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Between urban and national: Political mobilization among Mizrahim in Israel's 'development towns'

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In the face of persisting deprivation, marginalized ethno-classes generally mobilize against their governments and/or against rival groups. Two key arenas of such mobilization are extra-parliamentary protest and local electoral campaigning. The paper examines these arenas in Israel's peripheral 'development towns', established during the 1950s, and populated primarily by "Mizrahim"—Jews who migrated to Israel from the Muslim world. The public protest by Mizrahim in the towns has been consistent, though not intense. Generally, it voiced 'external' demand to the state for a fairer share of public resources, falling within the 'legitimate' boundaries of Zionist political discourse. In local elections, however, the Mizrahim raised a more militant political voice, focusing mainly on their competition against the large number of 'Russians' immigrants who arrived during the 1990s. Local election campaigns often transgressed the acceptable boundaries of Zionist discourse, by questioning the core values of immigrant absorption and Jewish unity. In explaining the different agendas and discourses, we argue that the answer is rooted in two related phenomena. First, on a national level, Mizrahi identity at the Israeli periphery has been 'trapped' by the settlement agendas of the Zionist project. The local election discourse, however, demonstrates the centrality of place for the Mizrahim in both their communal identity and political power. While the towns were created as peripheral and impoverished places in the attempt to Judaize the land, they have now become a significant, and threatened, ethnic and political resource. The external and internal discourses therefore combine as two key 'layers' in the making of the peripheral Mizrahi ethno-class.

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Introduction

A large number of the Mizrahi Jews, who arrived in Israel from the Muslim world, mainly during the 1950s, were settled in peripheral 'development towns'. Their political mobilization has emerged against a background of geographic marginality, persisting deprivation and demographic instability. A recent period of mass immigration from the former

Soviet Union, coupled with repeated economic crises associated with Israel's globalizing, neo-liberal, economic policies, has further destabilized the towns. Given their current population, which exceeds 800,000, and the recent influx of immigrants, these immigrant towns have become a significant component of Israeli politics and identity formation.

Our paper aims to study political mobilization of Mizrahim in the towns, and focuses on two central arenas: extra-parliamentary protest and local election campaigns. These provide useful vantage points from

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which to examine the changing patterns of mobilization and identity. Notably, different 'voices' are raised in the two arenas: public protest is aimed 'outside' at the national state and other loci of power, while local election campaigns are aimed 'inside', at the local voter. The difference between these 'voices' will link our paper to the question of geographic scale and its socio-political significance.

Our research indicates that the public protest by Mizrahim in the towns has voiced demands for a fairer share of Israel's public resources, falling within the 'legitimate' boundaries of Zionist political discourse. In local election campaigns, however, the Mizrahim raised a more intense political voice, focusing on competition against the large number of 'Russians' immigrants who arrived during the 1990s. Local election campaigns often transgressed the boundaries of accepted Zionist discourse, by questioning the core value of immigrant absorption. What explains the different agendas and discourses? We argue that the nature of political mobilization is rooted in the intertwined influences of place (and hence, scale), identity and class. The dynamic role of place is a central point in our analysis. It emerges as a major source of communal identity and political power, constantly reshaped through social processes (See; Agnew, 1987; Massey, 1994; Paasi, 1999). And further, place and identity are composed of several 'layers', most notably corresponding to 'national' and 'local' scales. The former pertains to the formation of the Israeli-Zionist nation, and the critical role of the development towns in the making of Israeli-Jewish space, while the latter focuses more on the actual town, and may be indifferent to national imperatives.

While the towns were created as peripheral and impoverished places in the attempt to Judaize the land, they have now become a significant—and threatened—ethnic and political resource. The Mizrahi voice is thus pitched differently in the two arenas: it demands resources from the state and economic forces, while attempting to maintain control over the local 'turf'. Hence, our examination also reveals some 'cracks' in the Zionist nation-building project: Mizrahi Jews in the periphery are developing alternative outlooks and voices (especially, but not only, ultra-orthodox Sephardic identity), which aims to transform the nature of Zionism from within, while using the development towns as a major source of power. This has yet to present an open challenge to the Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli state, but the level of consent awarded to state dictates is gradually declining.¹

Our basic assumption holds that ethnic goals and identities are constantly reshaped by material and

political circumstances. At each time/space configuration, an ethnic group will make use of what it considers to be the "correct" identity to advance its interests through public mobilization. This is particularly salient when an immigrant group resides in a community whose ethnicity is regarded as having a low social status, and especially a group whose identity, we contend, is 'trapped' at the margins of a settler society. The connection between patterns of mobilization for protest in development towns and the 'entrapment' of their Mizrahim is central to the claims of this paper. A 'trapped' identity emerges in the gray area, between the centers of authority and wealth and the excluded margins. Trapped communities have few alternative paths for identity development or political mobilization, except the oppressive structure established by the state. The main open option is inclusion at the national center, but this comes at a heavy price of structural inferiority (see Swirski, 1989; Shohat, 2001).² However, no group would accept a 'trapped' position as final, and searches for ways to undermine the oppressive setting. Such an attempt is likely to first emerge on a local scale, where interests are immediate and concrete. It is on the local scale that the group may begin to exploit small 'cracks' in the national hegemony. The suggestive connection we are making between issues of mobilization, identity and geographic scale, is one of the intended contributions of this paper.

To substantiate these claims, the paper reports on two research projects. The first focused on acts of public protest in the towns, while the second studied local election campaigns. The first analysis explores the position of peripheral Mizrahim in the national place, identity and politics, while the latter examines their mobilization in the local urban turf, and particularly vis-à-vis the large influx of Russian-speaking immigrants in recent years. Prior to the detailed account of development town mobilization, let us outline some of our theoretical approaches.

Theoretical aspects

Ethnic mobilization and protest: Motivations and goals

A substantive literature exists on ethnic mobilization and protest (for reviews, see Bulmer and Solomon, 2001; Gurr, 1993). In this paper, we draw on three major approaches³ most appropriate to the study of peripheral Mizrahim: (a) relative deprivation, (b)

²Another option is to by-pass the existing political system, as attempted in Israel by ultra-orthodox groups such as Jewish-Mizrahi Shas and the Islamic movements (see: Peled, 1998). This will be discussed later in the paper.

³In this paper we do not discuss Tilly's theory of resource mobilization (Tilly, 1978), which assumes that activists in this form of organizing are not marginalized socially or politically, nor subject to social-economic-political discrimination, since this does not, in our opinion, reflect the situation of Mizrahi residents of development towns in Israel.

