

A Lost Decade, or, where has the Mizrahi Narrative gone since the 1990s?

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In many respects, the decade between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s was the Mizrahi decade. Not only did the “ethnic problem” resurface in the sociological discourse on Israeli society, but also Israeli political and cultural arenas were painted with strong ethnic colours. Shas comes straight to our minds. But also HaKeshet, The Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow, and Ahoti (Sister) for Women in Israel. Nor can’t we dismiss the blooming of “Mizrahi” art, literature and poetry that sought and still seeks to untangle the Mizrahi Question. Although these issues and representations have not yet disappeared, when we approach the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this Mizrahi discourse seems to quest for a renewed legitimacy in the Israeli public discourse.

In this paper I will seek to shed some needed light on the question of “what is dead and what is alive in the Mizrahi political discourse?” By looking at the changing discourse of citizenship in the last decade, I wish to re-examine the vitality of “a Mizrahi perspective” on state-society relations in Israel, and to offer some thoughts on new grounds for a legitimized discourse on ethnicity and citizenship.

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Introduction

One point of departure for a talk on the Mizrahi narrative after the 1990s may take us to the kibbutz, where many now celebrate the Mimuna, the traditional Jewish Moroccan festivity which ends Passover. According to a report that was succinctly titled on the internet edition of Ha’aretz “The Mimuna is being Ashkenized” - the initiative in one case was of a kibbutznik of Moroccan descent. In another instance, a proud Polish kibbutznik had fathered the idea to celebrate this festivity - which in the 1970s had symbolized the rise of the Mizrahi voice into the Zionist heartland, and the declining dominance of the Ashkenazi culture.¹ Undoubtedly, a Mimuna in a kibbutz is like reading The Capital at Benjamin Netanyahu’s dinner table.

Another possible starting point might be Yossi Sarid’s recently published alternative history, titled, “Accordingly, we are here assembled”. Depicting 1959 (each chapter in the book tells the story of one year from 1948 to 1967), Sarid has chosen to speak in the voice of a Moroccan Jewish young immigrant who had left his non-, if not anti-Zionist family back in Morocco, and after becoming Israeli he ended up stoning the police in Wadi Salib. Isn’t it a victory? Sarid, a bona fide Ashkenazi Sabra speaks not merely in the name of a Moroccan Jew. Rather, he speaks in the language of a Post Zionist Mizrahi activist. Sami Shalom Chetrit could not be more satisfied.²

How can one decipher these two stories? Is it a happy ending to a Mizrahi struggle that sought to undo the Zionist revolutionaries’ failure, namely bringing down the barriers, social and cultural, between Jews, fusing them into one nation? Or, is it that we live in a post-modern/post-Zionist world, where cultural artefacts and social histories are mere representations, no hierarchy attached? What do these stories tell us about the Mizrahi struggle, as Sami Shalom Chetrit calls this, or on the Mizrahi perspective, as the post-colonialist school prefers to look at it? Are the Mizrahim really integrated? Should they? Do they speak for themselves now, or is it, again, that Ashkenazim, who do not really want to be Mizrahim, appropriate their symbols and their viewpoint in order to maintain the upper hand?

These are of course too many questions to be answered. In the following minutes I wish to reflect on the 1990s and to ponder “what is dead and what is alive in the Mizrahi political discourse?” My talk is less about the Mizrahi struggle, but rather is aiming to re-explore the Mizrahi perspective that has been formulated not only in the academia, but also through political struggles. I dare not being too pretentious by offering a new Mizrahi epistemology, or perspective. Yet, I wish to demonstrate the limitations of the Identity Politics approach that came to dominate the Mizrahi

¹ Eli Ashkenazi, Ha’aretz 25/4/08

² In fact, he also pointed out to this option in his book p. 278.

discourse. Arguably, the (over-)emphasis on identity has obscured the class aspect of social relations, rendering identity politics an ideological toolkit of neo-liberals. Yet, a simple return to the "old" class conflict approach will not suffice either. We need a new approach, more sensitive to the changing realities of both ethnicity and class, that is still based on the now forgotten values of civic solidarity. Hence, limiting myself to critiques from the left, what I am concerned with is a) whether a Mizrahi perspective is still relevant for decoding the Israeli Society, and b) whether this perspective have kept its edge in the struggle over citizenship.

A Mizrahi perspective or a Mizrahi struggle?

Twelve years ago I argued that Mizrahi politics was the real thing. Well, to be more precise, that it was a realist response to the ongoing ethnic conflict. I was looking then at the nascent Shas party and suggested that it was the time for forthright ethnic politics. Citing Sami Chetrit's father, I titled my thesis: "And thanks to the Ashkenazim". That is, thanks for amalgamating the descendants of several Arab congregations into a single category. Being himself an activist in the Histadrut, I believe that what Nehorai Chetrit had in mind was the fusion of an "ethnic consciousness" that would allow the "newly made" Mizrahim to become a class, not in itself, but for itself. In the mid 1980s, after three futile decades of electoral struggle, and after the Likud, it was required from the Mizrahim to take a Haredi turn in order to coalesce into a political collective³, representative of the Mizrahi working class. Becoming Haredi, then, had served two purposes: a) reminding the Ashkenazi establishment that these members of the Israeli working class are equal Jewish citizens, and b) against the cultural hegemony of the Ashkenazim, it posited an alternative way for "Being Israeli" by redefining the notion of "being Zionist".

