“Ethnocracy” and Its Discontents: Minorities, Protests, and the Israeli Polity

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1. Thwarting the Challenge

During Israel’s jubilee year two notable challenges to the order of things emerged from peripheral (nonmainstream) groups, both concerning the issue of land control. In early 1997 a group known as the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow began a campaign under the slogan “This land is also mine,” demanding a more equal share in the state’s vast public lands. These are held mainly by Jewish rural settlements (kibbutzim and moshavim) that are dominated by Ashkenazi Jews. The Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow claimed that since the lands were being developed for commercial use, they should be shared more equitably, with more benefits flowing to economically deprived Mizrahim. As the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow’s spokesperson stated, “If the kibbutzim no longer farm much of their so-called agricultural land and now lease it for megaprofits to megacompanies who build

I wish to thank Lev Grinberg, Yossi Yonah, and the referees and editorial team of Critical Inquiry for their useful comments and suggestions. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. Direct correspondence to yiftach@bgumail.bgu.ac.il

1. Ashkenazi Jews (Ashkenazim in the plural) are those who arrived in Israel/Palestine from Europe and America; Mizrahi Jews (Mizrahim in the plural, also known as Sephardim) came from the Moslem world; while Palestinian Arabs (or Arabs) are the Palestinian citizens of Israel who remained in 1948, as distinct from the Palestinians who reside in the occupied autonomous territories, or in the Palestinian exile communities and diasporas. The current meaning and use of these categories are of course not primordial, but very much a product of political, economic, and geographical forces operating in Israel/Palestine during the last century.

Critical Inquiry 26 (Summer 2000)
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shopping malls and gas stations, why shouldn't the benefits be shared among the Israeli public? After all, these state lands are ours, too!"  

Later that year, two hundred acres of agricultural land belonging to Palestinian Arabs in Rukha, near Um al-Fahem (fifteen kilometers southeast of Haifa), were confiscated for army use, spawning a wave of protest that ended up in three days of clashes between Israeli police and Arab protesters. The police stormed a local high school, and, for the first time in the state's history, fired rubber bullets at Israeli (Arab) citizens. Fifty-five local residents and fifteen policemen were wounded, and twenty protesters were arrested. The anger and frustration of the situation was well expressed by a local protester:

Can you believe it? First they [the state] come and take from us the little land they didn't take last time, then they don't let us protest against it, and finally shoot our youth. . . . Are we citizens or aliens in this state? Do we have any rights here? But forget it, nobody will listen to us anyhow. . . . After all, we are only Arabs.

But both Mizrahi and Arab challenges failed; control over Jewish rural lands remained unchanged, while the transfer of Arab lands at Rukha to army use stayed intact. The Mizrahi challenge was quickly attacked by mainstream Israeli politicians as undermining a national symbol. It was also attacked by Arab leaders, who pointed to the deep irony of the Mizrahim demanding from the Ashkenazim that which was not theirs, since much of the land had been expropriated initially from Palestinian Arabs. As an Arab activist noted bitterly, "The Mizrahim simply wish to join in the looting of Arab lands."

2. Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow spokesperson, Hakhol dibburim (All talk), Kol Yisrael (Israeli radio), 103.3 FM, 20 May 1997, 10:00–12:00 A.M.; see also Yoman (Israeli television, channel 1), 23 May 1997; and Haaretz (Tel Aviv), 25 Apr. 1997.
4. Local Um al-Fahem resident, quoted in "Intifada bameshulash" (Riots in the Triangle), Ma'ariv (Tel Aviv), 29 Sept. 1998.

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The Arab protest in Um al-Fahem was simply crushed by force. The problem of the confiscated agricultural land was passed to a committee for reconsideration, but as of the time of writing (October 1999) the situation had changed little. The defence minister (Yitzhak Mordechai) reflected the general mood in Israeli Jewish discourse at the time in his claim, “The land is absolutely essential for our training, and besides, if we give it back here, we'll have to return to the Arabs many of the army's training grounds all over the country.”

Following these events, the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow changed tack and began to demand not the redivision of national land but the transfer of Israeli public housing (whose residents are mainly low-income Mizrahim) to the ownership of their residents. Using a far more ethnocratic rhetoric, which emphasized their contribution to the Zionist project of Judaizing the country, they gradually won public support and even managed to influence the passage of new legislation that may now turn this goal into reality. The consequences among the Arabs are less clear, but reports of frustration and resignation in Um al-Fahem have also been linked to the strengthening of the Islamic movement and to the setting of new Islamic educational, cultural, and political agendas among the Arabs, some with subversive undertones.

The two acts of protest serve as a telling entry point to the discussion of this essay, which deals with the position of peripheral groups vis-à-vis a repressive regime. They illustrate vividly the ability of a settling ethnic state (defined below) to subdue challenges from its peripheries, especially when these address issues fundamental to the regime's ethno-territorial logic. I will begin by sketching the scholarly and historical/geographical settings of the social phenomena I explore. The remainder of the essay will advance in three main stages, moving from theory, to analysis and critique of the Israeli regime, and later to an exploration of the mobilization of the two peripheral minorities.

2. Setting

In this essay I analyze critically the structure of a regime I have termed ethnocracy, and its impact on the position and identity of peripheral minorities. To this end I will probe the resistance to the Israeli Jew-

7. At the time of writing the law was still not implemented, with successive governments claiming a shortage of funds to put it into practice.
8. In the summer of 1999 three violent attacks were carried out by members of the Israeli Islamic Movement. The one surviving terrorist in the attack (three others died) mentioned the “Zionist land grab” as a main reason for his killing of two young Jews (“Aravim Yisraeliyim hetkifu zug yehudim” [Israeli Arabs attack Jewish couple], Ma’ariv, 9 Sept. 1999).
9. The term ethnocracy has been mentioned in previous literature. See David Little, Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity (Washington, D.C., 1994), p. 72, and Juan J. Linz, “Totalitar-
ish ethnocratic regime emerging from two peripheral minorities, namely Palestinian Arabs (used interchangeably with Arabs) and Mizrahi in the development towns, the peripheral Mizrahim.

My main argument is that Israel’s ethnocratic regime, which facilitates the colonial Judaization of the country, has buttressed the dominance of the Ashkenazi Jewish ethno-class and enabled the “blunting” and silencing of the resistance of both Palestinian Arabs and peripheral Mizrahi. Thus, despite notable differences, the marginalization of Palestinian Arabs and Mizrahi Jews is linked, deriving directly from the very same Judaization (“de-Arabization”) project that positioned these communities in cultural, geographic, and economic peripheries. This was partly achieved by a duality in the Israeli state between a democratic facade and a deeper undemocratic regime logic, which facilitates the dispossession, control, and peripheralization of groups that do not belong to the dominant ethno-class. Thus the very nature of the settling ethnocracy, which combines expansion, settlement, segregation, and ethno-class stratification, militates against the effectiveness of challenges emanating from peripheral groups. The selective openness of the regime, which allows for public protest, free speech, and periodic elections, is largely an illusion: the ethnocratic regime has arranged itself politically, culturally, and geographically so as to absorb, contain, or ignore the challenge emerging from its peripheries, thereby trapping them in their respective predicaments.¹⁰

The two peripheral groups are trapped by the lack of available choices through which to mobilize against their collective marginalization. But the predicaments of peripheral Mizrahim and Arabs are quite different: the former are trapped inside the Israeli Jewish ethnocracy, while the latter are trapped outside its boundaries of meaningful inclusion, a key difference that I explore later. Yet the emergence of an ethnocratic settling regime in Israel has worked to significantly marginalize both groups. The protest campaigns also indicate that the two groups are developing collective identities to counter the marginalizing logic of the regime. The Arabs are gradually disengaging (though not separating) from the state to form an Arab region, while the Mizrahim emerge as a deprived but “moral” ethno-class. Two other notable responses to the predicaments of the two sectors have been the powerful emergence of Islamic and Jewish religious movements and a more recent secular mobilization around ideas of multiculturalism and binationalism, all of which offer mobility and identity outside the existing symbolic grid of the state.