¹Ashkenazi Jews (Ashkenazim in plural) comprise the dominant or 'core' Jewish collective in Israel. Most Ashkenazim immigrated to Israel from Europe and America during the pre-state period or immediately after 1948, founding and constituting Jewish culture and nationalism in Israel.

resource competition, and (c) the politics of identity, and relate them to the scale question.

Relative deprivation is defined by Gurr (1970) as a gap between value expectations and value capabilities. Value expectations are the conditions and goods to which ethnic groups believe they are entitled, while value capabilities are the conditions and goods that groups acquire. Changes in the social, political, or demographic structure can widen the gap between expectations and capabilities, leading to dissatisfaction, a sense of relative deprivation, competition for resources, and political mobilization. A sense of deprivation based on disparities and discriminatory policies, accompanied by structural transformation processes, often fosters tensions between the group and state authorities. This plays itself out as a *competition over economic, cultural, spatial, and political resources* (Esses et al., 2001). Economically, this creates competition for housing (Barkan, 1986; Johnston, 1982; Knox, 1982) and jobs (Olzak, 1992; Bonacich, 1972). Competition for spatial, cultural, and political resources includes control over territory, relation to place, and the right to cultural expression. Beyond these, the conflict over political resources is associated with an ability to organize both within the system, typically through voting, and outside it, in mobilizing extra-parliamentary protest (Nagel, 1986; Taylor, 1993).

Protest by deprived minorities can range from words to violence. The groups adopting a strategy of militant or violent protest are usually 'homeland' ethnic minorities or indigenous peoples. In contrast, 'immigrant' groups usually adopt less militant strategies, their identity is more malleable, and hence the threat they pose to the established order is less acute (see: Yiftachel, 2001).⁴ Gurr and Harff (1994) note that immigrant mobilization often emanates from an 'ethno-class' identity, highlighting the link between ethnic origins, current material conditions and political mobilization (Gurr and Harff, 1994). Yet, the definition of immigrant and homeland identities is never clear-cut. Over time, immigrant groups develop 'homeland sentiments' for the place in which they settle. This becomes apparent when the integration of the immigrants in the new society or their dominance over 'their' localities is threatened. In such cases, 'veteran' immigrants might implement a strategy of violent protest vis-a-vis the sources of threat. Adopting the competition model of ethnic collective action (Olzak and Shanahan, 1996), Bergesen and Herman (1998) argue that the 1992 Los Angeles riots represented a defensive reaction to recent Latino and Asian penetration into African-American neighborhoods. Hence, most of the casualties in these riots were Latino and Asian immigrants (Sanchez, 1997).

⁴The distinction between 'immigrant' and 'homeland' groups is sharpened for analytical purposes; needless to say, this distinction is often blurred in 'real life', and is itself constructed through a multitude of political mobilizations.

Studies of violent protest in American cities during the 20th century shows that an influx of immigrants places additional pressure on veteran immigrant communities, and contributes significantly to the intensity of ethnic unrest (Olzak and Shanahan, 1996). As we shall see below, the observation that minority groups tend to adopt violent protest against the influx of new immigrants will not be supported in the Israeli case. However, even in the Israeli case, it is evident that the presence of more than one ethnic group in a contestable locality usually encourages ethnic mobilization and the sharpening of conflicting identities.

The politics of identity extends the theory of deprivation and competition to mobilization aimed at non-material gains. The politics of identity, above all, seeks to achieve recognition (Taylor, 1995). This refers not only to accepting one's own identity, but also to having others acknowledge the collective as different (Fincher and Jacobs, 1998). At the same time, the politics of identity seek to gain power on the basis of collective identity. This transforms collective identities into a resource for organizing and mobilizing political support, particularly in cases of collective deprivation (Herzog, 1995). The politics of identity intensifies at times of structural change, such as the entry of a substantial group with a different ethnicity, culture, language, or occupation. The multiplicity of identities in one location fosters the politics of identity, as groups and individuals become aware of the mobilizing potential of ethnic difference (Fincher and Jacobs, 1998; Jackson and Penrose, 1993). To enhance its power, each community mobilizes its members through the construction of difference, as a convenient platform for reinforcing ethnic and racial solidarity. This does not take place in isolation, but by groups in constant relation (often contestation) with other groups and interests (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Wilmsen, 1996).

The politics of identity is also based on a sense of belonging to a place, since beyond the ethnic culture this is the resource most available to those organizing ethnic protest. During this process, local identities are created or renewed, reflected in phrases like "my neighborhood", "my community", "my city", "my school", or "my milieu". These identities attach themselves to the familiar and the spatial, in opposition to processes of globalization, which symbolize uncertainty and fragmentation (Castells, 1997).

Ethnic political mobilization can also be achieved via institutionalized mechanisms, like political parties or other social movements. In fragmented party systems, ethnicity and place are major bases for rallying political support. This is especially true when the ethnic candidate, or party, promises benefits to group members via jobs in the public sector or an "open door" to public officials. Accordingly, the "group homogeneity voting model" assumes that voters who belong to certain ethnic groups tend to vote for a party or candidate of the same ethnicity, especially if that group is relatively small and distinct from the rest of

the population spatially, culturally, and socially. The more an ethnic group maintains its distinct identity and religious or cultural institutions, the more likely its members will vote the same way. On the other hand, if and when an ethnic group become assimilated into the general community, it is less likely to exhibit uniform voting patterns, even when ethnicity remains a 'symbolic' general basis for group identity and mobilization (Landa *et al.*, 1995).

Yet, these three major approaches remain unsatisfactory when examined at different geographic scales. Their explanatory power was implied earlier in relation to militant protest of immigrant groups. The relative deprivation approach contends that immigrants usually exercise less militant strategies, contrary to the resource competition approach, which seeks to explain riots in multi-ethnic cities. However, we contend that there is no substantial contradiction between these approaches, once we enter the factor of geographic scale within which ethnic protest takes place, as a potential explanation of the intensity of mobilization.

Geographic scale

Scale refers to the hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size, such as urban, regional, national and global (Delaney and Leitner, 1997). It does not, however, suggest that one scale is fixed and separated from other scales. Scales should be viewed as related to networks of interaction (Cox, 1998), or as Agnew (1997) suggests, be defined as "the focal setting at which spatial boundaries are defined for a specific social claim" (Agnew, 1997, p.100). This links the geographic scale to political projects often conceptualized as the 'politics of scale'. The politics of scale involves relations between space, power and ideology, in which a particular scale is advanced as a social organizer and capital regulator, vis-a-vis other scales (a relevant example of the 1990s is the de-privileging process of national regulation and the shifting of regulatory power to local and global scales; Brenner, 2000).