While Shas is still considered a political mishap, a stray party that the chattering classes like to hate, it is now 24 years old. Nothing to be ignored when talking about Mizrahi identity. Yet, we ought to consider something, that many of us tend to forget or forgo: that after Shas, ethnicity, and Mizrahi identity in particular, is not the same as before. Not necessarily because of Shas. Various economic, social, cultural and political changes are responsible for the re-configuration of class and ethnicity. This, I propose have bearings on both the Mizrahi struggle and perspective.

When Shas emerged in the political arena in 1984, we rarely pronounced words such as multiculturalism, post-colonialism, neo-liberalism and the like. At the time, the "ethnic problem" was seen as a problem of cultural gaps for functionalists, or a

³ Chetrit p. 309.

reflection of class conflict in the eyes of the radicals. Shas was enigmatic simply because it didn't fit into these schemas. In due time, our vocabulary has expanded and we were able to grasp the Shas phenomenon by explicating it in the terminology and context of Identity Politics.

Thus, throughout the 1990s, we were witnessing the celebration of Identities in the media, in politics and of course, in the market. We saw Identity Politics becoming the new *doxa*, that which, in Bourdieu's words, "goes without saying because it comes without saying" (Bourdieu 1977:167). But we were saying a lot. In fact, we talked endlessly about identities and multiculturalism to the extent of believing that we have actually reached a post-national life. Identity Politics was the new prism through which our ontology shifted. Society was seen through its variety and Identity became the ultimate descriptive: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi rift, the failed absorption of Jews and non-Jews from the FSU or Ethiopia, gender differences, and even the dilemmas that characterise the (post-)modern self. Beyond an ontological shift, Identity Politics had offered us also a new epistemology: Identity became all encompassing, wearing and undressing outfits like a chameleon. It was at once essentialist and constructivist, particular and universal, empowering and dangerous. With Identity, no longer did we require any other social concept. The Class King is dead; long live the Queen of Identity.

However, this change did not occur in a void. It came in tandem with a new spirit and ideology: neo-liberalism. Neither class nor ethnicity remained the same. Take ethnicity for example: up until the 1970s in the world, and the 1980s in Israel, the only legitimate ethnic affiliation was the national. Thinking of ethnicity in terms of an essential identity implied that being attached to one's ethnic origins acted as a regressive social mechanism. Moreover, being defined, identified and stigmatised by ethnic characteristics doomed the bearer of any non-hegemonic identity to the margins of society. Yet, neo-liberalism had brought about a dual change in relation to ethnicity: a) regarding human subject as consumers first, the market sought to appeal to non-hegemonic groups and draw their purchasing-power by making direct reference to their ethnicity; and related to that, b) the market seeks expansion by incorporating the ethnic groups' cultural artefacts and aesthetics as representations of authentic lifestyles. Thus, when non-hegemonic groups incline to reify their own ethnicity by appealing to identity qua ideology (as in "black is beautiful"), the market further exacerbates this imagery ("black is beautiful and selling"), thus rendering identity all the more important mechanism of social hierarchy.

Now think about class. Once the major organising principle for the expansion of citizenship, class in neo-liberal times is no longer the basis for political action, nor

do class divisions constitute the basis for cultural identification. In fact, class dis-identification is now the “norm”, even if this practice in itself is a class process. Nonetheless, despite the absence of direct reference to class, people continue to “know” where their own class boundaries cross (Bottero 2004: 990). Therefore, although class is a less rigid category than what we believed it was, and class identities are more implicit, it still serves as a “mode of differentiation” for people to place themselves against others (Savage 2000: 102 and Reay 1997: 226 cited in Bottero 2004: 990). A similar argument may be made for class conflict. Following Bourdieu, a more adequate approach to class conflict would be not looking at class consciousness, but rather at *classed* consciousness, in which the recognition of social divisions is embedded in practice (Bottero 993). Class dis-identification is not simply the victory of the middle class. It is also the way for people from the lower class to become, in Marshall’s terms, civilized members in society. Or, citizens.

When Nehorai Chetrit and his generation had made Aliya, some 40-50 years ago, the welfare state was on the rise. Though no welfare is perfect, it implied for the working class that there were paths for mobilization, and for living in dignity as citizens. We of course should not fool ourselves about equality. A groups’ proximity to the hegemony had determined its place in the citizenry. Thus, Mizrahi Jews and Jewish women were deprived of full citizenship status, yet they were much better off than Arabs. In due time, Arabs were better off than their brethren in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, simply for being citizens. Currently, labour migrants in Israel are privileged in comparison to Palestinians from the Territories. But citizenship in itself is less promising than it used to be.

