today, whereas in 1982, there were only 3,000. The associations differ from one another in their level of organization, objectives, strategies, style, identities, framework and relationship with the state. It is abundantly clear that they represent a new phenomenon in the Israeli landscape. The article's main objective is first, to describe the historical and institutional circumstances that elicited this new phenomenon and determined its basic features for many years to come; second, to depict the contradictions embedded within the new phenomenon on two levels: identity politics and instrumental politics; and third, to delineate the inability of many new associations to free themselves from the state's bear hug. All in all, the manuscript's main thesis is that numerous obstacles still exist to Israel becoming more democratic, with a genuine civil society at its center, one that is more open to global trends, and less dependent on state authorities and the neo-liberal market.

Over the past decade, public interest in Israel has developed on a variety of issues related to the individual, and his/her rights, preferences, body, identity, and environment (mainly ecological). These issues have gradually been absorbed as an integral part of public discourse at the local and national levels, and consistently garner a great deal of coverage in the media. They are at the core of various forms of protest, guided by grass-roots organizations, non-profit

associations, social movements and even political parties. These organizations wage struggles for a long list of causes, including peace, civil rights and freedom of expression, discrimination in the work place, police violence, sexual harassment, gay and lesbian rights, the right to civil marriage and secular burial, needs of new immigrants, rights of foreign workers, animal rights, nature conservation, air pollution, exposure to radiation and other environmental health hazards, etc.

In the past, these issues, which are concerned with quality of life, and even quality of death, were not considered to be of interest to the public at large. Suddenly, however, they are all around: "Earth is in danger – what can you do?" we are asked by members of the Israeli branch of Greenpeace; "Preserve the coastline, the green, the landscape," we are told by representatives of the Israel Union for Environmental Defense; "Don't be apathetic - say no to a country filled with highways," the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel tells us; "One condom and you're covered," explains the Israel Association of Family Planning; "It's better to go naked than to wear fur," declare activists for "Anonymous," at a demonstration at which they picketed - bare chested – in front of several Tel Aviv fur retailers; or "Let the chickens live," which was the caption on a poster distributed on Yom Kippur eve in Jerusalem's markets, where chickens are ritually slaughtered in atonement for sins. All of this constitutes a refreshing change in a society in which the public rhetoric has, for many years, focused on issues such as state, nation, territory and wars, religion and commandments, immigration, enlistment, mission and commitment.

According to the government registrar of non-profit associations, there are close to 30,000 such associations in Israel today, in 1982, there were only 3,000.¹ Their level of organization, objectives, strategies, style, and the extent of their relationship with the state may differentiate the associations from one another. It is abundantly clear that they represent a new phenomenon on the Israeli landscape, the significance of which should be deeply considered. Are we only speaking of new associations, that is, the addition of another political player in the "old politics" arena? Or are we witnessing a far-reaching change, the conception of a new politics and a new form of participation and influence? Is Israeli society being transformed through these associations into a more democratic, multi-identity and multicultural society? One that is more open to global trends, and that is less dependent on state authorities, on the one hand, and on the private sphere, on the other?

¹ The Associations Law was enacted in 1980. Only by registering as an association can a group qualify for tax-exempt status, accumulate assets or receive the right to appear in court as a public body.

New Politics, New Social Movements and Civil Society

In the modern era, the political system has always been characterized with protest that reflected organized attempts to change reality. From the 1970s on, it became clear that a new form of contentious politics is emerging, carried by “new social movements.” The term relates not only to a new phenomenon; it also constitutes a theory that explains its own conception. As opposed to theories such as the resource mobilization theory, which assume that human beings are rational creatures organizing themselves in order to maximize their interests, the theory of new social movements emphasizes the historical and cultural circumstances out of which a new interpretation of reality emerged. The theory considered the changes taking place in our world during the second half of the 20th century, toward a society known alternately as post-modern, post-materialist, a technocratic society, or even a programmed society. (Kumar, 1995; Thompson, 1995) The new social movements – peace movements, student movements, women’s movements, civil rights movements and environmental movements – are conceived as giving expression to this change. They are the carriers of the new politics, which usually manifests itself outside the established parties and the traditional political methods. (Poguntke, 1993)

The new social movements are significant, according to scholars such as Alan Touraine, Claus Offe and Alberto Melucci, because, unlike the past, there is no clear present-day model of an ideal society, no longer any single organizing principle, divine commandment, historic materialism, or an attempt to idealize the market. The new movements – given the kaleidoscope of ideologies, the diversity of perspectives, the various types of knowledge, and the ability to weave together a world of contrasts without creating any substantive contradiction – are regarded as both a symptom and a cure of the new era; in which the cultural means of production are, in certain respects, replacing the material means of production, and the ability to impose interpretation over reality and create symbols and images, becomes more significant.²

Some critics asked, “how new the new social movements really were?” (Tucker, 1991), but as the phenomenon gained strength and began to spread, it became more difficult not to recognize its uniqueness, especially when compared to the quintessential political frameworks of the modern era - political parties,

² Among the prodigious amount of literature on new social movements, most of which is based on Offe (1985); Touraine (1985) and Melucci (1985), we will cite only a few: Dalton & Kuechler (1990); Elder (1990); Scott (1990); Eyerman & Jamison (1991); Rucht (1991); Johnston & Klandermans (1995); Kriesi *et al.* (1995); Piccolomini (1996).

interest groups and the “old” social movements. What makes the new social movements particularly unique is the fact that they seem to be driven not simply by narrow interests or the desire to amass as much economic or political resources as possible -- as part of the instrumental struggle over the division and allocation of the national “pie” -- but by a wish to gain “ownership” over collective goods that affect the entire public. (Dalton & Kuechler, 1990: 10-16) This is because the new social movements seem to target their criticism at the modern order, the symbols of development and progress that are at its core, and at the nation-state that is perceived to be the carrier of this order (for example, Conca & Dabelko, 1998; Bauer, 1994). Another unique attribute is the attention devoted by the new social movements to various issues - such as attitude toward nature, work, the body, sexuality, interpersonal relationships, human rights, children’s rights, animal’s rights, etc. - that were non-issues in the past. If one can rely on the famous studies conducted by Inglehart, these shifts in public attitudes testify to the change in the advanced industrial societies of the late 20th century; from preoccupation with material issues – the struggle for bread, so to speak – to post-materialist issues that concern quality of life and new life-styles.³ These issues do not coalesce into a comprehensive world-view with a high degree of unity and totality, such as was the case with socialism, communism and capitalism; instead they represent a pluralism of ideas, values and identities (Larana et al., 1994; Johnston & Klandermans, 1995). The new movements are perceived as directing their criticism toward the centralist, bureaucratic, hierarchical, formalistic, instrumental, mass character of modern politics, which stifles any opportunities for real social change. As a substitute, they offer new techniques of mobilization that are consciously designed to overcome the “iron law of oligarchy” as posited by Roberto Michels, imbuing their movement with a communal and even “familial” character (Melucci, 1985; Scott, 1990; Della Porta & Diani, 1999: 110-136). One last quality that distinguishes the new social movements is that the classic political bodies, including the “old” social movements, have always aimed to change the center, whereas the new social movements, in fact, try to gain autonomy from it, which leads us to the concept that has gained wide popularity in recent years – “civil society.”