Yet, the question of how social claims, often expressed by ethnic mobilization and protest from 'below', intersect with the politics of scale has hardly been studied by geographers. In order to examine this question, in the context of immigrant-settler towns, we suggest an additional component to the nexus between scale and social claim: *identity*. Therefore, similar to Staeheli's (1999) scholarly endeavor to integrate the scale question with citizenship, we suggest here that the dynamics of spatial scale and identity offers fruitful paths for geographic and urban research. If, indeed, geographic scale is a platform and container of social activity, we propose that every scale is also a platform of a certain 'layer' of identity, and each layer is constructed through certain forms of mobilization. In this paper we plan to focus on two such scales: national and local. In other words, we seek to integrate the politics of identity with the con-

cept of scale in order to understand better the nature of relative deprivation, resource competition and collective mobilization among urban immigrant groups. But before we address these issues empirically, let us turn to a brief presentation of Israel's political-historical settings.

Settler society and the making of ethno-classes

Israel's development towns are key components in the making of a Jewish settler society in Israel/Palestine, and this geographic-historical setting is central to the understanding of the Mizrahim as a marginalized ethno-class. Settler societies have generally been established by Europeans, who settled other continents and dominated indigenous peoples by seizing and ethnicizing space, economy and politics (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995). In order to advance the project of nation- and state-building, the new settling regime had to 'import' immigrants who entered society at a status lower than the dominant group—the 'founders'—but higher than the indigenous 'natives'. To advance the project of territorial ethnicization, the immigrants usually serve three main functions: cheap labor to replace native groups; settlement on the 'frontier' (periphery); and control over the natives and their land (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995). These dynamics generally result in the maintenance of hegemony held by the dominant European group (usually identified with 'the state'), by distancing the immigrants from the centers of capital and political power (McGarry, 1998). Meanwhile, the immigrants are contributing to the important national project of settlement, which provides them with a sense of belonging and certain material gains from the settling state. Culturally and politically, however, they are marginalized, while the natives find themselves entirely excluded (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995).

The ambiguity of immigrant marginalization and inclusion transforms them into an ethno-class (or a cluster of ethno-classes), situated between the 'founders' and the 'indigenous'. In due course, other immigrant groups join the project, and create new axes of ethno-class tensions and struggles. Through this spatial-economic process, the immigrant becomes 'trapped', as it were, between the founding group and the excluded 'natives'. Their identity thus develops at several simultaneous 'layers'⁵—a quest for full integration with the 'founders' at the national arena, alongside an emphasis on 'difference' at a local level. Let us turn now to the case itself.

Mobilization in the development towns

The creation of a Mizrahi ethno-class

Following Israel's independence in 1948, a great many Jewish immigrants from a range of cultures

⁵See: Yuval-Davis, 2000.

began to arrive in the country. The large numbers and cultural diversity forced policymakers to adopt a policy of ‘rapid and optimal absorption’ (Eisenstadt, 1969). This policy sought to implement the concepts of “Judaization-dispersal” and “ingathering of the exiles”. The policy of dispersing the Jewish population throughout the country—a key principle underlying the ethnicization of space—was operationalized in a national program known as the “Sharon Plan” (Sharon, 1951). This important policy document was named after Aryeh Sharon,⁶ head of the Planning Authority in the Prime Minister’s Office in 1948–1952. Sharon sought to provide an urban plan for the state of Israel, in anticipation of a population of 2.5 million (Kark, 1995). This plan created a pyramid with five primary types of settlement in a hierarchical relationship. One major category missing from the urban landscape prior to the founding of Israel was Jewish middle-sized towns and urban centers having a population of 6000–60,000 (Sharon, 1951; Troen, 1994). These communities came to be called “development towns”.

The development towns became the main tool for implementing the policy of (Jewish) population dispersal and creating a Jewish majority in the Galilee and Negev. Between 1948 and 1963, 27 development towns were established as medium-sized peripheral urban centers, in realization of the concept of dispersal (See: Fig. 1). Most were far removed from Israeli

urban centers. The towns were populated through the provision of public housing to (mainly Mizrahi) homeless and dependent immigrants who had little other residential choices (Yiftachel and Tzfadia, 1999; Lewin-Epstein *et al.*, 1997). Most of the few Ashkenazim sent to the towns found their way to the center of the country, leaving the Mizrahim behind in the development towns.

Thus, paradoxically, the concept of ‘population dispersal’ undermined the concept of the ingathering of the exiles, since the segregated development towns were virtually entirely populated by Mizrahi immigrants. Over the years, these immigrants were subject not only to social, political, and cultural marginalization, but were also at an acute economic disadvantage (Etkin, 2002). The economic profile of all the towns relied on heavy and traditional industries, cheap labor, and constant job instability (Razin, 1996; Gradus and Einy, 1984; Gradus and Krakover, 1977). The existence of towns distinctively inferior from mainstream Israeli society and commonly patronizing behavior toward the Mizrahim, spawned widespread sentiments of alienation and social marginality (Shohat, 2001).

The conspicuous gap between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim generated various scholarly accounts. One perspective, drawn from neo-Marxist thought, views the settlement of Mizrahim in development towns as a pool of cheap labor for the rapidly growing Israeli economy (Shafir and Peled, 1998; Bernstein and Swirski, 1982). A complementary analysis regards the establishment of development towns as a means used by the dominant Ashkenazi group to advance the territorial goals of Zionist nationalism. In other words, by transforming the Mizrahim into a settlement force, the territorial interests of the dominant group were served, creating a Jewish majority in previously Arab regions. During the process, these regions were also transformed from glorified frontiers to stigmatized peripheries (Hasson, 1998). At the same time, the distancing of Mizrahim from the economic and political centers enabled the dominant Ashkenazi group to maintain its dominance over Mizrahim and Palestinians (Swirski, 1989).