3. On Nationalism, Ethnocracy, and Democracy

The conceptual approach of this essay emerges from the growing interest in nationalism, which has virtually exploded to occupy center stage in both the social sciences and the humanities. But my stance here is a critical one. Despite their illuminating insights and breathtaking endeavors, most studies of nationalism devote only scant attention to the impact of nationalism on intranational and intrastate disparities and cleavages, that is, the impact of nationalism on minorities. Most studies have thus largely ignored a critical tension between nation- and state-building, in what was termed by Anderson “the impending crisis of the nation-state hyphen.” Symptomatic of this deficiency has been a lack of engagement on the part of most theorists with the debates on civil society, postcolonialism, and the emergence of social movements, and a myopia towards the centrality of space, its contours and internal divisions. With these defi-

13. For a notable exception, see Manuel Castells, The Power of Identity: Economy, Society and Culture, vol. 2 of The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture, trans. pub. (Oxford,
ciencies in mind, let us now move from a general discussion on nationalism to a critique of ethnocracy.

Ethnocracy is a specific expression of nationalism that exists in contested territories where a dominant ethnos gains political control and uses the state apparatus to ethnicize the territory and society in question.\textsuperscript{14} Ethnocracies are neither democratic nor authoritarian (or "Herrervolk") systems of government. The lack of democracy rests on unequal citizenship and on state laws and policies that enable the seizure of the state by one ethnic group. They are not authoritarian, as they extend significant (though partial) political rights to ethnic minorities. As detailed elsewhere, ethnocracies emerge through a time/space fusion of three major forces:\textsuperscript{15} (1) A settler and/or settling state that promotes external or internal forms of colonialism (the former typically by Europeans, the latter by the expanding core of ethnic states, such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Estonia, or Serbia); (2) rigid ethno-nationalism premised on an ethnic (and not territorial) self-interpretation of the legitimizing principle of self-determination, often buttressed by a supportive religious narrative; and (3) an "ethnic logic of capital," resulting in an uneven economic landscape and long-term stratification between ethno-classes, expressed by the flows of investment, development, and labor market niches. The polarizing effect of capital flow has worsened in recent decades following the increasing mobility of capital and the globalization of the world economy.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the many important local variations, ethnocratic states are broadly typified by a social structure consisting of: (1) a powerful "charter group," the founding core of the dominant nation; (2) later groups of immigrants from ethnic backgrounds different from the charter group, who are incorporated (usually unevenly) upwards into the host society; and (3) relatively weak and dispossessed local, indigenous, or rival ethnic groups, which are generally excluded from the meaningful political and cultural realms.\textsuperscript{17} This structure exposes the inherent tension between

\textsuperscript{14} See Yiftachel, "Ethnocracy."

\textsuperscript{15} See Sassen, Globalization and Its Discontents (New York, 1998).

\textsuperscript{16} WASP groups in Anglo-Saxon settler societies are one example of a charter group. See Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Beyond Dichotomies—Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Settler Societies," introduction to Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class, ed. Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis (London, 1995), pp. 1–38, and Yasemin Nuho–Ju Soysal, Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe (Chicago, 1994). Ethnocracy is also particularly problematic for gender equality. See Julie Mostov, "Sexing the Nation/Desexing the Body: Politics of National Identity in the Former...
the parallel projects of nation- and state-building in ethnocratic regimes. This entails an active exclusion of groups constructed as external to the dominant nation by a combination of legal, policy, and cultural means. The excluded are usually indigenous peoples, but also collectivities that have been marked as foreigners for generations. Yet at the same time these groups are incorporated (often coercively) into the project of state-building. This tension of incorporation without legitimation is at the heart of the chronic instability experienced by ethnocratic regimes.18

In ethnocracies, as noted, the dominant ethno-class appropriates the state apparatus and attempts to structure the political system, public institutions, and state culture so as to further its control over the state and its territory. This results in the blurring of state borders in an effort to incorporate diasporic coethnics while at the same time weakening or neutralizing the citizenship of minorities. Estonia and Sri Lanka can serve as examples here. In the former all people of Estonian descent, wherever they live, are entitled to citizenship, while over half the Russians, who have resided in the state for over fifty years, are disenfranchised. In Sri Lanka over two million Tamils who have resided in the country for generations are denied citizenship through their classification as Indian Tamils, thereby maintaining the demographic dominance of the Sinhalese ethnos.

In both cases, as in Israel/Palestine, the notion of the demos is crucially ruptured. Yet the empowered demos—the community of equal resident-citizens—forms the basis for the establishment of democracy. Its diminution highlights the structural tensions between ethnocracy and democracy.

4. Ethnocracies and Democracies

My account of the ethnocratic regime involves a thorough critique of its common representation as democratic. On the one hand such a regime claims to be a full (and often even liberal) democracy, while on the other it routinely oppresses and marginalizes peripheral minorities and constantly changes the state structure in the majority's favor. The oppression of minorities is often exacerbated by the legitimacy granted to the state.

Yugoslavia,” in Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation, ed. Tamar Mayer (London, 1999), pp. 89–110. Mostov has adopted the model to describe the paternalism and male violence inherent in ethnocratic systems, which are concerned, first and foremost, with ethnic reproduction and hence treat women/mothers as bearers of ethno-national honor. For illuminating discussions on gender and nationalism in Israel, see N. Berkovitz, “Eshet khayl mi yintza? Nashim ve'ezrakhut beyisrael” (Who can find a brave woman? Women and citizenship in Israel), Sotsyologyah Yisre'elit 3, no. 1 (2000): 277–318, and Kathy E. Ferguson, Kibbutz Journal: Reflections on Gender, Race, and Militarism in Israel (Pasadena, Calif., 1995).

in the international arena as a consequence of its purportedly democratic structure, as is the case in Israel.

This critique emerges from two main positions. First, I employ a Gramsci-informed perspective that seeks to discover the underlying logic of power relations within a political-economy of culture. This perspective is suspicious of official rhetoric and declarations, constantly searching for the deeper political and historical transformations and the hegemonic forces, often unsee or silent, that navigate these transformations. Second, the critique emerges through privileging looking at society from the periphery into the core, for example, by discussing the mobilization of Mizrahim and Arabs in Israel. This angle reveals the impregnable, stratifying, and nondemocratic nature of the ethnocratic regime.

Needless to say, the term democracy is not taken uncritically here. It is a contested concept, hotly debated, rarely settled, and widely abused, particularly in multiethnic states. It is an institutional response to generations of civil struggles for political and economic inclusion, gradually incorporating and empowering the poor, women, and minorities into the once elitist polity.

This is not the place to delve deeply into democratic theory. Suffice it to say that several key principles have emerged as foundations for achieving the main tenets of democracy—equality and liberty. These include equal citizenship; protection of individuals and minorities against the tyranny of states, majorities, or churches; and a range of civil, political, and economic rights. These are generally ensured by a stable constitution, periodic and universal elections, and free media. In multiethnic or multinational polities, as the seminal works of Arend Lijphart and Will Kymlicka have illustrated, a certain parity, recognition, and proportionality between the ethnic collectivities is a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy and stability. While no state ever implements these principles fully, and thus none is a pure democracy, ethnocratic regimes are conspicuous in breaching most tenets of democracy.


To further fathom the workings of ethnocracies we must differentiate analytically between the features of a regime and its structure. Some ethnocracies possess visible democratic features, such as periodic elections, free media, an autonomous judiciary that protects, and even (some) human rights legislation. Yet the deeper structure of such regimes is undemocratic mainly because they promote the seizure of territory and the public realm by one ethnus, thus undermining key democratic principles such as civil and legal equality, the protection of minorities, and the maintenance of equality and proportionality among the collectivities making up the state. Of course, features and structure mutually influence each other, and neither remains static over time. But the ethnocratic logic of the structure generally dictates the terms of much of what transpires in the more visible political arenas.