The concept of civil society has a long history, and as is often the case for other concepts, its meaning shifts from time to time (Perez-Diaz, 1998; Alexander, 1998). We will employ the concept as it has been used over the past

³ Inglehart (1977; 1990) maintains that adolescent socialization in the West, under conditions of economic and physical security, has led to a lasting shift in political value orientation, from the need for physical and material security to post-materialist values like self-actualization, belonging, participation and the like. See also De Graff & Evans (1996).

decade, primarily in the wake of events surrounding protests of the Solidarity movement against the Polish Republic during the 1980s (Ost, 1990). This has to do with the conclusion reached by the Solidarity activists, according to which revolutionary social change is impossible both because of the hold exerted by the nation-state on the economic and military means of production and by its ability to dismiss any frontal uprising against it. As a substitute, the activists developed a “third road” philosophy that called for establishment of a separate social realm or public sphere that would serve as a sort of ideological alternative to the single “truth” that the nation-state and capitalism represent. (Arato, 1981; Frenzel-Zagorska, 1990; Cohen and Arato, 1995)

From the Eastern European experience, the new perspective spread far and wide, taking a form that was not limited to authoritarian regimes; on the contrary, the liberal state was also perceived as having a polity that reduces and even restricts public expression, participation and influence (Cohen & Arato, 1995). Out of a tradition whose intellectual roots are primarily derived from Hegel, Tocqueville and Gramsci (Kumar, 1993), the concept was identified as a realm of activity that is separate from both the state and the economy, and which includes associations, organizations and social movements that are linked with one another, motivated by ideal interests no less than by material interests, such that they provide an alternative to the dominant world-view, and garner influence, primarily by cultural means. The new meaning attached to the term civil society is not identified with the bourgeois society, as it was in the past. On the contrary, its existence is unrelated to a class or material orientation, and the groups that comprise it often come out openly against Western capitalism and the various forms of its “collaboration” with the liberal state (particularly those, perhaps, that led to the establishment of an apolitical consumer society). (Tucker, 1991; Honneth, 1993; Cohen & Arato, 1995; Alexander, 1996; Keane, 1998)

The relationship between new social movements and civil society is self-evident. Civil society exists if and when areas of interaction and collaboration are created between the various new movements. Certainly not an all-inclusive social or national integration effort, but an effort at dialogue, coordination and communication; the multilateral ability to launch an alternate discourse that entails a meta-political critique of the existing social order. In any case, civil society is composed of reflexive groups and organizations that are fully aware of the significance of their activity, their unique political role, and their opportunities for changing reality. This awareness exists to such an extent that it is possible to differentiate between two types of politics, which the civil society comes to combine: The processes by which identity is formed at the individual and collective levels, as it occurs in movement frameworks, and the manner in

which such cultural and political novelty is then translated into attempts to influence conventional, establishmentarian, sometimes statist, politics, which are extraneous to the narrow world of the movement. The one type of activity can be termed "identity politics" and the other "instrumental politics."

The two levels are not mutually exclusive. However, the first type of political activity expands political involvement and participation, precludes depoliticization of the populace and creates alternative meanings while experimenting with various new social forms. Political activity at this level is not simply a means to an end; it constitutes an object in itself. (Larana et al., 1994) Due to these processes of constructing identity and "otherness," and the creation of new forms of social relationships, the phenomenon of the new social movements and the civil society cannot be tabulated in terms of instrumental orientation, considerations of profit and loss, or even to questions of victory or defeat, as is customary in the "old" political system. This is because the new social movements offer another experience of time, space, lifestyle as well as a redefinition of politics. It may be likened to what Mellucci (1985) described as a sort of "symbolic amplifier." In this regard, however, one should not make the mistake of attributing an apolitical meaning to civil society, unless it is referring to its aversion to conventional politics, especially to party politics. The political role of the new social movements becomes rather clear when one bears in mind that there is no more apt definition of politics than the struggle over the rules of the game and the attempt to determine them.

Social movements may as well be conscious of the second level of political activity - that which is more instrumental and interest-oriented and directed toward the state and the well-established political center, in an attempt to influence distribution of local and national resources, activities of the political parties, the legislative and the decision-making process. Sometimes they even make an effort to assume a share of government as the example of the green party in Germany testifies (Poguntke, 1993). In any case, a civil society exists only when both levels of politics actively coexist. This will occur only when the new identities and cultural experiments secure a stable, bona fide grip among a range of groups and sectors, and are translated into conventional politics with the attempt to influence reality at large. (Cohen & Arato, 1995; Melucci, 1996; Della Porta & Diani, 1999)

Equipped with this theoretical scheme, and aware of the argument that theoretical writings on new social movements are far more readily available than thorough case studies (Muller-Rommel & Poguntke, 1995: xvi), we can ask whether a civil society does indeed exist in Israel. Are the new associations and organizations just new players in the well-established "old" political system, or,

alternatively, are we witnessing the formation of a new politics? Is it one that contains new themes and new styles in the post-materialist form, that are translated into participatory dispositions and techniques, which in turn succeed in altering the political agenda and the structure of domination in society (Poguntke, 1993; Muller-Rommel & Poguntke, 1995)? In order to answer these questions, we must first examine the extent to which the Israeli social movements succeed in creating an alternative world of identity and meanings, complete with coordination, agreement and cooperation between them, and translate it – through the use of instrumental and formal politics – into broad, comprehensive influence. The main argument I shall attempt to prove in the pages to come is, although signs of alternative identities and new “truths” that are collectively organized and active, appeared in the last decade in Israel, these ostensible elements still bear restrained, incomplete, even vulnerable, character, so much so that they do not provide any evidence of a substantial transformation from which a civil society and a new politics might emanate. Moreover, I will argue that both the vitality and limitations of the new phenomenon stem from the historic circumstances of its inception. In this regard, it should be noted that although one may find similarities between the Western new social movements and the phenomenon currently underway in Israel - in terms of type of organization, form of protest, issues at stake, strategies, etc. - it is the differences between the two that are of greater interest, differences without which it is impossible to understand the significance of the “Israeli style” contention and the general differences between the “West” and the “rest.”

The article has three parts. The first part has been devoted primarily to elucidation of the problem that is at the core of this essay. The second part will describe the institutional environment from which – and in opposition to its organizing principles – the new phenomenon sprouted, when an appropriate political opportunity structure was formed. In the third part, I will present (through three sections: politics of identity; instrumental politics; and the state’s “bear hug”) the attributes of the new protest formed in Israel, and the way it was translated into what may be called a politics of associations.