This account links the development towns to the settler society model. The dominant (‘founders’) group is composed primarily of Ashkenazim who settled in the territory prior to the founding of the state, and the middle-class Mizrahi immigrants who mobilized upwards; the native group is Palestinian-Arab; and the immigrant group is composed primarily of Mizrahim who arrived from the Muslim world and more recently from the ex-Soviet Union. A related approach defines Israel as a “settling ethnocracy”, in which a European ethnic group controls the state apparatus (in the name of ‘the nation’), unevenly incorporating later immigrants through various nation-building projects. The ‘founders’ reinforce their dominance through their control of the state’s evolving geography, economy and politics. Rights

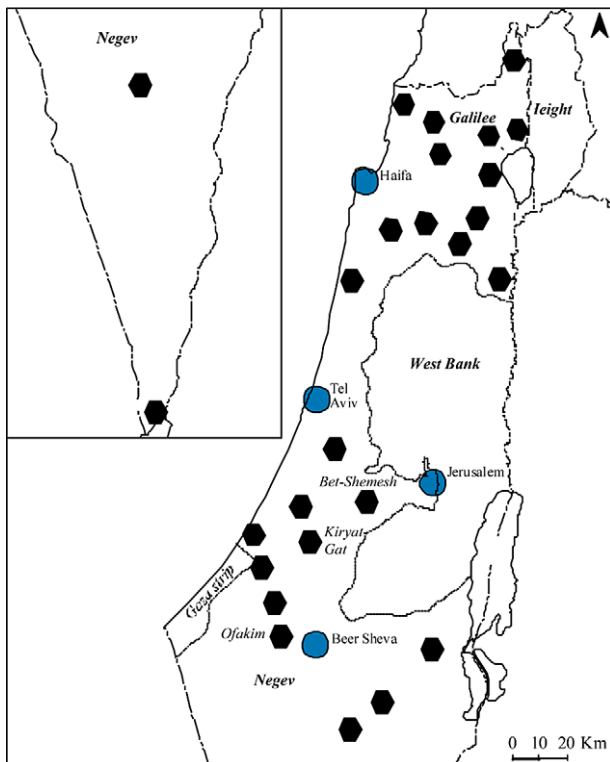


Figure 1 Development Towns in Israel, 1948–1963.

⁶No relation to Israel’s current Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

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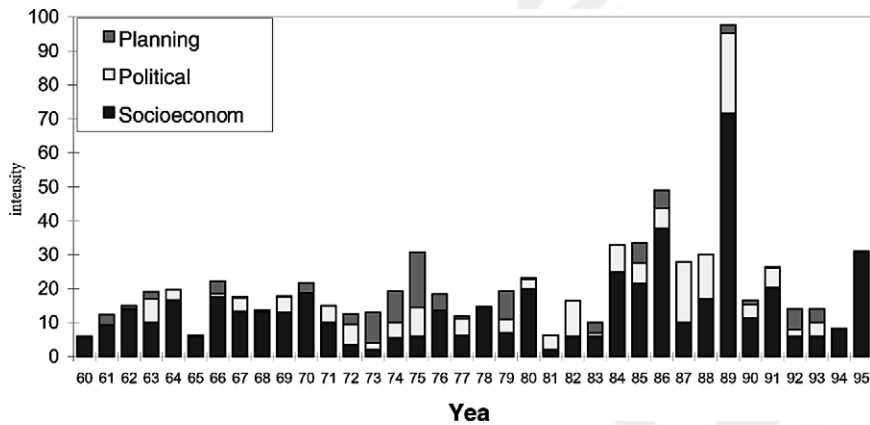


Figure 2 Protest intensity of the Mizrahi Ethno-class in Development Towns, 1960–1995.

and capabilities are determined mainly according to ethnic affiliation (Yiftachel and Kedar, 2000). How does this affect the patterns of protest of Mizrahim from development towns?

Protest of the Mizrahi ethno-class in development towns

Our analysis of public protest includes all events expressing dissatisfaction in the public sphere, especially against the state. Data were collected for the years 1960–1998 from the reports of two national newspapers (*Ha'aretz* and *Ma'ariv*) and two local papers (*Kol HaTzafon* and *Sheva*). Data about each act of protest were translated into a numerical index based on the number of participants, duration and intensity.⁷ Due to limitation of space, the presentation of results will be quite brief. In the period under discussion, 345 acts of protest took place in development towns (see Fig. 2). Public protest in the towns has been relatively persistent and consistent, if not intense, apart from one exceptionally active year (1989); it has remained without the volatility that would constitute a direct challenge to the settler ethnocratic regime. This stands in contrast to far more intensive and often fluctuating levels of protest in nearly all other organized sectors of Israeli society, notably the Arab citizens and Jewish settlers (Herman, 1996; Lehman-Wilzig, 1990). 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.⁸

What about the fluctuations in protest? These, we

found, were almost entirely influenced by two related factors: macro-economic conditions and public policies. We can note waves of protest surfacing during every period of economic hardship and restructuring in Israel, which usually hits peripheral groups hardest. This occurred during the mid-1960s, the late 1970s, the mid-1980s, the late 1980s, and the mid-1990s, when many demonstrations, rallies and media activities in the towns objected, at times fiercely, to the rise in unemployment, the decline in services and the emigration from the towns during these periods. And conversely, during periods of government investment in the towns, and growth in local employment, such as the early 1980s (when a 'neighborhood renewal' project was established in development towns), or the early 1990s (the massive building for 'Russian' immigrants) the towns remained relatively calm.

What did peripheral Mizrahim mobilize against? Despite the large number of events in and about the towns, we discovered, as noted, that the range of issues has been quite narrow. The findings show that protest in development towns focused primarily on economic themes, especially employment and wages: 62% of the acts of protest dealt with economic issues, 22% with political issues, 11% with planning issues, and 5% fell into the "other" category. 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, Mizrahi-Ashkenazi and Arab-Jewish relations within Israel, as well as matters pertaining to resource distribution and service provision (Lehman-Wilzig, 1990). This relatively limited focus and the consistent shunning of topics considered 'ideological', illustrates the 'entrapment' of peripheral Mizrahim within the Israeli settling ethnocracy. This setting silenced their voice on issues at the basis of the oppressive system, and gave them only limited options with which to challenge their marginal pos-

⁷For details about quantifying the protest actions, see Gurr, 1993; Lehman-Wilzig, 1990.

⁸The Black Panthers was a group of young Mizrahim who mobilized popular protest against the Israeli elites during the early 1970s. The protest emerged from Jerusalem's poor neighborhoods, and spread to other parts of Israel (Bernstein, 1984).

591 ition, leading to the emergence of a fairly docile
592 'ethno-class' identity.

593 It is particularly striking to note the virtual absence
594 of public objection among peripheral Mizrahim
595 against continuing Jewish settlement in the occupied
596 territories (Golan Heights, West Bank and Gaza). This
597 has clearly deprived the towns of material and human
598 resources. Instead of objecting to on-going settlement
599 activity, the Development Towns Forum (an umbrella
600 forum of mayors often voicing the towns' collective
601 concerns) accepted towns from the occupied terri-
602 tories (Ariel, Ma'ale Adumim and Katzrin) into its
603 ranks, thereby indicating indirect support of the con-
604 tinuation of Jewish settlement. Why do leaders of
605 towns support further Jewish settlement activity?
606 This, we suggest, reflects the dependent and insecure
607 position of peripheral Mizrahim within the Israeli
608 ethnocracy, 'cornering' them to take a territorial-
609 nationalistic and a pro-settlement (i.e. anti-
610 Palestinian) position. This impedes their ability to
611 voice opposition to and challenge policies that clearly
612 affect them adversely.