Ethnocracies thus operate simultaneously in several levels and arenas and create a situation where political struggles are often waged around the state’s features, while little is said and fought over the deeper hegemonic structure. As powerfully argued by Gramsci, a “moment” of hegemony is marked by the unquestioned dominance of “a certain way of life . . . in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles.”23 The hegemonic order reflects and thus reproduces the interests of the dominant ethno-classes by representing the order of things in a distorted manner as legitimate and moral and by concealing its oppressive or more questionable aspects. This public perception is maintained by preventing, deflecting, or ridiculing discussions that challenge the structure of the regime and by limiting public debate to its more shallow features. In his enlightening discussion on resisting hegemony, Gramsci differentiates between “wars of movement” and “wars of position.” The former target contemporary political party conflicts and interests embedded in what I term here regime features, thus concentrating on short-term political or material gains. The latter address the deeper and often unseen hegemonic ideas and “truths” that generate long-term power relations and their societal legitimacy, that is, what I term here regime structure. Gramsci’s normative strategies aim to shift the attention of political entrepreneurs who represent the exploited strata from “wars of movement” to “wars of position” and thus articulate a counterhegemonic consciousness.24

In this light, I have identified several structural bases that constitute the foundation of ethnocratic societies, objects in a “war of position” à


24. Ian S. Lustick, Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), p. 122; for his enlightening discussion on this subject, see pp. 121–24.
la Gramsci. These include the rules, policies, and institutions affecting immigration, the spatial system of land and settlement, the state’s constitution, the role of the military, the nature of the dominant culture, and the regulation of capital. These bases, each separately and together, powerfully mould ethnic relations in contested territories, but are rarely subject to day-to-day or electoral deliberation. Genuine debate on these taken-for-granted issues is generally absent from public discourse, especially among the dominant majority. But the dominance of the various “truths” behind these bases is, of course, not absolute and may be exposed and resisted as political entrepreneurs exploit the tensions and contradictions in the system to advance antihegemonic projects.

But in Israel most of the structural bases are still intact, as subjects such as immigration policies, the role of military, the state constitution, and even the ethnic nature of development policies (which routinely privilege Jews over Arabs) are rarely discussed in national Jewish politics. This is not accidental, of course; it allows the dominant Jewish ethnos to extend its control over Palestinians (both in Israel and the occupied territories) through the use of discriminatory immigration, land, settlement, cultural, and development policies, as well as through the (nearly unquestioned) centrality of the (Jewish) army in the state’s decision-making arenas.

5. Ethnocracy and Minorities

The crux of the ethnocratic system is its ability to maintain the control and dominance of the charter group. This is premised on the exclusion, marginalization, or assimilation of minority groups. But not all minorities are treated equally. Some are constructed as internal, whereas others are marked as external. A critical difference exists between those considered part of the so-called historical or even genetic nation and others whose presence is portrayed as a mere historical coincidence or as a danger to the security and integrity of the dominant ethnos. These discourses strip the means of inclusion in the meaningful sites of the nation from external minorities.25

Ethnocracies are driven, first and foremost, by a sense of collective entitlement on the part of the majority group to control what it thinks of as its state and its homeland—a sense of entitlement derived from the notion of a universal right for self-determination. Thus, belonging to the dominant ethno-nation is the key to attaining mobility and resources for peripheral groups and a strategy adopted by most immigrant minorities, who thereby distance themselves from indigenous or other external minorities.

The charter group can thus play a dual game. On the one hand it

25. See Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose, Constructions of Race, Place, and Nation (Lon-
don, 1993).
articulates a discourse of belonging that incorporates later migrant
groups, inviting them into the moral community of the dominant ethno-
nation. But on the other hand the charter group uses this very discourse
of inclusion and belonging to conceal the uneven effects of its strategies,
which often marginalize the immigrants economically, culturally, and geo-
graphically. It would be a mistake, however, to treat this as a conspiracy;
it is rather an expression of broad social interest, generally unspoken and
unarticulated, which privileges social circles that are closest to the ethno-
national core. This seemingly natural process tends to broadly reproduce,
though never replicate, patterns of social stratification.

The strategy towards indigenous minorities or fragments of rival na-
tions is more openly oppressive. They are represented and treated at best
as external to the ethno-national project, or at worst as a subversive threat. The principle of self-determination is used only selectively, pert-
taining to ethnicity and not to an inclusive geographical unit, as required
by the basic principles of the nation-state order and by the tenets of de-
ocracy. Many of the projects that typify ethnocracies, namely, frontier
settlement, land seizure, military expansion, and economic growth, en-
croach on the position and resources of local minorities. These projects
are often wrapped in a discourse of modernity, progress, and democracy,
but the very material reality they produce is unmistakable, entailing mi-
nority dispossession and exclusion.

However, the self-representation of most ethnocracies as democratic
creates structural tensions because it requires the state to go beyond lip
service to empower external minorities with some (though always less
than equal) formal political powers. The cracks and crevices between the
open claims for democracy and the denial of full minority participation
harbor the tensions and conflicts typical of ethnocratic regimes.26

The dual game of a public democratic facade alongside structures of
ethnic expansion and control is thus at work against both internal and
external minorities, although there are differences in practice. The dif-
ference lies in the selective imposition of borders and boundaries. Ethn-
cracies typically impose a multiplicity of physical, legal, social, economic,
and cultural boundaries that differentiate between ethno-classes. These
have uneven levels of porousness: the dominant group can usually travel
freely across boundaries; internal minorities are more restricted, often
culturally and economically, while external minorities, are systematically
excluded.

Finally, it must also be emphasized that the breaching of democratic
principles in ethnocratic states is far more severe vis-à-vis minorities
marked as external, due to the systematic rejection of these groups as

26. For further discussion of this tension, see Mann, “The Dark Side of Democracy,”
22–43.
meaningful members of the polity, often expressed by legal and institutional means. Minorities characterized as internal face lesser obstacles to the formal possibility of democratic inclusion. But in ethnocratic regimes this possibility generally comes with a steep collective price of cultural and economic stratification.

6. The Israeli Ethnocracy: Judaizing/Colonizing the Homeland

Following independence in 1948 Israel began a concerted and radical strategy of Judaization (de-Arabization). The expulsion and flight of around 750,000 Palestinian refugees during the 1947–49 war created large gaps in the geography of the land, which the authorities were quick to fill with Jewish immigrants and refugees who entered the country en masse. The darker side of this strategy was the destruction of 418 Palestinian Arab towns, villages, and hamlets and the concurrent prevention of the return of Palestinian refugees.27 During the first decade of independence Israel built hundreds of Jewish settlements, often near or literally on the site of demolished Arab villages and towns.

The duality of the Israeli state can thus be traced to its early days. It created a state with several significant democratic features and formalities but at the same time established a legal, institutional, and cultural regime structure that advanced an undemocratic project of Judaizing and de-Arabizing the country. This duality became obvious and much criticized following the conquest of further Palestinian territories after 1967, but it existed before then and still exists today in “Israel Proper” (that is, Israel within its pre-1967 borders) where the laws, policies, and institutions that facilitate the Judaization process are still in operation. It is important to distinguish between the pre-1948 period, when Jews arrived in Palestine mainly as refugees, in a population movement I have conceptualized as one of “colonialism of ethnic survival,” and the periods that see the Israeli state engaging in internal (post-1948) and external (post-1967) forms of colonialism.28


Because I am mainly interested here in the position of minorities, this is not the place to enter fully the active debate on the level of democratic institutionalization in Israel. Suffice it to note that several key democratic principles are routinely violated, all because of the ethnocratic nature of the Israeli regime: Israel never had a constitution, and basic human rights and capabilities are thus not protected by special legislation; there is no separation between state and church; some twenty pieces of legislation discriminate formally between Jews and Arabs; and, as we shall see below, the state never established the legal-territorial basis for democracy—that is, it has not defined its borders, it occupies and actively colonizes Palestinian and Arab territories beyond its internationally recognized borders, and it has maintained a legal and institutional system of land control that is deeply undemocratic.29

This political design is premised on a hegemonic perception, cultivated since the rise of Zionism, that the land (ha-aretz) belongs to the Jews and only the Jews. A rigid form of territorial ethno-nationalism developed from the beginning of Zionist settlement in order to quickly “indigenize” immigrant Jews and to conceal, trivialize, or marginalize the existence of a Palestinian people on the same land. The frontier became a central icon, and its settlement was considered one of the highest achievements of any Zionist “returning” to the revered homeland. A popular (and typical) youth movement song, “Nivne arzenu etret moledet” (“We shall build our land, the homeland”), by A. Levinson, frequently sung in schools and public gatherings and known to nearly every Jew in Israel during the nation’s formative years, illustrates the powerful construction of these icons and myths.