Under Hegemonic Structure

A far-reaching liberal world-view has never struck roots in Israel. The “founding fathers” of the Jews, who immigrated to Palestine from Russia in the early years of the twentieth century, brought with them a collectivistic political culture. They were socialist and conceived as representing the monolithic truth, the “general will.” This will, however, was more of a national or ethno-national than of a socialist nature, and in certain respects it influenced and was influenced by the conflict with the Arab residents of the country (Shafir, 1989; Kimmerling, 1983; Shalev, 1992). The Jewish leadership faced a weak petty-bourgeoisie that was unable to translate numerical majority into political force, thereby preventing the development of an alternative individualistic, liberal world-view for many years to come (Shapiro, 1984). As a result, a non-liberal, collectivistic democracy came into being, with a political society – some would say a mobilized society – at its center. (Ben-Eliezer, 1993)

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the nation-state implemented the collectivistic principle known as Statism (Levi, 1998). It instituted a subsistent economy, expropriated various civilian, voluntaristic functions and transferred them over to the authority of the state, and by means of various arrangements, transformed the populace into a nation-in-arms, which adopted the army and war as its focal points (Ben-Eliezer, 1998a). For many years, these arrangements blurred any possible ostensible distinction between state and society. The individual of the restrained, non-liberal democracy was judged according to the criterion of what he could contribute to the collective (Ben-Eliezer, 1998b). And if there were any haphazard attempts, for instance by Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, to implement liberalization “from above” (Keren, 1989), along came the 1967 Six-Day War and the ensuing occupation of the territories and gave a new lease on life to ethnos and blood, the vision of a Greater – and stronger – Land of Israel, and the preference of “security needs” over “the good of democracy,” as if it were some abstract equation under discussion. In the political realm, this common denominator succeeded in bringing about several national unity governments, and when these failed, it was usually the right party that was left in power, with periodic – and failed – attempts by liberal parties (for example the Democratic Movement for Change, in 1977) to assume a role as a third power group in politics.

During the 1980s, the incidence of protest rose to unprecedented levels (Herman, 1996). Yet it soon took on a tone of moderation and restraint, even of co-option by the establishment. Political participation at large is the name of the

game of collectivistic democracy, and so it was that protest movements such as the “dovish” Peace Now or the “hawkish” Gush Emunim, which may have operated in their own peculiar ways, never succeeded and essentially never even tried, to propose an alternative ideological world-view and undermine the ruling paradigm of the nation-state (Lustick, 1988; Newman & Herman, 1992). It is not without reason that Lehman-Weitzing (1992: 57-61) labels the Eighties in Israel the “period of routine protest.” Indeed, during this decade there were an immense number of demonstrations, but they became part of the rules of the game. The main issues raised were limited to security/peace issues. Many of the demonstrations were even organized by political parties, thereby furnishing them with yet another channel of influence. Toward the end of the decade, a turning point occurred.

Tarrow (1989) argues that in order to understand contentious collective action, one must look to the political system for answers. It is the political environment which either encourages or discourages people from employing collective action. Tarrow calls this a “political opportunity structure.” This sort of structure, which was created in Israel in the late 1980s, was the result of a combination of reasons: an economics rationale - at the time, Israel was moving from a centralized, collectivistic economy that was characterized by a great deal of government involvement to a decentralized market economy with little government control. It did not take long for the results of this economic liberalization to become noticeable. Within a period of twenty years, Israel was transformed from a poor country with a lackluster economy, into one of the dozen most developed countries in the world, and a genuine Middle Eastern economic superpower. Essentially, a kind of “bourgeois revolution” took place, propagating a neo-liberal outlook that bore similarities to trends that gained popularity in Reaganist America and Thatcherist Britain. (Ram, 2000; Shafir and Peled, 2000)

Another reason for the development of the political opportunity structure in Israel was the Intifada, which broke out in 1988. The popular Palestinian uprising exposed the weakness of the nation-state, the difficulty of its army to operate as an army of occupation, a role in which it was forced to act as a sort of colonial police force fighting stone-throwing women and children. The Intifada also proved how tired Israelis had grown of occupation and war. “The beatings are hurting the beaters, as well,” one journalist wrote, and a public chorus of disapproval gradually formed in Israel, bringing with it an awareness of the Palestinians’ rights and their distress. There were initial indications of the emergence of a society engaged in domestic affairs, one that is cognizant of global changes, especially the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a society whose members are assiduously working to improve their

quality of life and lifestyle - so much so that the Intifada grew insufferable, and the peace accords that Israel signed in the early 90s took on a supreme significance. (Peled & Shafir, 1996; Ezrahi, 1997)

The political opportunity structure that spawned a new form of protest stemmed from another, no less important reason: During the 1980s, partisan politics found itself in a continued state of crisis, which even the national unity governments, which included the two largest political parties in Israel, were not only unable to resolve, but even exacerbated. A sort of paralysis set in, in the wake of which the bargaining power of the small parties, especially that of the religious parties, increased. The public became fed up with party politics and its practitioners, especially what came to be called the "stinking scheme," a political plot hatched by Shimon Peres to bring down the Yitzhak Shamir government through a complicated political maneuver. The scheme eventually failed, but as a result, many were roused to action.

"Constitution for Israel" and the hunger strikers

Unpredictably, around this time an unprecedented wave of protest swept through Israel, a country that has always had its fair share of demonstrations and social protests. The public's sense of revulsion was expressed in a slogan that was current at the time: "We've had it with you - You're corrupt." The public mood shifted, and calls for a general overhaul of the political system were heard. The most prominent activists were a group of law school professors from Tel Aviv University, who drafted a constitution, the basic tenets of which were publicized in August 1987. This was the beginning of the "Constitution for Israel" social movement, which heavily marketed its messages and garnered extensive support in a country that has Basic Laws, but has never had a written constitution.

In response to the stasis that followed the 1988 elections, the protest activities of "Constitution for Israel" picked up speed, and were complemented by other initiatives, such as a campaign that was spearheaded by a few young people - eventually totaling twenty-four individuals - who embarked on a hunger strike in late March 1990. They demanded a change in the system of government. The strike began with two people, then three and then thousands began to stream in - visiting, talking, showing solidarity, sleeping with the strikers in tents. Gradually, more tents were added, more signs were posted and more books were filled with signatures. It was a textbook example of how a social movement is formed. There was also a group of mayors who joined the protesters (without hunger striking), enlisting in the cause. By any yardstick, the momentum that was created was thoroughly impressive. Over 100,000 people attended some

“Constitution for Israel” demonstrations; one was attended by over 200,000 persons (*Haaretz* [daily] April 8, 1990; *Yedioth Achronot* [daily] April 8, 1990; Bechor, 1996). It was a clear indication for a cycle of protest.⁴

The struggle was different from previous protests in that there was an almost across-the-board outcry against the constituent elements of the “old politics”: denunciation of parliamentary politics in a society in which politicians had accustomed the public for decades to think of them as indispensable; and a demand that a mechanism be created whereby the primary decisions would be made by the people. However, the outburst of spontaneity soon abated, and the protest was gradually institutionalized. The hunger strikers were divided by internal tensions (*Haaretz*, April 15, 1990). The spontaneous, popular, outspoken character of their tactics, as well as the chance of an increase in public participation and involvement, seemed to threaten some members of the protest movement itself, who called for restraint. For example, the following statement by Professor Uriel Reichman, the chairman of “Constitution for Israel,” was given in a newspaper interview: “There are people among us who sought to be militants... they called for a tax strike, claiming that the taxpayers’ money is used to bribe the parties, and that the people have no real representation. I put a stop to it, because it would be a horrible tragedy if the last vestiges of the rule of law in this country would vanish, and we would have anarchy” (*Yediot Achronot*, March 25, 1990). The more “rebellious” wing of the protest movement also demonstrated some notable signs of restraint and inner cleavage. (*Yediot Achronot*, April 1, 1990)