613 This collective identity is marked by a strong desire
614 to assimilate and integrate into the 'core Israeli cul-
615 ture', a pervasive feeling of deprivation vis-a-vis the
616 national center, and a drive for improving the towns'
617 low socioeconomic position. The combination of
618 economic deprivation and social alienation from the
619 Israeli center has recently given rise to a range of
620 political movements, which promote local patriotism,
621 and especially Mizrahi Jewishness (Ben-Ari and Bilu,
622 1987). Most notable has been the successful ultra-
623 orthodox movement of Shas.

624 Returning to the topics of protest, why did
625 Mizrahim in the towns avoid raising ideological and
626 controversial issues? Moreover, why did no signifi-
627 cant political opposition emerge from the deprived
628 towns? We point to Mizrahi 'entrapment' within Jew-
629 ish settler society as the key explanation. The Jewish
630 settling ethnocracy institutionalized the superiority of
631 the Ashkenazim in most spheres of society, creating
632 a dependency of the Mizrahi ethno-class on the Ash-
633 kenazi center. Thus, we should view the issues of
634 public protest not through the narrow lens of protest
635 and its motivations, but within the broader context of
636 a society that is fractured and stratified in both class
637 and ethnic terms. This society was built by a power-
638 ful, Zionist-Ashkenazi hegemony, which has worked
639 to overlap Zionism, "Israeliness" and Ashkenazi
640 identity. This power structure undermined every
641 attempt to challenge its legitimacy and left no alterna-
642 tive other than protest against the discrimination and
643 deprivation in the distribution of material resources.
644 In overview, the nature of public protest reflects a
645 profound transformation of identity on a national-state
646 level: from peripheral ethnicity(ies) to a deprived
647 ethno-class. This transformation has occurred under
648 the force of the settling Jewish (de-Arabizing) ethno-
649 cracy, which has wiped out the Mizrahim's culture
650 while settling them in frontier regions, thus spawning

651 the emergence of a relatively uniform, marginalized
652 (and mainly Mizrahi) 'ethno-class' in the towns and
653 across the state. In other words, the identity of periph-
654 eral Mizrahim, as reflected in their protest activities, is
655 most identifiable in terms of their national peripheral
656 socio-economic and geographic position, and not
657 through a distinct cultural or ideological stand. This,
658 as we shall see, changes in the local arena, where we
659 focus on local electioneering. Here the new immi-
660 grants from the former Soviet Union ("the Russians")
661 provide a major focus.

662 '*Russians*' in the development towns: Background

663 Some 911,000 immigrants from the former Soviet
664 Union ('Russians') arrived in Israel from late 1989
665 until the end of 2001 (Ministry of Immigrant Absorp-
666 tion, 2002). Like most previous waves of immigrants,
667 the majority of Russians did not arrive in Israel for
668 ideological reasons, but to improve their security and
669 quality of life (Al-Haj and Leshem, 2000). The econ-
670 omic and social beliefs of the immigrants were the
671 product of Soviet socialization, but also of exposure
672 to Western culture after the disintegration of the
673 USSR (Lissak and Leshem, 2001). The will of the
674 Israeli elites to absorb such a large mass of immi-
675 grants is related to their Zionist desire to maintain
676 Jewish majority over the Palestinians, to their aspira-
677 tion to preserve a secular majority over a growing
678 ultra-Orthodox population, and their wish to reinforce
679 the country's European culture. In these senses, the
680 arrival of the Russian immigrants served primarily the
681 interests of the secular Jewish Ashkenazim.

682 Unlike previous waves of immigrants, the Russians
683 arrived in Israel when capitalist and individualist
684 values were ascendant. This created some space for
685 norms that are different than, though not contradictory
686 to, the core Zionist ideology, and eroded the collec-
687 tive will to instill a uniform national culture
688 (Kimmerling, 2001). Instead, higher importance was
689 placed on providing the immigrants with housing and
690 employment. This was reflected in a new policy lab-
691 eled "direct absorption", whereby an immigrant is
692 awarded a package of benefits and financial aid for a
693 limited period to cover all social and housing needs.
694 This is vastly different to the absorption policy pre-
695 vailing during the 1950s and 1960s, when the state
696 directed immigrants to public housing and pre-
697 arranged employment (Hasson, 1992). But the
698 government remained a key actor, shaping the
699 location of immigrant absorption through the con-
700 struction of large-scale projects of affordable housing
701 and employment at the state peripheries, especially in
702 the development towns (Tzfadia, 2000). These poli-
703 cies contributed to the settlement in the towns of some
704 130,000 Russians, many of an economically and soci-
705 ally disadvantaged background (Central Bureau of
706 Statistics, 1998). The rapid growth brought about not
707 only an increase in the towns' population, but also
708 significant changes in their ethnic composition. Spati-
709 ally, most of the Russians settled in new neighbor-

hoods, which became spaces distinct from the older urban sections, and sometimes constitute “a town within a town”. Demographically, the towns lost their distinct Mizrahi character, and at present accommodate 25–40% Russians (Tzfadia, 2000).

The pattern of isolationism and integration adopted by the immigrants contributed greatly to creating a distinct social category—“the Russians”. Although most of these immigrants came from a variety of sub-cultures, some from Asia and others from Europe, the great majority speaks Russian and tends to see itself as belonging to this category. Above all, this is how they are perceived and categorized by mainstream Israeli society. Thus, clear ethnic and cultural boundaries were drawn around the new immigrants, who emerge as a distinct group within an increasingly multi-cultural Israel (Kimmerling, 2001). These boundaries were accepted and reinforced by the founding of two immigrant political parties with a clear Russian character, “Yisrael b’Aliyah” (Israel in Immigration/Ascendance) and “Yisrael Beitenu” (Israel our Home). The two parties (and especially the former) performed well in national elections, attesting to the success of the Russians in acquiring political power as a distinct group. The success of the parties also demonstrates their ability to convert their numbers and organizational skills into political power in order to maximize their access to resources and budgets, which were also used to buttress the ethnic walls (Kimmerling, 2001).