We shall build our country, our homeland
Because it is ours, ours, this land

We shall build our country, our homeland
It is the command of our blood, the command of generations
We shall build our country despite our destroyers
We shall build our country with the power of our will
The end to malignant slavery
The fire of Freedom is burning
The glorious shine of hope
Will stir our blood
Thirsty for freedom, for independence
We shall march bravely towards the liberation of our people.

Such sentiments were translated into a pervasive program of Jewish Zionist territorial socialization and indoctrination, expressed in school curricula, literature, political speeches, popular music, and other spheres of public discourse. The vision promoted was of a pure ethnic state, replicating the East European examples from which the founding elites had arrived. Frontier settlement thus continued to be a cornerstone of Zionist nation-building, even well after the establishment of a sovereign state, forming a central part of the sacred values, the pantheon of heroes, the mythology, and the internal system of legitimacy and gratification of the settler society.

Jewish frontierism gained new energies following the 1967 war, after which Jewish control was extended to the entire historic Palestine/Eretz Yisrael (the land area controlled by the British mandate) and beyond. The scope of this essay does not permit full discussion of the significant impact of the semiofficial inclusion of the occupied territories into the realm of the Israeli regime, nor of the important changes following the 1995 Oslo agreement. The mutual recognition between the Jewish and Palestinian national movements is of course highly significant and may in the future halt the Judaization impulse of Israeli Jews. However, at present, without peace or stable borders, the moral power of the Judaization project is still prominent in Israeli Jewish society.

This is aptly demonstrated by a song, “Artzenu haktantonet” (“Our

30. “Nivne artzenu,” Shiron ha-aretz (Songbook of the land) (Tel Aviv, 1995).
31. See Yoram Bar-Gal, Molelet ve-ge’ografyah be-me’ah shanot hinukh Tsiyon (Molelet and geography in a hundred years of Zionist education) (Tel Aviv, 1993), and Uri Ram, “Zionist Historiography and the Invention of Modern Jewish Nationhood: The Case of Ben Zion Dinur,” History and Memory 7 (Spring–Summer 1995): 91–124.
34. It is also reasonable to perceive the 1995 and 1999 withdrawal of Israel from pockets in the West Bank and Gaza as consistent with the Judaization project. The territories with Palestinian majorities are handed to the Palestinian National Council to establish autonomous enclaves, while the rest of the land (some 90 percent of Israel/Palestine, much of it hotly contested) is being furthered Judaized.
tiny little land"), which became immensely popular during the 1990s, composed and sung by a renowned Israeli rock singer, Rami Kleinstein. It is worth paying attention to the total devotion and even erotic attraction to the land that radiates from the song's lines, as well as its religious and historical undertones. The Arabs are absent from this idealized landscape, as evident in the description of the land as barefoot and naked. While the drive to settle the frontier and expand Jewish control has waned in recent years, it is still a major political and cultural force in Israeli society, as illustrated by the following passage:

Our tiny little land
Our beautiful land
A homeland with no clothing
A barefoot homeland
Sing your poems to me
You beautiful bride
Open your gates to me
I shall cross them and praise the Lord

To be sure, the perception of this land and the state of Israel as a safe haven after generations of persecutions of Jews, and especially after the Nazi Holocaust, had a powerful liberating meaning. Yet the darker sides of this project were nearly totally absent from the cultural and political construction of an unproblematic return of Jews to their beckoning promised land, in a process described aptly by Yitzhak Laor as a "national narrative without natives." Very few dissenting voices were raised against the hegemonic Judaizing discourse, policies, and practices. If such dissent did emerge, the hegemonic national Jewish elites found effective ways to marginalize, co-opt, or gag most challengers.

7. Judaization and the Making of Ethnocracy

The Judaization strategy became the core project and the main logic around which both Jewish and Palestinian societies developed in Israel/Palestine. It shaped relations between the two ethno-nations and among ethno-classes within each. The main bases of ethnocratic states identified above have all been central to the regime in Israel/Palestine. These include Israel's Jews-only immigration policies; its constitution-in-the-making, which enshrines the state's Jewishness; its development and investment strategies, which heavily favored Jews over Arabs but at the same time maintained ethno-class gaps among Jews; the central and criti-

cal role assigned to the military, which excluded the vast majority of Arabs while exacerbating the stratification between Jewish ethno-classes; and the firm imposition of the Jewish and Hebrew culture (in its Ashkenazi guise) as the only medium of communication and as the source of the norms and practices governing the Israeli public sphere. These are enshrined in a range of Israeli laws, practices, and institutions, discussed by a vast literature.

The last basis concerns the land, settlement, and planning policies on which I touched earlier. Several mechanisms worked powerfully and systematically to transfer the ownership, control, and use of land from Palestinian Arabs to Jewish hands. The Jewish collectivity owned 7 percent of the country’s lands prior to 1948, and at present the state of Israel, together with the Jewish National Fund, owns over 93 percent. This process is unidirectional; under Israeli law, state land cannot be sold, including in the occupied territories where over 50 percent of the land has been either transferred to state ownership or to exclusive Jewish use. The control of land enabled the establishment of over seven hundred Jewish settlements in Israel/Palestine, at a time when no new Arab settlements were allowed.

The bases of the Israeli settling ethnocracy are all buttressed by the declaration that the state is Jewish, not Israeli, as would be required under a normal application of the right to self-determination. This is not mere semantics, but a profound obstacle to the imposition of democratic rule, which, as noted, should be premised on the empowerment of a sovereign demos. The Israeli regime has no clearly identifiable demos, but rather a


38. See, for example, Kretzmer, The Legal Status of the Arabs in Israel (Boulder, Colo., 1990); Gavison, “Jewish and Democratic?”; and Kimmerling, “Religion, Nationalism, and Democracy in Israel.”


40. Except for several towns built for the (often coercive) concentration of Bedouins in the northern Galilee and southern Negev regions.

41. The state is routinely defined as “Jewish and democratic” by a series of Israeli laws, especially since 1992. But the tension and even contradiction between the two terms is never resolved by the legal specifics. Further, a 1985 basic law empowers the state to disqualify from state elections parties that oppose the status of Israel as the “state of the Jewish people” (Kretzmer, The Legal Status of the Arabs in Israel, p. 29).
complex and layered set of stratified group rights and capabilities. Its *ethnic* interpretation of the principle of self-determination now creates a distorted situation where many Jews around the world have two potential rights of self-determination (as citizens of their countries and as automatic Israeli citizens), while millions of Palestinians are denied even one such right.

Thus, strikingly, Jews who are citizens of other countries have more rights in Israel's land and settlement systems than the state's own Arab citizens. Arab rights under the Israeli regime (that is, the area where Israel exercises de facto sovereign control) are stratified legally and institutionally among Druze, Bedouin, Palestinian Arab citizens, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, and subjects of the Palestinian Authority. This is a vivid illustration of the workings of the ethnocratic regime, where at a fundamental level rights and resources are based on ethnicity and not on territorial citizenship, all geared to facilitate a demographic and spatial expansion of the dominant ethnos.