In addition, attacks were directed toward the democratic character of the “Constitution for Israel.” Its “Constitution Document” did not make Israel a country for its citizens, but only reinforced its ethno-national character. The draft was full of deep animosity for political parties and an almost mystical belief in the power of legislation to heal the ills of society; and, perhaps most problematic of all, it proposed procedural corrections for a democracy that had considerable problems: a society embroiled in a protracted occupation and war, with security interests supreme through emergency laws that have been in force ever since Israel’s establishment. (see debates on these issues, *Haaretz*, April 13, 1990, April 19, 1990)

⁴ Tarrow (1994: 153) uses the phrase “cycle of protest” in referring to a phase of heightened conflict and contention across the social system that includes: a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors, a quickened pace of innovation in the forms of contention, new or transformed collective action frameworks, a combination of organized and unorganized participation, and sequences of intensified interaction between challengers and authorities which can end in reform, repression or sometimes revolution.

By and large, the protest nevertheless implied a new repertoire of contention.⁵ It was a liberal challenge against a society that had subsisted for years on the collectivistic ethos and that put security issues at its center.⁶ Indeed, the events of the early 1990s had two substantial outcomes: the first took place in March 1992, when the Israeli parliament (Knesset) adopted the Direct Elections for Prime Minister Law. Even before the passage of this legislation, the large political parties had decided to enact “democracy in the election of representatives to the Knesset,” or in less formal parlance, “primaries” (Doron, 1996). These were signs of a new politics emerging. The same trend was responsible for groundbreaking new civil rights legislation: Basic Laws on this issue were enacted by the Knesset, and the “Constitution for Israel” movement as well as several other associations active in this area were partially credited with the victory; but was it not a Pyrrhic victory? Wasn’t it possible that the response of the political establishment to pressures, and its readiness to accept changes, were actually evidence of a political window of opportunity that subsequently closed?

By their nature, protest movements are formed rapidly, and they go through periods of somnolence as well. By late 1990, “Constitution for Israel” had practically disappeared, and with it, the hunger strikers. The idea of a constitution was shelved, as well, but the protest itself did not die out.

It was translated into an insurgence of collective action on several fronts in Israel, underscoring the fact that a new phenomenon was afoot, one in which ideological discussion and debate on matters of principle have penetrated everyday discourse. This was the case in the affair of Carmella Buchbut, who killed her husband and was offered protection by several women’s organizations; this was also the case in the appeal by Alice Miller and women’s organizations against the State of Israel and the Israel Defense Forces, in which they were charged with discrimination, for having prevented Miller from competing with men on acceptance into the air force pilots course. There was a public outcry over statements made by various public figures such as President Ezer Weizman, or the singer Meir Ariel, on gays’ and lesbians’ place in society; public debate on the deaths of soldiers in training accidents raised questions concerning the sanctity of life; controversy over the new Trans-Israel Highway and objections to

⁵ The term repertoire of contention, following Tilly (1986: ch.1), is based on the assumption that in every society there is a stock of familiar forms of action that are known to everybody and become habitual aspects of interaction.

⁶ On the connection between the rise of movements concentrated on post-materialist issues and the relative decline in the importance of security issues in post Cold-War Israel, see Ben-Eliezer (2001).

construction of new marinas and other structures along Israel's coastline raised debates concerning Israel's quality of life. Through these and other affairs, it became increasingly clear that there were new forces within Israeli society that perceived problems and injustices differently than in the past. Not only do they place new issues on the agenda, they also propose different ways to resolve them.

The nature of public discourse was changing in Israel, largely thanks to the groups, movements and organizations that had been established in recent years, which see themselves as representatives of the public, its desires and needs. A simple list of the associations established in recent years would fill many pages. There are over 15 associations concerned with the rights of animals – “Let Animals Live,” “Anonymous” and the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals are only a few examples. Hundreds of green associations are deeply involved in environmental issues. Some are homegrown, such as the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, while others, such as Greenpeace, are non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many of them have much in common with the new wave of transnational movements that concern themselves – at times in disregard of the sovereignty of nations and their territorial boundaries – with issues such as environmental hazards and infringement of individual rights. There are municipal and local associations, as well; practically every city and geographic region in Israel has its own area-focused organizations. There is not a single ecological danger that has not raised the anxiety threshold of Israeli citizens – the Ramat Hovav waste disposal site in southern Israel is but one example. Radiation from cellular antennas is another example of fears, along the lines of the “risk society” posited by Beck (1992), that has over the past two years translated into mass hysteria, organizational efforts and collective action. This testifies to the fact that many people in Israel are shaking off the unadulterated romanticism that development and progress once enjoyed.

“Green” has become a much-in-demand color. Even the Dead Sea Works, the leader of an industry that has most assuredly harmed nature, has adopted an advertising slogan: “We are the green in the desert,” and the Jewish National Fund, which is an ethno-national organization, responsible for preserving only Jewish-owned land, advertises that it represents “one hundred years of green”. Most associations, however, are not free-riders. Some, for example The Association for Civil Rights, are engaged in fighting for individual rights, while others, such as the Hot-Line for Workers, try to protect workers, including Palestinians and migrant workers. Some associations, such as The Movement for Quality Government in Israel, or Amitai, assiduously oversee proper government practices or the propriety of civil servants. They often act by means of petitions to the country's courts. Dozens of organizations that address the rights of women

have been established, for the most part by feminists. The Counseling Center for Women is just one example. There are associations, such as Klaf, that represent gays and lesbians, A Council for the War On AIDS, associations that look after children's rights the most important of which is E.L.I., and others, such as ALMAG that uphold men's rights, especially during divorce proceedings. Some are active in the campaign for civil marriage; others are concerned with a woman's rights over her own body, for example, on the issue of abortion - The Association for Family Planning. Some associations, LILACH for example, fight for the right to die with dignity, either through euthanasia or through non-religious burial, some associations, such as Sikkuy or Adalla, Edva or the Democratic Rainbow try to transcend Israel's ethnic division; and the list goes on.