The encounter in the development towns between the two social groups, the Russians and the Mizrahim, quickly led to competition over economic resources, which were already in short supply. This competitive drive was intensified by a sense of relative deprivation among the Mizrahim, in light of the benefits bestowed upon the Russians, such as housing assistance (in new neighborhoods), tax breaks and help in finding jobs, and a feeling that Israeli society is more indulgent toward Russian culture than it ever was toward Mizrahim immigrants in the 1950s. The Mizrahim also note that the housing benefits for the Russians are in excess of what they, the veterans, receive at present. In the early stages of absorption, welfare services became a major arena of contest. The “direct absorption” policy decentralized the absorption functions, which had previously been handled by the central government, leaving most of the absorption work to the local authorities, including the provision of welfare services. The gap between demand and supply led to competition over the available services from the earliest stages of absorption. Later, the Mizrahim and Russians began to compete over employment, notoriously scarce in the development towns (Lipshitz, 1992). The struggle over these resources was conducted alongside other efforts of cooperation. It illuminated, to both groups, the importance of control over place as a means to acquiring not only economic, but also political and cultural resources. The

next section deals with control of place as reflected in local voting and electioneering.

Local elections

We begin by comparing statewide local election results in 1989, 1993, and 1998.⁹ Later, this section focuses on the Mizrahi-Russian tension during the elections in two development towns in the southern periphery of Israel, Ofakim and Kiryat Gat (see Fig. 1).¹⁰ These towns are representative of the geographic, social and ethnic settings of most Israeli development towns, but as we shall see, offer two different trajectories of local ethnic mobilization. In most local elections, Israel’s many political parties combined into several main blocs: Labor;¹¹ Likud;¹² Russian immigrant parties; local parties; small national parties; and religious parties. The religious bloc is divided into Shas, a Mizrahi ultra-orthodox party founded in the 1980s following a split within the ultra-Orthodox circles between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, and other religious parties.

The municipal council elections held on November 10, 1998 brought to a climax a number of dynamics that had begun in Israel in the 1980s, including the diminished power for the large parties and increased support for sectoral, ethnic, local or independent parties (Goldberg, 2001). In development towns, however, these processes were particularly salient, as the boundaries between the sectors were clearer, and personal familiarity with the candidate carried greater weight, if only because these are small towns.

It can be seen in Fig. 3 that the key dynamics in the development towns were as follows. There was a significant drop in the election of Likud members to the councils, from 30% in the 1989 elections to 22.6% in the 1993 elections, and to 13.6% in the 1998 elections. In parallel, there was a significant drop in support for the Labor Party, especially in the 1993 elections. Then, Labor won an average of 27.9% of the municipal council seats, winning only 13.8% of the seats in 1998. In contrast with the diminishing power of the many ‘mother parties’ (Likud and Labor), there was a slight increase in the power of the local parties,

⁹Data for this comparison were collected from a special series of publications issued by the Central Bureau of Statistics (1990, 1994, 1999).

¹⁰Data for this analysis were taken from local newspapers published before and after the elections. Several in-depth interviews were also conducted with key figures in the elections in Ofakim and Kiryat Gat.

¹¹The Labor Party is currently one of the two largest parties in Israel. Until the mid-1970s, Labor was consistently the party in power and dominated all the state institutions. In the 1970s, Labor lost the national election to the Likud Party, and ever since there has been rivalry between the two for dominance.

¹²Likud is currently the party in power in Israel, but until 1977, it was the main opposition party to the Labor-led government. Mizrahi candidates had appeared on Likud lists, and therefore the Likud rise to power was attributed to increased support from Mizrahim, as well as the Mizrahi protest of Labor’s attitude toward them in the 1950s and 1960s.

Between urban and national: Erez Tzfadia and Oren Yiftachel

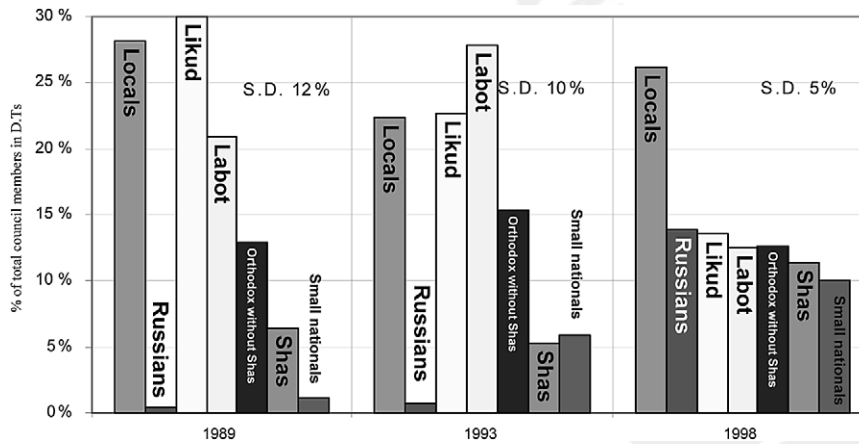


Figure 3 Distribution of Political Blocs in the Municipal Councils of Development Towns after Recent Elections.

in comparison with the previous elections in 1993. In the 1989 elections, the local parties won 28.1% of the council seats, 22.3% in 1993, and 26.2% in 1998.¹³ More importantly, the local parties became the dominant bloc on most councils, indicating the increased importance of place over national or statewide political concerns. Nevertheless, the local bloc is also rather fragmented, and hence often ineffective. Together with increased support for the local parties was a sharp increase in the power of the Russian immigrant bloc, which captured 13.9% of all municipal council seats in development towns. This achievement turned the immigrants into the third largest, after the local and religious blocs. The immigrant bloc is composed primarily of 'Yisrael b'Aliyah', the national immigrant party, but also 'Yisrael Beitenu' and other local 'Russian' parties. The great homogeneity of the immigrant bloc enhanced its power, in contrast with the splintered power of the local parties, and the partial fragmentation of the religious parties (Shas, Agudat Israel,¹⁴ and other religious factions).

The roots of this keen ethnic electoral struggle, beyond the feelings of relative deprivation and competition over resources, relate to the existence of two distinct identities in a small, isolated place. The multiplicity of identities in a small place tends to sharpen the politics of identity, and thereby reconstruct and even essentialize difference (Jackson and Penrose, 1993). The struggle between Mizrahim and Russians to define which identity will be dominant in the small place is intertwined with the struggle over political power and local resources, and is hence shaped by broader fields of hegemonic influence, which determines resource distribution and identity construction.