The ethnocratic nature of the regime is also conspicuous in the selective imposition of boundaries and borders. For example, the Green Line (Israel's pre-1967 border) functions as a barrier for the movement of Palestinian Arabs, but not for Jews, who can freely cross it and settle in the occupied territories. A striking illustration of this undemocratic practice is the overlooking of the Green Line during Israeli elections, which are described by nearly all commentators as free and democratic. Yet Jews residing in the occupied territories have determined the election of right-wing governments four times during the 1980s and 1990s, while the Palestinians, who were subjects of the Israeli regime, remained disenfranchised. In the 1996 elections, for example, Binyamin Netanyahu would have lost by over 5 percent if results were only counted within the Green Line. Yet he was elected prime minister, and most scholars continued to treat Israel Proper as democratic.

Within Israel Proper, for example, Arab citizens are prevented from purchasing land in about 80 percent of the country, through the imposition of institutional and municipal regulations in rural areas that do not apply to Jews. The boundaries imposed on the Mizrahim are less visible, expressed mainly by informal economic, cultural, and geographic barriers to their mobility within Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli society. These are intimately linked to the Judaization of Israel/Palestine, which delegi-

42. On the issue of borders, Israel's continuing (often indirect) sovereign control over the occupied territories and its active colonization of these territories sharply contradict its claim for democratic status.

43. This exclusion is mainly achieved by regulations that permit rural Jewish settlements to select their residents and by the active involvement in rural planning of Jewish organizations, such as the Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Agency, which have "compacts" with the Israeli government allowing them to act exclusively for the welfare of Jews within Israel.
timized Arab culture, politics, and capital. This was destructive for most Mizrahim, who at the time could be described as Arab Jews.44 But the comparison should be qualified: I am not claiming that the ethnocratic regime is formally undemocratic towards the Mizrahim, at least not in recent decades, but rather that the undemocratic structure of the Judaizing system vis-à-vis Palestinian Arabs has affected the Mizrahim adversely in a range of cultural, economic, and geographic matters.

The dominance of the Ashkenazim was furthered by equating the version of Jewish Hebrew culture they had constructed with Israel in toto, thereby demoting all other cultural forms. The founding Ashkenazim gained further status by representing "their" state as Western and modern, but at the same time as the bearer of moral projects such as the "ingathering of the exiles" (mizug galuyot) and the "melting pot" (kur hakhituch), both connoting a sense of equality between Jewish ethno-classes. This placed the Mizrahim in a position of weakness, as their only option for mobility was to enter the margins of Ashkenazi-qua-Israeli society, whose culture, rules, and practices were alien to their background and capabilities. It is striking that the Ashkenazim were a numerical minority in Israel by the early 1950s, but the working of the ethnocratic settling regime and the fusion of their identity with the general form of "Israeliness" enabled them to maintain long-term dominance.45

The processes described above, however, are not one-dimensional and must be weighed against countertrends, especially the growing assimilation of Mizrahi Jews into the Israeli middle classes in the country's main urban areas, the increasing universality in legal and social rights across groups in Israeli society, and greater cultural pluralism.46 Yet the parallel Judaization and ethnic stratification trends have been powerful and have come to mark Israel's social landscape.47 This has been translated into a broad ethno-class structure in which the dominant stratum is mainly occupied by Ashkenazim (34 percent), followed by an intermediate Mizrahi stratum (36 percent), and a marginalized Palestinian Arab minority (17 percent).48 The rest of the Israeli citizenry is made up mostly of Russian speakers, who have formed a discernible ethnic enclave that in the long term is likely to merge with the Ashkenazi group.

48. Within the entire Israeli control system (Israel/Palestine), Ashkenazim make up only 21 percent of the population.
8. Peripheral Minorities

Having established the parameters, I will now focus in more depth on the two minority communities that are the subject of this essay: the Palestinian Arab citizens and the Mizrahi in the development towns. Given their peripheral status and location, their non-Ashkenazi background, as well as their similar population size, and despite some important differences, it may be illuminating to compare and contrast their political mobilization vis-à-vis the state.

The Palestinian Arab minority numbered 950,000 in late 1998, constituting 17 percent of Israel’s population. This minority is made up of the fragments left after the 1947–49 expulsion and flight of some three quarters of the Palestinian Arab community, in what is known as the Nakbah (disaster). The Arabs, who reside in three main regions in the country’s north, center, and south, were placed under military rule between 1948 and 1966—a period that cemented their position as Israel’s lowest socioeconomic stratum. During the 1950s, as part of the pervasive Judaization strategy, the Arabs lost around 60 percent of their lands through widespread expropriations. But during the last two decades, levels of control over the Arabs have eased; their communities have undergone (partial) modernization; and their social, political, and economic capabilities have slightly improved, although they remain Israel’s most deprived ethno-class.

The second periphery, what are called, in an Orwellian usage, the development towns, includes the twenty-seven urban centers built or significantly expanded mainly during the 1950s for the housing of new Jewish immigrants as part of the official “population dispersal” strategy. In 1998 they housed a population of 1.01 million, or 18 percent of Israel’s population, of which about two-thirds were Mizrahi, and most of the rest Russian-speaking recent immigrants. During the 1950s and 1960s they evolved into a poor, isolated, and distressed sector of Israeli Jewish society. Over the years, the towns were subject to policies that enhanced their dependence on the central state apparatus, mainly expressed in the channelling of labor-intensive and economically insecure industries to the towns and the mass construction of cheap public housing. These created

49. There are of course other minorities shaped by the Israeli ethnocracy, notably, Haredi Jews and nonenfranchised Palestinians in the territories, and even Israeli and Palestinian women, in certain respects, but the analysis of their mobilization must await another occasion.

50. See Lustick, Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel’s Control of a National Minority (Austin, Tex., 1980); Smooha, Arabs and Jews in Israel: Change and Continuity in Mutual Intolerance, vol. 2 of Arabs and Jews in Israel (Boulder, Colo., 1992); and Zureik, The Palestinians in Israel.

51. See Gabriel Lipshitz, Are ha-pituah: basis hadash le tikhnun mediniyut (Development towns: toward new policy) (Jerusalem, 1990). See also Sachar, “Reshaping the Map of Israel.”

52. Mizrahi in the development towns are, of course, part of the larger Mizrahi community in Israel, although their different geography and organization make them a distinct subsector, a periphery of a peripheral community. See Swirski, Israel.
social stigmas and concentrations of social problems and crime, causing a process of “negative filtering” (the ongoing out-migration of upwardly mobile residents) and considerable population turnover.

The territorial Judaization policy is of particular relevance to the two peripheral groups, as the transfer of lands and relentless Jewish settlement activity created a layered ethnic geography. Arab geography has been severely contained by the state and remains virtually frozen. The increasing encirclement of Arab localities by Jewish settlements and the lack of residential alternatives have effectively caused the ghettoization of the Arabs. As for the Mizrahim, around half of them were settled (often coercively) in distressed development towns (often built on expropriated Palestinian land) and thus found themselves residing in segregated and stigmatized enclaves.53

Hundreds of kibbutzim and moshavim were also built in the same areas, most of which were populated by more powerful Ashkenazi groups.54 But the state allowed these localities to segregate themselves from both Mizrahim and Arabs in nearly all facets of daily life, thus creating an uneven, fractured regional geography.55 This layered geography of ethnic power shaped the daily existence among both Mizrahi and Arab groups from which the protest analyzed below emerged.