Politics of the associations

It is difficult to offer any broad generalization about the new collective action that is developing in Israel, a full discussion of which would require typology of the various groups, a task that will not be accomplished in this essay. Nevertheless, it is proper to describe some fundamental characteristics that may help explain the significance of the new phenomenon and its status within Israeli politics. When the different aspects of the new phenomenon are weighed in the aggregate, it will become clear that the new collective action has difficulties in setting up an autonomous public sphere that is free of state control, a public sphere which could be called a civil society, and which would lead one to describe the current state of Israeli politics as new. In the following, we will demonstrate the way the new groups are characterized either by cultural production that is not followed by practical political action, or by practical political action that is not based on any new cultural infrastructure. In many cases, the new Israeli collective action essentially takes the organizational form, not necessarily of new social movements, but of associations – which are a kind of interest group with ideology. Rather than making good on any claims for genuine social change, this jumble exposes a situation in which the new associations become a genuine part of the existing social order.⁷

⁷ Regarding interest groups and the difference between these groups and social movements, see, for example, Useem & Zald (1987). Some scholars consider integration of instrumental politics with identity politics to be the formula for the success of the new social movements in the West. See, for example, Dalton (1994), who regards “ideologically determined organization” and “organizationally determined ideology” as keys for success. As is shown in this article, the Israeli case is altogether different.

Identity Politics

The proliferation of groups and associations making strides toward the development of their own style in early-90s Israel is, without a doubt, evidence of a new interpretation of reality, a claim for separate identity, for otherness, which represents an effort to offset the monolithic “truth” of the nation-state.⁸ Some of the associations exhibit an impressive degree of broad ideological crystallization. They operate on a continuing basis and publish monthlies or quarterlies printed on recycled paper. They have a symbol or logo, as well as a slogan or fashionable catchphrase, and some even have a widely disseminated, comprehensive worldview and counter-ideology. This, however, quite often is not translated into instrumental politics or influence. Instead, it takes the form of shutting itself off from its environment. One example of this is “Anonymous,” an animal protection association that was set up in 1994, with a clear ideology which links animal rights with human rights and environmental quality, as stated in the movement’s literature: “Animal rights, human rights - One struggle.” (*Anonymous*, no. 7, 1997) This combination stands in contradistinction to “Let Animals Live”, an association that is demonstratively apolitical, and which suffices with providing services to animals. Members of “Anonymous,” consider themselves “political in a social fashion.”⁹ The movement, however, is small, its achievements few, it is shuttered up inside its own style and does not collaborate much with other associations. The movement bears similarities to hundreds and even thousands of other movements throughout the world, but unlike many of them, it has not succeeded in translating its separate consciousness into effective politics and influence.¹⁰

Greenpeace is another example of an organization with an alternate identity in Israel that compromises itself at the practical and instrumental levels. As an NGO, it has a clear and well-formulated world-view. Leaders of Greenpeace disseminate this ideology through information campaigns, lectures, video films, bulletins and newsletters. They have an obvious appreciation of the importance of marketing and media exposure: white fields of snow daubed with the red blood of slaughtered seals, vibrant colored blue skies and blue seas, Zodiac boats skimming swiftly toward supertankers that do harm to nature, brave young men suspended from London Bridge holding signs, blocking passage of ships in the river and resisting attempts by police to remove them, and everything

⁸ For more on this general trend, see Melucci (1989 and 1996).

⁹ A discussion with Galit, one of Anonymous’s activists, 1998.

¹⁰ Regarding other movements, see Groves (1992); Ryder (1996).

swathed in the appropriate background music.¹¹ The Israeli Greenpeace, inspired by its older sister, mounts ostentatious, dramatic campaigns that call for a combination of technical sophistication, clandestine planning and bravado, and which are likely to pique the interest of young people (for example, *Kolbo* [weekly], October 2, 1998; December 11, 1998). Some events are orchestrated in tandem with reporters and TV cameras with the aim of creating a provocation that will resonate through the media. Nevertheless, the organization's effectiveness is open to question. The gimmicks are left to the back pages of the Israeli newspapers, and the media exposure is directed, if at all, to the gimmick, and not the issue it was intended to raise.

Greenpeace has no ideologues; it has public relations professionals. It has no ideological discussions; it has showy events; and what is most clearly evident is the fact that there is one subject that Israeli Greenpeace, as opposed to the mother organization, refuses to deal with at all – nuclear power and nuclear arms. On this issue, the stunts disappear from sight, journalists are not invited and confrontations do not take place. Greenpeace was established in order to fight nuclear tests, but in Israel someone made the decision that this issue would be disregarded. The Israeli Greenpeace, thus, becomes an example of an Israeli-style NGO, a softer, and more refined version of protest than in the West. Israel – whose nuclear capability is a well-known fact – is light years away from the European anti-nuclear movements. As demonstrated, for example, by Flam (1994), these movements succeeded in combining the development of an alternate culture – one that proposes a nuclear-free world – with effective political strategies. They called public attention to undemocratic decision-making by small groups of experts and special interests, and their efforts netted widespread opposition to nuclear power, massive, effective pressure on decision-makers and, eventually, a change in policy. The Israeli Greenpeace, however, is willfully negligent when it comes to taking on the sacred cow of Israel's defense interests, taking part as a full partner in the state's non-declaratory nuclear strategy.¹²

The Israeli peace movements come across in a similar light. For the most part, they were conceived after the Lebanon War in the early 80s, and reached maturity during the Intifada. In comparison to numerous Israeli associations, the peace movements in Israel are conspicuous due to their unequivocal political messages and general objection to the traditional security thinking that was part of the nation-in-arms; nevertheless, their practices are moderate. For example, Peace Now, the main peace movement in Israel, was opposed to conscientious

¹¹ Regarding the world organization of Greenpeace, see Wapner (1995).

¹² On nuclear power as a non-issue in Israel, see in Newman & Ein Gil (1996).

objection during the Lebanon War and the Intifada (Menuchin, 1985; Reshef, 1996: 96-99). Even the conscientious objectors themselves, during the Lebanon War, did not contest the principle of military service, only the idea of taking part in “a war of choice” (Helman, 1997). Among peace movements in Europe and the United States, imprisonment often has a cathartic effect. This has not been the case in Israel, where peace protests have not crossed lines or directly confronted the establishment. “The Year 21,” for example, a protest movement that was formed during the 1982 War in Lebanon, was dissolved immediately when some of the main activists were arrested for a couple of days. (Sasson-Levi, 1995)

As opposed to other countries, it is hard to imagine a scenario in Israel in which members of peace movements collaborate with members of the various green organizations. Even the green movements themselves do not always cooperate. Despite differences of opinion and varying points of view, members of environmental organizations in the West are able to bridge ideological gaps. In fact, the ideological arguments (for example, between ecologism and environmentalism) sometimes attract extra publicity for the Green viewpoint, further enhancing its effect (Dalton, 1994; Dobson, 1995). Meanwhile, in Israel, ideological disagreement is nearly nil; a sticker here, a sticker there, some catchy slogans, utopian ideas; the Israeli new associations, however, do not serve as carriers of ideological disputes or debates on fundamental issues. In this way the road to instrumentalism is paved, the significance of which we will elucidate in what follows.