In neo-liberal times, there are no citizens but only consumers. The attention and rights that a person is entitled to are as large as one’s purchasing power. This also implies that for both minority groups and non-citizen labour migrants citizenship rights are in short supply. But also for the “traditional” working class, which may be now termed “the part-time employed class”. This fragmentation of the working class is crucial. It explains why class consciousness in its traditional sense is unattainable. But look at the table below: it suggests that ethnicity can no longer be identified with class. Or conversely, that the class segment is not ethnically homogeneous. This is another reason why the spread of citizenship is in trouble.

In the 1980s, when the new sociology unravelled the fallacy of modernisation, we saw ethnicity as a key factor in correcting the failure of modernised states to include the underprivileged and disadvantaged. Understanding that the national identity failed to be inclusive and egalitarian, as promised, we hoped that Identity in a narrower sense would take its place. For a while, and in several important

ways, it did. New social movements had entered central stage rendering their “new identities” a part of the political realm. They did so because they were either escaping the stigmatised identities of their constituencies (Blacks!), or chasing new ones in order to create new constituencies (Greens!). However, this had its price. Whereas class politics and the civil rights movements were speaking in the name of the whole, these new social movements had lost their capacity to do just the same. Quite to the contrary. Those who spoke in universal terms were losing to those movements and political parties that had taken advantage of the new situation. Shas is of course our own example. Thus, while on the left we were fighting over the “right jargon” to explain the new politics, the Right was winning politics itself. In this respect, back to my starting point, it helps no one’s politics if Sarid speaks like the last Mizrahi activist, inasmuch as celebrating the Mimuna in the kibbutz is culturally insignificant. There are some old questions that beg for new answers and the current debates on the Mizrahi perspective and discourse are not very helpful in getting them answers.

More specifically, three seemingly oppositional camps on the left seek an answer to the “ethnic problem”. I think that they all fail to provide us with answers. The first is The Mizrahi Struggle camp which reiterates the opposition between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in a society that simply fails to see such an opposition. It is, I believe, useless to cry “Ashkenazim, Ashkenazim!” and to see the Mizrahi masses distance themselves from you, even if you are historically right. A similar difficulty is facing The Post-Colonial Interpretative Project that alienates itself not only by its jargon, but also because it had turned integration almost into the F word. Being non-reflexive regarding its conception of identity as ideology, it failed to see that understanding identities as socially constructed, does not prevent “real people” to remain attached to them. In short, against the anticipation of these two camps, “real” Mizrahim have preferred their Jewish identity over their Mizrahi one.

The third camp on the left calls upon us to abandon identity altogether and to re-align with the old “class conflict”. As if this class conflict was never about identity. But the class structure has changed, and even more so, the nature of class conflict is no longer the same. Not that there is no class opposition. The call for “identity-free” class consciousness was possible in the age of modernisation, when people could foresee their integration as “civilised” citizens of the nation. Today, when the workers hardly speak the same language, ethnicity cannot replace class in the old class conflict. There are as many class conflicts as there are sites or workplaces where unionisation is possible. Yet, the solutions are local. They do not materialise into a comprehensive change, as they did when social citizenship was still in fashion. When the experience of class is too individualised (Bottero), and the

struggle for social change is grounded in a "Desire for Sameness" (Richardson) - it may not come as a surprise that Post Colonialists like Yehouda Shenhav and Yossi Yonah unknowingly agree with the oracle of neo-liberalism who declared that "there is no such thing as society". Is it true that instead of searching for new grounds for social solidarity, and re-shaping our Mizrahi perspective to confront new formations of class and ethnic hierarchies, they too resort to nationalism to delimit the contours of the Society in Israel? If so, I think that we are giving up citizenship too soon, and I pity this.

Table 1: Who is who in the working class versus the upper class!!

	High wages ^a	Low wages ^b
Men	1.7	15.4
Women	0.2	36.5
Jews and others	1.1	25.5
Arabs	0.1	26.2
Mizrahim (Israeli born to fathers from Asia/Africa)	0.7	22.5
Ashkenazim (Israeli born to fathers from Europe/America)	2.6	20.2
Immigrants from FSU since 1990	0.2	29.6
Education up to 12 years	0.2	31.3
Education 13-15 years	0.6	27.1
Education 16 years and over	2.7	15.1

Source: Workers, Employers and the Distribution of Israel's National Income - Labor Report: 2007. by Dr. Shlomo Swirski & Ety Konor-Attias, May 2008. p. 22.

^a Upper one percentile of the population of wage earners.

^b Wage earners of less than 3,515 NIS which is 2/3 of the median salary. One quarter of the wage earners' population is reaching this figure, which totals to 7.3% of the total income. The upper percentile earns 6.1% of the total national income.

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