We can thus see how the central Zionist project of Judaizing the country has worked to both dispossess the Palestinian Arabs and also to segregate, weaken, and marginalize peripheral Mizrahim through the very same settlement process. The legal, institutional, and cultural mechanisms geared to segregate Jews from Arabs that were at the basis of Zionist settlement were also used—in a different, softer manner—to exclude Jewish elites from conational minorities. This was most conspicuous in the country’s rural areas, between kibbutzim and development towns, but was also evident in all of Israel’s urban areas.56 The two sectors have thus evolved into notable geographical and ethno-class peripheries.57

53. Ashkenazim were also housed in the development towns, but most found ways to emigrate to better locations. During the 1990s, with the large-scale immigration of Russians, some towns grew and developed considerably, although they remain the least developed Jewish sector.
54. During the 1950s the state also built hundreds of moshavim for Mizrahim, and these have become similar to the development towns in their socioeconomic development.
56. See Amiram Gonen, Between City and Suburb: Urban Residential Patterns and Processes in Israel (Aldershot, 1995).
57. Recent figures show persisting gaps. In 1998 mean income per capita among Arabs reached only 41 percent of the national mean; among peripheral Mizrahim the figure was 72 percent. Official unemployment in Arab localities and development towns was around twice the average among other Jewish localities, and in September 1999, of the twenty towns declared “unemployment hubs” by the Israeli government, eleven were Arab and nine were development towns (Israeli Bureau of Statistics news release, 1999).
9. Challenging Ethnocracy? Protest by the Peripheries

Based on conventional theories that link political mobilization to relative deprivation in a democratic regime, one may expect the two sectors to have developed into significant sites of resistance to the Israeli regime.58 Has this happened? Did a challenge emerge from the periphery? And, more specifically, are there any voices addressing the pitfalls of the Judaization project? To explore these questions, I briefly trace here the nature and fluctuation of political protest among Palestinian Arabs and peripheral Mizrahim.59 This is not an in-depth analysis, which I have carried out elsewhere, but rather a prism through which to illustrate the positions and capabilities of minorities within the ethnocratic system. Figure 1 traces the evolution of protest among both peripheries (fig. 1).60

Palestinian Arabs

The public voice of Palestinian Arabs in Israel only began to be heard in the mid 1970s. Prior to that, due to the military rule imposed over their localities, as well as to their poverty, isolation, fragmentation, and


59. I counted as protest all verbal, written, and active expressions of collective grievance staged in the public domain. I documented all reported events of public protest in or about the sectors studied here, tallying 726 incidents during the 1960–95 period. Data were collected from all events reported by any of four leading Israeli newspapers. Overall, of the 726 protest events documented, 381 were among the Arabs and 345 among the peripheral Mizrahim. Events are coded according to their intensity, using a composite index adapted from Gurr, *Minorities at Risk*, which measures the duration, size, and militancy of each event.

Fig. 1.—Protests in Israeli peripheries.
peripheral status, Arabs only rarely challenged the Israeli state and its policies. In the early years the activities of the national Al-Ard ("The Land") movement (which was subsequently declared illegal) and annual rallies staged by the communist party around May Day were the most notable occasions expressing antigovernment resistance.

Serious Arab protest erupted in 1976 as a head-on challenge to the Judaization project. The occasion was the first Land Day in 1976, which marked the point of entry of Arabs into Israeli public politics. A general strike and mass demonstrations against land expropriation in the Galilee took place, resulting in widespread clashes with the police and the killing of six Arab protesters. Since then Land Day has been commemorated as a major annual event. Despite the traumatic events of that day and the failure of the campaign to retrieve the land, the Arabs gained a presence in Israeli politics; they could no longer be ignored.

Following the first Land Day Arabs began to marshal popular antigovernment sentiments and gradually built a well-organized and sustained civil campaign around the leadership of voluntary bodies such as the National Committee of Arab Municipalities, the Following Committee, and recently the Islamic Movement. The civil campaign came into full force during the mid to late 1980s, combining past grievances with a future outlook, as exemplified by the following statement by the mayor of Dier Hanna, a medium-sized Arab town, during Land Day of 1983:

Israel has taken our land, surrounded us with Jewish settlements, and made us feel like strangers in our homeland. . . . The Jews do not realize, however, that we are here to stay, that we are here to struggle for our rights, and that we will not give up our identity as Palestinian Arabs and our rights as Israelis. . . . The more they take from us, the more we fight.61

The campaign progressed with dozens of preplanned events, a fairly coherent ideology of peace and equality, and militant rhetoric. In 1987 the National Committee even published a ten-point manifesto claiming to represent the goals of the entire Arab community, articulating a vision of Arab-Jewish relations moving towards equality and stability, as well as calling for greater Arab control over education, planning, and development issues. This vision expressed for the first time a coherent collective dissent by Israeli citizens to the tenets of the Jewish and Judaizing ethnocracy.

What did the Arabs protest against? My analysis reveals three dominant issues: land and spatial policies, socioeconomic conditions, and (Palestinian) national rights. The continuing prevalence of all three issues in almost equal intensity is quite striking. Despite yearly fluctuations, we

61. Spoken at a rally attended by the author, 1983.
consistently find concerns over land, nation, and resources dominating Palestinian Arab protest.62

But the Arab civil campaign began to wane and change during the 1990s. In every year except 1994 we see levels of protest and mobilization lower than the heyday of the late 1980s (although considerable protest activity continued). Arab protest has also changed its character: it is far more local, reactive, and sporadic, in contrast to the more programmatic and preplanned campaign of the 1980s. How can this decline and change be explained, especially in light of the persisting exclusion and deprivation of Arabs in Israel?

Some claim that a combination of a pervasive process of "Israelification," as well as improved government policies, especially during the years of the Yitzhak Rabin/Shimon Peres government (1992–96), made the difference.63 Others claim the opposite: Arab marginality within the Judaizing state has caused a prolonged crisis, distorted development, and a confused identity, all militating against the maintenance of an organized civil campaign.64 My position is that the Arabs have hit the impregnable wall of the Jewish "moral community," which is still preoccupied with its own victimizations and fears and thus able to ignore the undemocratic nature of Arab exclusion and the political ramifications of their visible and obvious deprivation.65

There is a prevailing feeling among Arabs that under its current political structure the Israeli state is able to continue to reject, deflect, or ignore Arab demands for equality.66 Hence, antistate protest may be losing its appeal, while other modes of operation gain favor, including the strategic use of the Arabs' growing electoral clout, or the channelling of Arab energies into a quiet construction of political, social, economic, and cultural enclaves within Israel.67

Most recently, the ongoing absence of Arab political gains generated demands for cultural and religious autonomy and to turn Israel into a "state of all its citizens." In the Israeli ethnocratic setting these basic—

62. According to our index of protest intensity, land and planning issues were the basis for 33 percent of Arab protest, socioeconomic grievances for 28 percent, and Palestinian national issues for 38 percent.
64. See Rouhana, Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State, and Ghanem, "State and Minority in Israel."
66. See Azmi Bishara, "Al she'elat hamni't Ha'afalastini beisyrael" (On the question of the Palestinian minority in Israel), Te'orya Uvikkoret (Theory and critique) 3 (1993): 7–20.
even banal—democratic demands harbor genuine dissent against a monocultural state that often privileges world Jewry over the state's Arab citizens. They have generally caused aggressive Jewish reaction, bordering on panic, illustrating the obvious gap between Israel's self-representation as a democracy and its ethnocentric reality. Mainstream Israeli Jewish discourse (of both right- and left-wing parties) has quickly painted the demands as radical and subversive. Take, for instance, the recent argument of Avraham Burg, a Labor MP considered to be a leftist and known for his propeace activities. In the following statement Burg marks the simple civic demands as dangerous and raises the shadows of anti-Semitic persecutions:

The demands to turn Israel into a state of all its citizens are symptomatic of the persistent desire by the Arabs, since 1948, to undermine the Zionist idea, which, we must remember, comes hard on the heels of generations of Jewish persecutions in the Diaspora. We are not a normal nation because the majority of Jews live outside their only state; we therefore cannot become a state of all its citizens, or risk losing the moral meaning of our state.