Instrumental politics

The ability of social movements to transfer issues that in liberal countries are part of the private sphere to political issues constitutes one of the quintessential indicators of civil society. However, many Israeli associations, such as the Movement for Quality Government, claim –at times with great fervor – to be apolitical. It may be assumed that such a position is a backlash against the tendency of the collectivistic nation-state to make every issue political and every subject enlisted. In addition, the widespread, public criticism that in the late 1980s was leveled against party politics, encouraged associations to define themselves as apolitical, as if they were not afflicted with the “system’s” illnesses. Similar phenomena existed in Europe during the 1970s, but movement activists there soon realized that even if their objectives were not political in the narrow sense of the word, since they pertain to social and cultural issues, nevertheless “everything is political” and can only be realized in this manner. (Dalton & Kuechler, 1990: 10-16)

In Israel, The Society for Protection of Nature (SPN), the largest green organization in Israel, is ready to protect the environment beyond the Green Line (the boundary between pre-1967 Israel and the territories occupied in the Six-Day War), without any ostensible sensitivity to the political significance of such an act. In so doing, Green becomes “above it all.” The SPN does not hesitate to maintain field schools in the occupied territories, even in Ofra, a settlement that is considered a stronghold of the extreme right in the territories. Moreover, the SPN sees nothing wrong with arranging tourist tours of these territories, which provide a large source of income to the organization.¹³

As part of this “apolitical” viewpoint, there is a strong tendency among many associations to make various subjects seem non-political by presenting them as professional matters that must be handled exclusively by experts. Legal expertise ranks particularly high in this category. Consider the case of Eliad Shruga, chairman of the Movement for Quality of Government. Is he a leader of a social movement or is he a private attorney? Apparently the two hats can be switched with dexterity, and the boundary between them is not always clear (*Haaretz*, August 20, 1999). Beyond questions concerning purity of ethics, such phenomena expose a tendency to restrict contention to legal path. Whereas many of the new movements in the West came out against logocratic elements, and the conversion of knowledge into a resource - thereby removing the ordinary citizen from the decision-making process (Cohen & Arato, 1995: Chapter 10) - the instrumental politics of many Israeli associations becomes problematic from a democratic perspective. The problem is revealed in the words of Shruga himself: “Once the first petition we submitted was accepted, we realized that hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating outside could not accomplish what one little High Court of Justice brief could.” (*Haaretz*, August 20, 1999.)

The Movement for Quality Government, like many other associations, submits countless court petitions. They primarily represent the petitioner, his or her attorney and the movement that upholds the rights of the petitioner, but not necessarily the public. As regards these limitations of the legal channel, the activities of the Israel Union for Environmental Defense (IUED) are especially instructive. This association was established in 1991 and it successfully operates a law firm that focuses on environmental affairs. In Allon Tal’s opinion (the founder of the movement), the environmental protection laws in Israel are adequate; they only need to be better enforced. Therefore, Tal and his colleagues are predisposed to waging their struggles in the legal realm (*Haaretz*, February 14, 1992). Tal voices no sweeping disapproval against the system; his association

¹³ On these issues, see the SPN’s various bulletins (Shomrei Hasviva, Bama, etc.).

is not engaged in creating an alternative culture. Although there is a great deal of political logic in approaching the courts in Israel, which, in recent years, have been characterized by “judicial activism” – according to which everything is “judicable” – yet, the association which is considered the law’s watchdog on environmental issues is chained to the leash of legal thinking and its influence is limited to agreements, compromises and concessions to the establishment.

In keeping with their status as professional organizations, associations such as Greenpeace and the IUED not only declare themselves apolitical, but also often back up their politics in the guise of research and science. The SPNI even maintains a unit for conducting surveys. Serious though it may be, it is often evidence of instrumentalization of the research and fetishization of the methodology employed in these studies. The new social movements in Europe not only call attention to the dangers of technological production and development, but also protest against modern society’s trust in the ethos of rationalism and modernity. They try to politicize knowledge and technology, and to make them a target for criticism (Piccolomini, 1996). Meanwhile, leaders of the associations in Israel are made out to be, or turned into, “experts” and their associations often provide a fig leaf for instrumental rationality, which converts the desire to “understand” reality into bureaucratic techniques of organization, management, documentation, and even surveillance and control.

These activities project a narrow view of democracy. At the Israeli associations’ conferences, reference is occasionally made to the formation of civil society, presumably because it is a pity not to use such a popular buzzword. Witness, for example, the title of a conference held at Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1999: “Self-Help As a Bridge Between Cultural Differences, and a Contribution to the Establishment of Civil Society.” The convention was initiated by the Israel Center for Self-Help, an umbrella organization of some 500 groups and associations (*Haaretz*, June 17, 1999). An impressive figure, everyone would agree, but why do these organizations, most of which are affiliated in one way or another with the establishment, constitute a civil society? The same holds true for the Movement for Quality Government. Although it is a movement of citizens who believe it is not enough to have the right to choose who runs the country on Election day, the movement makes no real attempt to expand the base of democracy in Israel. This fact becomes especially clear when one bears in mind that the individuals on whom the movement bestows its annual “Knight of Quality in Government” titles – at impressive ceremonies – are exclusively dignified members of the establishment and the state administration. One example of the latter was Ami Ayalon, former head of the Security Services. (*Haaretz*, April 24, 2000)

Instead of investing their efforts in creating a common cultural denominator and forming ad-hoc alliances that would seemingly serve their short-term goals, the environmental associations in Israel often choose to frustrate any opportunity of making a genuine social change. For instance, in the public campaign against the Trans-Israel Highway, the IUED collaborated with a religious association to prevent the desecration of graves; it would be difficult to describe this as a contribution to the foundation of civil society in Israel. Meanwhile, Greenpeace, which is fighting to prevent the pollution of the Mediterranean Sea, collaborated with the fishermen of Haifa – not exactly the friendliest group towards nature and living things. In the absence of organizational ability, the associations are also hard pressed to keep up with market forces whose influence has skyrocketed in Israel over the past decade. They have been unable to contend with the construction of marinas along the Mediterranean coastline, residential towers under construction on the Carmel coast in Haifa, or hotels built on the waterline in Herzliya, north of Tel Aviv.

The “tyranny of the market” continues to grow more intense in Israel and the associations themselves are often funded by firms that represent the market forces. Others are supported by international organizations that have their own interests, or wealthy benefactors who are not residents of Israel, but who try to impose their “truth” through contributions.¹⁴ There are also associations that earn profits by exploiting distressing situations. The differences of opinion and the internal struggles between them (for instance between three associations for men’s rights) exemplify pure profit motives. (*Tel Aviv* [weekly], July 5, 1996)

In the final analysis, the phenomenon of associations in Israel is new, albeit one that mostly offers opportunities for “negative freedom”. People want to prevent pollution, abate noise, protect their animals, homes, neighborhoods, environment, etc. This is how they define their world, and defending that world seems sufficient. In light of Israeli society’s collectivistic past, it is no wonder