In the development towns we discerned the existence of two major hegemonic influences. On the one

hand, there was an internal-local hegemony, which characterized development towns prior to the municipal council elections, when Mizrahim enjoyed over-representation in local decision-making circles, while the Russians had almost no voice (in the 1993 local elections, the Russians won 0.7% of the seats in the municipal councils, even though the Russians comprised more than a quarter of the towns' population). On the other hand, from a broader perspective of ethnic relations in Israel, the development towns remained on the margin of direct Ashkenazi domination. Some use this setting and interpret state efforts to settle large numbers of Russians in the towns, as an attempt to undermine their Mizrahi identity (see: Shalom Chetrit, 1999). Therefore, the conflict between veterans and immigrants in elections were also a reflection of the struggle of Mizrahim to protect their spatial bases of political and cultural power in Israel. This was most noticeable in the campaign of the Mizrahi-local movements, to which we shall return.

Veteran immigrants and new immigrants: Kiryat Gat and Ofakim

The main tension between Mizrahim and Russians is generated by the desire of the Mizrahim to preserve their over-representation on the municipal councils, and by the opposition of the Russians to that privilege. As found in previous empirical work, the power of the development town, in the opinion of its Mizrahi residents, derives from its ability to provide a relatively autonomous political space (Yiftachel and Tzfadia, 1999). Within this setting, both the Mizrahim and the Russians seek to increase their control over local resources. Unlike the Russians, however, the Mizrahim perceive much of their cultural identity to be linked to the development towns (Ben-Ari and Bilu, 1987; Yiftachel and Tzfadia, 1999). In this sense, local government is perceived as having the ability to protect that identity, reflecting the importance attached to control over place; as Castells notes, protection of cultural identity is related to and

¹³'Local' parties denote electoral groupings organized locally, with no direct association to a known state-wide political party. Needless to say, branches of state-wide parties in the development towns are also led by local people.

¹⁴An Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox party.

organized around a particular territory (Castells, 1983).

The intensity of the conflict differed from town to town, in keeping with two main factors—the relative size of the Russian immigrant community and their level of local organization. To illustrate the differences in intensity, two development towns in the south of Israel were selected: Ofakim, which had a low-intensity conflict, and Kiryat Gat, with a high-intensity confrontation. Prior to the arrival of the Russians, the two towns had much in common. Both were established during the 1950s on the southern periphery of Israel, in order to Judaize the Negev desert, function as urban centers for agricultural settlements, and supply housing for Jewish immigrants. Mizrahi Jews mostly populated the two towns with their economies being based on labor-intensive industrial development. Typical of peripheral towns, the narrow economic base could not guarantee a decent standard of living. In 1997 the average income of wage earners in Ofakim was 77% of the Israeli average, while in Kiryat Gat it reached 80%. Other parameters also reflected socioeconomic weakness: a high rate of unemployment, high rates of out migration and low educational achievement. However, in the long run, some differences emerged between the two towns, reflected in different growth rates, which saw Kiryat Gat reaching a population of 25,400 in 1983, while Ofakim reached a size of only 12,600. The difference was exacerbated when, in 1993, a large Intel plant was established in Kiryat Gat, whereas two years later Ofakim lost one of the major employers—the large textile factory of Uman.

The influx of Russian immigrants to Kiryat Gat and Ofakim caused a dramatic change to the towns' ethnic compositions. In December 2001, they constituted 27% of the population in Ofakim, and 29% in Kiryat Gat (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, 2002). Other indicators show that the groups of immigrants residing in both towns are similar: about 23% arrived from the Asian republics of the Soviet Union; 25% of the adult immigrants have an academic degree certificate and 25% of the immigrants are aged 65 or more (Central Bureau of Statistic, 1998). The most important data on Russian immigrants in the two towns is that until the recent elections, they were conspicuously under-represented on both local councils.

A major source of tension between the Mizrahim and Russians in the towns is the sense of relative deprivation felt by many Mizrahim. Ms. Hava Sultana (herself a Mizrahi) from Ofakim, who headed "Veterans and Immigrants: The Hope of Ofakim", a joint party of newcomers and former residents running for the city council, expressed this clearly:

The tension between new immigrants and veteran residents is a product of the discrimination. The immigrants received more than Ofakim residents could attain...it caused unrest...expressed as hostility toward them. This feeling grows because this is a

small town and there is frequent contact between the two groups...The fact that the new immigrants are foreign, different, is not what caused the frustration and tension between the veterans and the new immigrants (Interview with Hava Sultana, Ofakim, October 2, 1998).

In the local election of 1993 Sultana won one out of 11 seats on the town council. In both Ofakim and Kiryat Gat, in the local elections, immigrants (Fig. 4) represented, until this situation changed in the 1998 elections, as it became clear that immigrants were the single largest bloc in both towns.

The similarity in relative proportion of the immigrant population in each of these towns does not correlate with the power they gained in local elections. In Ofakim, two immigrant parties ran for the council: Yisrael b'Aliyah, the national immigrant party, and Veterans and Immigrants: The Hope of Ofakim, the joint immigrant-veteran party, headed by Hava Sultana. The Yisrael b'Aliyah party won 13.3% of all the seats on the council (2 out of 15 members), while the joint party did not pass the qualifying threshold required to have a seat in the council. In Kiryat Gat, four immigrant parties competed for the municipal council. Yisrael b'Aliyah, the national party, won 10.5% of the council seats (2 out of 19). Among the three local immigrant parties, Atid Ha'ir [Future of the City] won 15.8% of the vote, or 3 council seats; the Bukharian party won 10.5% of the vote, or 2 council seats, and Kiryat Gat of the Immigrants did not pass the qualifying threshold. All told, the immigrant parties won 7 of 19 council seats. More important, the Atid Ha'ir immigrant party, headed by Alexander Wechsler who also ran for mayor, garnered 31% of all the valid votes, just behind Albert Erez, head of a local party called Mifneh [Turning Point] in Kiryat Gat, which won 34% of all the valid votes for mayor. According to Israel's electoral laws, a candidate cannot win the elections unless gaining at least 40% of the vote. This often requires a second round of voting for the two top candidates. This meant that Erez and Wechsler had to run again in the second round; however, an unprecedented compromise agreement was signed by Erez and Wechsler on November 16, 1998, preventing a second round, which would have caused heightened tension and, possibly, violence. The compromise agreement saw Erez continuing as mayor and Wechsler becoming his deputy, with new and wider responsibilities.¹⁵

The elections in Ofakim and Kiryat Gat differed. In Ofakim, almost no tension was evident between the Mizrahim and Russians, as the latter vote was split. Those immigrants who settled in Ofakim prior to 1993, and the elderly immigrants living in protected housing in a new immigrant neighborhood, tended to support the rightist Likud-NRP (National

¹⁵ *Our Kiryat Gat*, local newspaper, Issue 953, November 20, 1998.