Against this prevailing attitude, the Arab collective entity has developed what can be conceptualized as a “region” in Israel. This is a political and spatial entity that lies between local and state levels and combines the various Arab localities into a statewide ethnic and political community. This region is formulated as a clear site of resistance to the order of things in Israel, but it is also a painful reminder of the Arabs' inability to integrate, significantly change, or secede from the state. It is gradually developing through a crisis-riddled process, during which the Palestinian Arabs in Israel are being shunned by both mainstream Israelis and Palestinians. The region resembles a “chain of beads,” based on the deep historical roots of Palestinian Arabs in their actual localities and their homeland, but also on the common memory of dispossession and deprivation suffered within the Israeli state, which amplifies the meaning of (the remaining) Arab places and localities. This mixture of steadfastness and militancy with cynicism, irony, and confusion, reflecting the nature of the new Arab spaces within Israel, is strongly in evidence in the lyrics to “Nazareth,” a poem written as the first part of a trilogy by a leading

69. The option of secession, or joining a future Palestinian state, has not even been aired or articulated seriously among the Arabs, who generally perceive it as unfeasible and undesirable. See Smooha, Arabs and Jews in Israel.
Palestinian Arab politician and poet, the late Tuwafik Ziyyad, who was mayor of the Galilee city of Nazareth at the time of writing (1989):

We guard the shades of our figs
We guard the trunks of our olives
We sew our hopes like the yeast of bread
With ice in our fingers
With red hell in our hearts . . .
If we are thirsty, we shall be quenched by the rocks
And if we are hungry, we shall be fed by the dust . . .
And we shall not move
Because here we have past, present
And future.

Development Towns

In comparison to the Palestinian Arab sector, the scene of public protest in Israel's development towns has been less volatile. 71 Most events have been local, although the Development Towns Forum—a statewide voluntary body of mayors—has also been active in coordinating and promoting many events and issues. 72 Levels of protest in the towns have been persistent, if not spectacular. It achieved notable presence in national politics and carved a permanent niche for peripheral Mizrahim in the policy-making scene. The protest fed on pervasive feelings of neglect and on a mixture of anger, resignation, and hope, illustrated well by the following account of one of the first residents of Ofakim, a southern development town:

We were loaded on trucks just outside the Haifa port. Went for hours and hours on stiff wooden truck benches, with many kids, women, and elderly people. Once we got to the town . . . we refused to get off . . . Then they sent us to “another place,” but the truck actually returned in a circle to the same site. . . . We agreed to get off . . . only because of the unbearable heat. . . . Since then we have been here. . . . But I am very proud, since someone had to settle these areas, someone had to show that this is a Jewish state, so we did, and with all the hardships, it was worth it. 73

This testimony exhibits the deep ambivalence of the peripheral Mizrahim, marginalized by the Judaization project, but identifying with it at

71. Public protest in the towns was generally organized by residents of North African origins, who form the majority of peripheral Mizrahim.
72. Leaders of protest, whether local or national, in the towns were almost always Mizrahi Jews. Despite the massive entry of Russian immigrants to the towns that began in the early 1990s, the leadership, up to this day, is mainly Mizrahi.
73. Interview by the author, 1998.
the same time. This ambivalence set the tone for their public protest over the years, which has been caught between the desire to belong and the urge to resist and complain. The first wave of Mizrahi protest outside the towns, known as the Wadi Salib riots, erupted in Haifa’s low-income neighborhoods in 1959 and was later followed by militant “bread and jobs” demonstrations in Beer-Sheva, Jerusalem, and Jaffa. But I found little evidence of similar events in the development towns. The isolation, poverty, and small size of the towns were probably responsible for this passivity. Small-scale antigovernment protest began in the towns a few years later, when Israel was hit by a deep recession. But, like the Arabs, residents of the towns fully entered the Israeli public domain only during the 1970s, when their collective voice was a major force behind the Likud’s ascension to power.

Protest in the development towns grew quite gradually and, apart from one exceptionally active year (1989), remained unmarked by the volatility and direct challenge to the regime that surfaced in the Arab periphery. This stands in contrast to far more intensive and often fluctuating levels of protest, not only among the Arabs, but also in nearly all other organized sectors of Israeli society. The relative detachment of the towns from the major political struggles of Israeli society was conspicuous in the early 1970s, when the Black Panthers movement mobilized many Mizrahim, especially in Jerusalem’s poor neighborhoods, but managed to rally only scant support in the towns.

But in the protest that did take place, what was the nature of the Mizrahi voice? What did peripheral Mizrahim mobilize against? Despite the large number of events in and about the towns, I discovered that the range of concerns has been quite narrow, revolving almost entirely around socioeconomic issues. The narrow focus of protest is especially conspicuous in comparison to other groups in Israeli society who have campaigned on a range of matters pertaining to the national agenda, including Israel’s relations with Germany, Arab-Israeli wars, the occupation and settlement of Palestinian territories, nature protection, religious-secular tensions, and Mizrahi-Ashkenazi and Arab-Jewish relations within Israel, as well as matters pertaining to resource distribution and service

75. See Hermann, “Do They Have a Chance?”; Lehman-Wilzig, Stiff-Necked People, Bottle-Necked System; and Yiftachel, “Israeli Society and Jewish-Palestinian Reconciliation.”
76. To give more detail, socioeconomic issues accounted for 62 percent of all events and political issues for 22 percent, while planning and housing matters formed the basis for only 11 percent of protests. The category “other,” which included nonmaterial religious, cultural, and social issues, only accounted for 5 percent. Further, of the three main issues, most demands focussed on resource allocation and financial matters.
provision.\textsuperscript{77} This relatively limited focus points to the way peripheral Mizrahim are trapped within the Israeli ethnocracy, with only very limited options with which to challenge their position, leading to the emergence of a fairly docile “ethno-class” identity, as I discuss below.\textsuperscript{78}

Returning to the Judaization project, it is particularly striking to note the virtual absence of public objection among peripheral Mizrahim to continuing Jewish settlement in Israel Proper or the occupied territories despite the fact that such settlement activity has clearly deprived their towns of material and human resources.\textsuperscript{79} Instead of objecting to ongoing settlement activity, the Development Towns Forum accepted towns from the occupied territories (Ariel, Ma’ale Adumim, and Katrizin) into its ranks, thereby indicating indirect support for the continuation of Jewish settlement.

Why do leaders of towns support further Jewish settlement activity? This, I suggest, reflects the dependent and insecure position of peripheral Mizrahim within the Israeli ethnocracy, which has cornered them into taking a territorial-nationalistic and prosettlement (that is, anti-Palestinian) position. This impedes their ability to voice opposition and to challenge policies that clearly affect them adversely.

What about the fluctuations in levels of protest? These, I found, were almost entirely influenced by two related factors: macroeconomic conditions and public policies. Waves of protest surface during every period of economic hardship and restructuring in Israel, which usually hits peripheral groups hardest. For instance, the mid 1960s, the late 1970s, the mid 1980s, the late 1980s, and the mid 1990s witnessed many demonstrations, rallies, and media activities in the towns that voiced objections, at times fierce, to the rises in unemployment, declines in services, and emigration from the towns. And conversely, during periods of government investment in the towns and growth in local employment, such as the early 1980s (with the so-called neighborhood renewal projects) and the early 1990s (with the massive building programs undertaken to deal with the influx of Russian immigrants) the towns remained relatively calm.\textsuperscript{80}

In overview, the nature of public protest staged by peripheral Mizrahim reflects a profound transformation in the conception of their iden-

\begin{footnotesize}
77. See Lehman-Wilzig, \textit{Stiff-Necked People, Bottle-Necked System}. I do not mean to imply, of course, that issues of resource distribution are inferior to other issues that can be seen as ideological; I hold the position that all public mobilization is driven by group interests.

78. This has changed somewhat during the 1990s with the ascendency of the Shas movement.

79. This deprivation is based, first, on the immense public resources invested in new settlements, in lieu of the towns. Second, the new settlements, which often occupy high-quality suburban localities, have attracted the new suburbanizing middle classes, thus depriving the towns of important human capital.