¹⁴ These include: KLAF, a feminist and lesbian association supported by The New Israeli Fund; Mama Cash from the Netherlands; Astraea - New York; Global Fund for Women; and US/Israel Women to Women. “A Line To the Worker,” is supported by The New Israeli Fund; Bread of the World from Germany; AGIR - Ensemble pour les Droits de L’Home, France; U.S. Ford Foundation; Christian Aid - Britain; ICJ - Sweden; ICCO - the Netherlands; Heinrich Boel Foundations - Germany; Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk and SIVMO from the Netherlands. We will not go into further detail regarding the connection between Israeli associations and international foundations and organizations. In any case, many of the associations are supported by the New Israel Fund, which transfers contributions from American and Canadian Jews directly to dozens of associations engaged in civil rights and social problems, thereby circumventing state bureaucratic mechanisms of money allocation. The New Israel Fund is subject to American influence and is distinguished by a liberal orientation.

that Israeli associations seek a private domain through which they can be relieved and that they have adopted an across-the-board posture of self-defense. However, the concept of civil society and the possibility that the associations will spawn a new politics, are, in fact, dependent on a search for “positive freedom” - a transition from preference to ability, from a (legal) right to practical implementation, from being on the defensive to taking the initiative. This shift of direction would apply to the entire gamut of social and political issues, with the intent of turning Israel into a diverse, multicultural society with the “demos” and not necessarily the “ethnos” at its center.¹⁵ Such a perspective - can we call it a sociological insight? - This is not hold true for most of the Israeli associations. One has the impression that the long shadow of the “Constitution for Israel” still hovers above them, and their behavior correlates with the claim put forth by Snow and Benford (1988), that a movement that develops at the beginning of a cycle of protest may act as a progenitor of master frames, and serve as an ideological and interpretive anchor of sorts for subsequent movements in the cycle. Furthermore, the movements that ensue are liable to find that these master frames, in fact, limit their perception of reality, even their ability to act.

To conclude this section, Israeli associations have a difficult time contending with the two main threats facing them: withdrawal to a romantic, communal utopia that offers no opportunity to be translated into real political influence; and a narrow practical orientation, focused on the individual and his rights, but lacking any pretension for substantive social and cultural change. These two threats are, in fact, related to a third one, which will now be described.

The state’s “bear hug”

State institutions have various ways of dealing with grassroots politics. Practically, the representatives of the “old” politics essentially made no attempts to negate the existence of the new associations in Israel; on the contrary, they accepted them with open arms. However, even if this contained a measure of openness, it was also an indication of a state structure that is flexible enough to absorb and institutionalize the new phenomenon. As such, it could prevent the new associations from developing an out-and-out anti-statist orientation and becoming a device for general social change.¹⁶

¹⁵ On the issue of ethnos versus the demos in Israel, see Smootha (1997) and Yiftachel (1999).

¹⁶ On the relations between states and social movements in general, see Kriesi (1995), Della Porta (1995).

The November 1998 elections to the local councils and municipalities were "Greener" than ever before. Green factions achieved success in Haifa, Tel Aviv and in numerous local councils. Following this success, some observers spoke of "the Green revolution on the municipal level" (Eitan Gdali, *Bama*, March 12, 1999). It was an exaggeration; still the results may be considered a change, particularly in view of the fact that in the previous elections, in 1993 and before, Green did not exist as an issue whatsoever. Nevertheless, at least in some instances, the candidates who achieved success in 1998 were not Green "freaks" but free riders. In Haifa, the Greens were closer to the color of whitewash. Their electoral list was headed by an architect and urban planner who earns his livelihood from... construction. In reaction to the success of his list, he explained: "We are a unique model of Greens. Not fanatic Greens who eat carrots and onions. Greens that want to see Haifa with development and construction, but in accordance with enlightened and environmental principles" (*Maariv*, November 12, 1998). How can these sorts of patrons of the environment present a Green opposition against a coalition of politicians, contractors and political machines? Is it merely coincidental that in both Haifa and Tel Aviv, the new lists rushed to join the ruling coalitions soon after winning their seats?

The new social movements in Europe are in conflict as to whether they should forge relationships with the state and its institutions, and they often decide in favor of doing so. The Greens in Germany, for instance, have become a full-fledged political party. They have been partners in ruling government coalitions, and their influence has increased to unparalleled levels. The Greens in Scandinavia have also found new channels of influence, establishing contacts of different types with the government (Yearly, 1991; Poguntke, 1993; Rohrschneider, 1993). Unlike Israel, all of the European Greens did not institute relations with the establishment before creating an independent and autonomous cultural infrastructure. The connection with the establishment was intended to influence it; whereas in Israel, the connection often seems like the product of the establishment's influence on the associations. "Our strength lies in our being part of the consensus," explained the spokesperson of the SPNI (in an interview held on October 4, 1999), and when associations reveal an ambivalent attitude toward the political order - opposition to it combined with cooperation with it - they often hold back from taking effective, all-out action. In other words, they essentially prevent the development of genuine separation between civil ideology and the state. This phenomenon has been revealed in various forms in the relationship between the Ministry of Environment and the green associations. Quite often, senior ministry officials realized that cooperation with the Greens, or

even a semblance of cooperation, is an effective co-optative technique (an interview with Roni Armon, Green Action spokesperson, November 24, 1998).

Many of the associations receive government assistance due to their being defined as non-profit institutions. This has implications on their activities and their ability to criticize government policy. In essence, this constitutes a very formal expression of the inherent risks of the state's "bear hug." Yishai (1998: 153-154) notes that Israel's Associations Law, enacted in 1981, requires every associated group to register and observe several organizational rules that are required by the Ministry of Interior. The registration requirement allows the state to refuse associations the right to exist, not only if they violate the laws of the state, but also if they adversely affect public morality or endanger state security—criteria that can, of course, be broadly interpreted. In any case, these barriers grant a great deal of power to state officials, on whose say-so associations can rise or fall. In this way, the state intervenes, making use of the classic practices of inclusion and exclusion.¹⁷

Two main reasons have led to a situation in which the new associations are well-integrated in the neo-liberal ideology that is becoming increasingly more entrenched in Israel. One reason is political: the "stinking scheme" and the ensuing protest it triggered, namely, the primaries that were instituted by various political parties and the Direct Elections for Prime Minister Law, all testify, *inter alia*, to the diminished ability of political parties in Israel to act as a mediators between the public and the leadership. The decline in their strength resulted in the establishment of direct contact - of a populist nature - between the leader and the led (Filc, 1996; Shapiro, 1996). It also prompted many politicians to work harder, directly appealing to their constituency in an effort to gain added support for themselves and their objectives. As for the other reason, Israel is facing liberalization, which is essentially leading to the emergence of new economic forces belonging to the private sector. True, privatization breaks up the monopolistic statist economy, but the free market can also produce influential magnates whose activities are difficult to supervise. This danger has become more tangible in Israel over the past decade, with a few dozen families controlling the major economic sectors, and already gaining considerable political influence (Shtressler, "The End of Socialism," *Haaretz*, May 3, 1998). The new associations dovetail nicely with the new reality of economic and political privatization, they even give their seal of approval: one, they do not come out against it, and this in itself is a form of collaboration and acceptance; two,

¹⁷ On the complex relations between state's inclusion/exclusion and democracy, see Dryzek (1996).

through their actions and declarations they create the illusion that they constitute an exemplary model of democracy and participation.

This becomes evident when one considers the reciprocal relationship between the associations and the political establishment. It turns out that the associations regularly refer their requests and desires to the various Knesset members, who, for their part, are in contact with the associations, listening to what they say and issuing promises. This is how the associations succeeded in influencing Knesset members to legislate laws on animal abuse; this is the technique adopted by the associations that rallied in support of Carmela Buchbut, who killed the husband who had been abusing her for years, etc. The reciprocal relationship that had developed since the relative decline of party machines, should come as no surprise; but make no mistake, it is not pressure that is exerted by voters, only pressure that comes from associations. Then the politicians propose legislative bills. Hundreds if not thousands of such legislative bills are tabled in the Knesset – most of which, of course, are not passed. However, the impression is that the Knesset member is working; that the “public” demands and also receives, and that its problems are being solved. However, in the liberal paradise that raises rights to a sanctified level, it is not social problems that are solved, but rather the problems of associations.

Moreover, many associations typically place an emphasis on local rather than nationwide activism. In a society that had a strong collectivistic ethos, local affairs were not at all considered to be of primary importance. The associations introduced grassroots politics on environmental issues relevant to specific regions or cities, in a manner well suited to their post-material approach. However, one gets the impression that they have had a difficult time freeing themselves from the millstone of localism. Instead of these local organizations serving as a source and a basis for effective countryside organizing efforts, as a sort of coalition of coalitions, they have actually contributed to the erection of a partition between local and national interests, and their membership often sets up its own hierarchy of importance between the two levels, such that the marginal status of the regional issues is raised to a higher rank. This was illustrated, for instance, in a letter sent by the SPNI to candidates in the local and municipal elections in July 1993: “Dear candidate... We consider you the significant factor for moving ahead on environmental issues. As for the future of the occupied territories and the economy - the government will decide. As for the resident’s quality of life, you decide.” (SPNI, a letter, July 11, 1993, Secretary 505)

The politics of separation between the local and the national is problematic since it is devoid of any overall pretension of influence and change. This is similar to Herzog’s (1999) findings in regard to advances made by women

in Israeli politics. This progress is attributed first and foremost to the local government, which serves as a channel of separation between women and national politics. What is more, there is a strong tendency in this local channel to view women as public and communal servants rather than “real” politicians.

This being the case, even if the politics of the associations every so often results in genuine achievements at the level of rights and legislation, we are still not witnessing the formation of a civil society or the creation of a new politics; a civil society and a new politics that are, by definition, meant to strive for expansion of the public sphere, by attempting to transfer important issues from the confines of the state decision-making apparatus to the public. Nevertheless, the Israeli new associations lack an adequate perspective as to what constitutes the “common good.” They do not even argue over what this may be; the associations retain their fragmented, pluralistic positions, but pluralism can easily serve as a mechanism for control, on the basis of compartmentalization, whereas the outlining of problems in legal and judicial lines can stifle alternate definitions and other solutions to social problems. How can legislation, or even enforcement, be of any help on the issue of violence against women – and this is, of course, but an example – if the overall normative and institutional structure, on which the political or the legal institutions are themselves built, continue to support male superiority and the “sanctity” of the family? Carmela Buchbut’s eldest son put it this way: “That was the reality. There are a lot of battered women in Israel. We never saw any way out. There was nothing to complain about - it was the reality that we accepted at home and we thought that that was how people acted. Nobody showed us anything else.” (*Davar* [daily], October 4, 1994)

Conclusion

Since the late 1980s and the early 1990s, significant political changes have swept through Israel, which has become a more liberal, open and individualist society than in the past, with a more central role played by market mechanisms and with increasingly less state control. The associations are indicative of the new situation. However, the politics of the associations, and their reciprocal relationships with the state institutions, can tell us something about the true nature of the changes now underway in Israel.

The concept of civil society is seen as an attempt to save civilian life from administrative and regulative invasions by the state - capitalistic and socialistic alike – through the establishment of a new post-materialist realm of identity, style, and action. When these become fundamental elements of politics, it may be characterized as “new.” From this perspective, the Israeli associations

do not quite pass the test. Most of them have not developed any consciousness of a social order confronting the state system, of the “real” as opposed to the “legal.” In essence, one could say that Israel is not being transformed from a political society into a civil society, but into a society of civilians. In a similar vein, consider the parable that appeared in an issue of the “Anonymous” bulletin, about a man walking along the beach and throwing starfish back into the sea. A bystander mocks him, saying that there are millions of starfish, and that the man can’t possibly believe he is changing anything. To which the man, while picking up another starfish and throwing it into the water, says, “It makes a difference... to this one.” (*Anonymous*, March 5, 1996)

In recent years, various investigators have pointed out the social change underway in Israel, as well as the crisis that follows it - the legitimacy crisis, or the “Zionist crisis,” that is rooted in the transition from a reality of consensus or hegemony, to a situation of fracture or schism. Some observers view the situation as a chronic crisis imprinted with the contrasting worldview of other groups living, side by side, in Israel (Yona, 1998). Others claim that it stems from the state’s inability to respond to various social pressures (Horowitz & Lissak, 1989). Still, others emphasize the changes that took place in Israel - including demographic changes related to the waves of immigration from the Soviet Union - which were not attended by any ideology that might have furnished legitimization for the cultural differences between the different groups (Kimmerling, 1998). There are those who relate the “problem” to the fact that there is no attitude of respect in Israel for “the other,” nor any real dialogue with him (Mautner et al., 1998: p. 79). Some observers, adopting a less pessimistic and more realistic view, argue that Israel is captive between two contradictory trends, one global and one local, and that the future holds two possible scenarios, one post-Zionist and one neo-Zionist (Ram, 2000). There are also those with an optimistic perspective, such as Peled & Shafir (1996), who do not accept the claim that Israel is captive to paralysis-inducing internal contradictions, arguing that it is actually undergoing a significant change from a frontier society with mechanisms of exclusion to a neo-liberal civil society with mechanisms of inclusion. In the final analysis - which this paper has not engaged in at all until now - there is room to wonder how much Israel has freed itself from its collectivistic past, and whether the current “crises” are, in fact, not all that significant. In any case, the new phenomenon of the associations, as described here, indicates that change is underway in Israel, albeit with considerable limitations and restraints which have been described in terms of the inability of the new associations to constitute a civil society and a genuine new politics in Israel that can confront both the nation-state and the market. As such, the

associations are working together to make Israel more liberal, but not necessarily more free. Overall, it is an elitist phenomenon, composed mainly of wealthy and highly educated Ashkenazim (Jews of Eastern European origin). Israeli Arabs and Mizrachim (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin) are conspicuously under-represented in their ranks. The associations, thus, almost totally fail in promoting non-ethnic bases of mobilization as a key to democratization. In the final analysis, whether they are captive to their narrow, limited, local, apolitical, legalistic and interest-driven world, or they wallow in an unrealistic utopianism, they seem to be confirming the Tocquevillian statement made by Alain Touraine: "Big Brother does not pose a danger to the social movements, but egoism does."

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