80. The arrival of Russian-speaking immigrants during the 1990s is a central topic in the development towns, although space limitations prevent me from discussing it here; see Yiftachel and Tzefadia, \textit{Policy and Identity in the Development Towns}.
\end{footnotesize}
tity: from peripheral ethnicity (or ethnicities) to a deprived ethno-class. This transformation has occurred under the force of the settling Jewish (de-Arabizing) ethnocracy, which has wiped out Mizrahi culture while settling them in frontier regions, thus spawning the emergence of a relatively uniform, marginalized, and mainly Mizrahi ethno-class in the towns. In other words, the identity of peripheral Mizrahim as reflected in their campaign is most identifiable in terms of their peripheral socioeconomic and geographical position, and not through a distinct cultural or ideological stand. This collective identity is marked by a strong desire to assimilate and integrate into the core Israeli culture, a pervasive feeling of deprivation vis-à-vis the national center, and a drive to improve the towns’ low socioeconomic position. The combination of economic deprivation and social alienation from the Israeli center has recently given rise to a range of political movements that promote local patriotism and especially Sephardi Jewishness. Most notable has been the successful ultraorthodox movement Shas, to which I shall return below.

The prevailing attitudes among peripheral Mizrahim show suspicion towards the surrounding Arab and Jewish Ashkenazi settlements. Their attitudes towards Arab-Jewish relations are particularly intransigent, while the protest they direct towards the general Jewish public addresses the potential guilt of Israeli elites towards frontier Mizrahi settlers. But it does not represent any profound challenge to the prevailing order of things.

This tendency is well articulated in “Ma’ale avak” (“Dust Heights”), a 1995 song by Kobbi Oz, lead singer of the rock band Teapacks, which hails from a southern development town. The song positions the Mizrahim as victims of the Judaization project and laments in ironic language the building and populating of the towns. But in a move typical of the voice emerging from peripheral Mizrahim, it ends not with confrontation or dissent, but rather a quiet wish to find a path into the Israeli center.

It’s not impressive, the government ministers thought
There are empty patches on the map
Down there a settlement is amiss
So the powers laid down the order
We’ll build a town, and bring some people
So they fill with their lives all the new houses
It’s good, plenty of dots [settlements] on the maps
And the newspapers promised exposure
So the ministers ordered in a sleepy voice

82. Shas is the Hebrew acronym for the six sacred books of the Mishnah and also stands for “Sephardi Tora Observers.”
83. See Yiftachel and Tzefadia, Policy and Identity in the Development Towns.
And went to treat other “emergencies”  
A junior clerk covered the distance  
To announce the opening of the new town called  
Dust Heights . . . dust . . . dust . . . dust . . .

In Dust Heights at dusk  
People along the central path  
To remember dreams of the forgotten  
Solidarity of the forsaken

They paved a road, black and narrow  
Cutting deep into the desert  
At the edge, they built some homes  
As if they scattered matchboxes

Coffee shops with drunken men  
And others are locked inside their homes  
And each and every one just dreams  
About the day they will cross the road to/from nowhere

12. Beyond Entrapment?

As we have seen, both Palestinian Arabs and peripheral Mizrahim have raised clear voices of protest in the Israeli public realm but have not been able to either change their predicament or destabilize the system. I explained this by describing these communities as trapped at the margins of an ethnocratic political system, thus having few realistic options for effective mobilization. Peripheral Mizrahim have been trapped within, and Palestinian Arabs have been trapped outside the Zionist project. Expansionist Jewish nation-building in a contested territory was constructed as a highly moral project, inseparable from its problematic Judaizing and de-Arabizing colonial dynamics. This enabled the (mainly Ashkenazi) Israeli elites to blunt, deflect, belittle, or delegitimize the protest staged by non-Ashkenazi groups. Notably, the legitimacy of the Israeli Jewish ethnocracy is so powerful that most Israeli Jews, including most scholars, have been blind to its undemocratic aspects and to the direct linkages between the exclusion of the Arabs and the marginalization of the Mizrahim.

Yet social settings may be malleable, and marginalizations can generate new collective consciousness and alternative agendas. The various responses to the situation of entrapment are worthy of their own in-depth analysis. Let me just mention briefly two noteworthy recent responses. The first, and perhaps the most effective, has been the establishment of

84. Teapacks, “Ma’ale avak,” Hakhayim shelcha balafa (Your life in an Iraqi bread).
85. Elsewhere I likened this situation to the kind of visual perception one would have inside a tilted structure, like the Tower of Pisa. See Yiftachel, “‘Ethnocracy.’”
religious alternatives. Religious organizations have rapidly risen to prominence, both among Palestinian Arabs, where the Islamic Movement has become a major force, and in the development towns, where the Mizrahi-Sephardi religious movement Shas has risen to a status of an influential local and national actor. In the last elections, for the first time, parties associated with these movements received the highest numbers of votes among both Arabs and Mizrahi.

The agendas of minority religious movements combine the provision of social services with the construction of new/old identities that partially bypass and transcend the state and its grids of power and signification. As such they offer a renewed discourse of belonging accessible to all believers. Their popularity is thus related to their potential to offer a supposed liberation from the stigmatized entrapment of the current cultural and ethno-class system.

The second, less conspicuous, response to being trapped at the margins of the state, especially among intellectuals from minority communities, has been a search for secular and decentralized political futures. Among the Arabs, this spawned the revival of the binational idea for the entire Israel/Palestine territory. This idea has a rich history, but it is now raised seriously for the first time by intellectuals and leaders among Palestinian Arabs in Israel. Among the Mizrahi, the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow, with which I opened this essay, is articulating a vision of a multicultural Israel, where the Mizrahi and other cultural groups would be able to construct their own version of a “good community.” The gradually growing attraction of these ideas rests on their moral appeal, but also on the liberating path they offer minorities from the oppressive logic of the present ethnocratic system.

What are the theoretical insights offered by our analysis? Can it illuminate events beyond Israel/Palestine? First, it underscores the considerable power of nationalism, as expressed by the ethnocratic regime, to maintain the position of elites and dominant ethno-classes. Theories of nationalism have usually ignored the mechanisms of internal stratification linked to the process of nation-building, which are all too obvious in ethnocratic regimes. In Israel the parallel discourses of “national belonging” and the “need to Judaize the country” (affecting the Mizrahim in particular) and the contradictory mixture of the notions of Israeli democracy and simultaneously Jewish state (with particular consequences for Arabs) managed to conceal—but at the same time enable—the preservation of Ashkenazi-Mizrahi-Arab stratification and the silencing of grievances raised by the periphery.

A further lesson often neglected by theories of nationalism is the dif-

87. See Yonah, “Fifty Years Later.”
difficulty of constructing meaningful citizenship within segregationist ethnocratic regimes. Because genuine membership in such regimes is first and foremost based on ethnicity, state citizenship does not develop into a powerful platform for mobilizing political demands, nor can it form a significant foundation for interethnic social solidarity. In Israel, this is exemplified by the totally separate campaigns conducted by Arabs and peripheral Mizrahim, despite the fact that both sectors have similar geography, grievances, and cultural backgrounds.

Finally, our analysis provides a thorough critique of ethnocratic regimes in Israel/Palestine and elsewhere. The capacity of a regime to receive legitimacy by boasting of a democratic government while at the same time ethnicizing the state at the expense of minorities should be scrutinized and theorized further. The inability of the two large peripheral groups studied here, which constitute around a third of Israel's population, to mount a serious challenge to the discriminatory logic of the Israeli ethnocracy is testimony to the darker sides of this regime, rendering its thin democratic facade an illusion. Genuine democratization depends, inter alia, on the cessation of the Judaization project, the demarcation of permanent boundaries, and the more equal and fair redivision of land and settlement resources, as the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow and the owners of the land at Rukha with whom I opened this essay have demanded. Democratization is necessary if Israel is to move towards stability and legitimacy and avoid the open conflict typical of ethnocratic regimes. At the edge of the millennium, both options remain within the realm of possibility.