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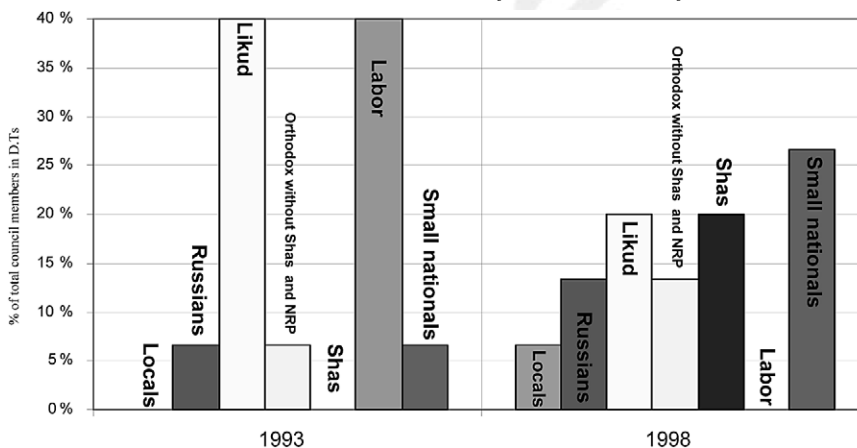


Figure 4 Composition of the Municipal Council in Ofakim after the Local Elections of 1993 and 1998.

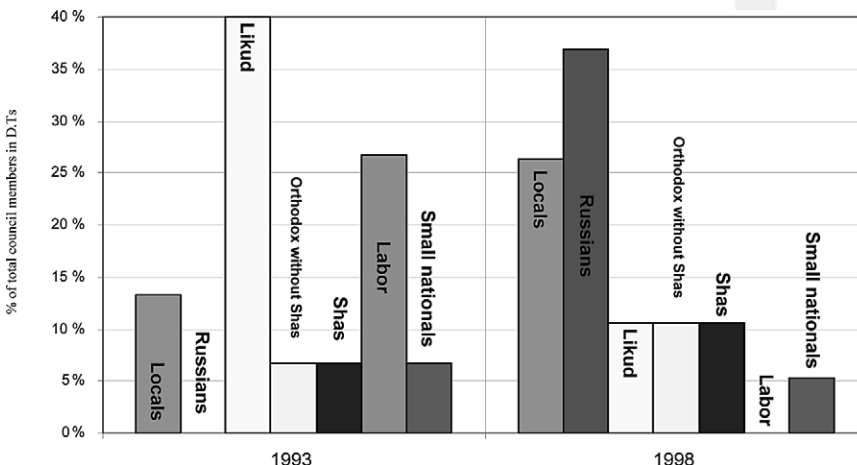


Figure 5 Composition of the Municipal Council in Kiryat Gat after the Local Elections of 1993 and 1998.

Religious Party) coalition. This bloc was headed by Yair Hazan, who had been mayor in 1989–1993 and who was responsible for the absorption of many immigrants. Perhaps it was his function during his first term of office that won him votes of the elderly immigrants in these elections (Hazan was re-elected mayor in 1998). Other immigrants supported ‘Yisrael b’Aliyah’ which was poorly organized and lacked leadership. The implications of this split among the immigrants can be gleaned from the words of Yair Hazan, current mayor of Ofakim, about a month before his election:

Because they [the Russians] don’t have leadership and the immigrant vote is split...they pose no threat to control [of veterans in the Ofakim city government—E.T. and O.Y.], and therefore there is no ethnic tension in town...The immigrant parties are not trying to undermine the dominance of the Mizrahim ...[The goal of the Russians is—E.T.] to enlarge their share of the local pie...They have no leadership because they are weak...a high percentage of elderly and single parents... (Interview with Yair Hazan, Ofakim mayor, October 2, 1998).

In Kiryat Gat, on the other hand, although the immigrants split their vote for the council into three separate parties, they united in support of Alexander Wechsler for mayor. Due to his political experience—he had immigrated to Israel in the 1970s and was active for many years in the Likud Party—Wechsler was able to unite the ranks of immigrants. Despite his declarations that his party represents veterans as well as immigrants, the Mizrahim called it ‘the Russian party’. To rally immigrant support, Wechsler stressed the division between the veterans and the immigrants, with emphasis on the distress of the newcomers. In other words, Wechsler took advantage of political ethnicity to gain power. In one of his speeches, Wechsler said, “I do not deny the fact that there is a schism and polarization in the town...The polarization was here even before the elections. The new immigrants live in ghettos here, in an atmosphere of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.”¹⁶

¹⁶Quoted in the local Kiryat Gat newspaper— *Our Kiryat Gat*, Issue 953, November 20, 1998, p. 29.

The awareness of the Mizrahim in Kiryat Gat that their control over 'their place' was in jeopardy created considerable tension, which also turned into violence. The tension reached a peak after the first round of voting, in which it became clear that a second round would be required between Erez and Wechsler. There were incidents of violence, as dummy bombs were placed near Wechsler's home, threats were made, and knives brandished. All this took place in the context of continuing stereotyping with Russians being labeled as mafia gangsters, prostitutes, and lacking any connection with Judaism. These stereotypes were reflected in the following excerpt from the local newspaper *Ma Nishma* after the agreement was signed between Erez and Wechsler:

"On Tuesday morning, after the agreement was signed between Erez and Wechsler, suddenly all the local massage parlors and branches of the Russian Mafia were 'closed'. Wechsler was acknowledged by his opponents to be Jewish, and all's well that ends well" (*Ma Nishma*, Issue 953, 1998, November 20, 1998, p. 26).

The elections in Kiryat Gat thus revealed the underlying tension between the Mizrahim and Russians. As noted, this conflict peaked when the Mizrahim felt that their control over the town was at risk. Several statements by Mizrahi residents in Kiryat Gat appeared in the local press after the agreement, illustrating tension:

N.A.: "...The compromise is a wise move. An atmosphere of hate was avoided...If Wechsler had been elected, there would have been a Mizrahi uprising..."
 T.B.: "...During the final week of the campaign, there was an atmosphere of war..."
 A.V.: "A split and rupture between the Mizrahim and Russians...reflected in extremist invective and physical and verbal violence..."
 M.B.: "Had there been a runoff, the ethnic tension would have erupted..."

Ofakim and Kiryat Gat represent the spectrum of ethnic tensions between the Mizrahim and Russians, which was evident to varying degrees in most development towns. Even in Ofakim, where inter-group tension was never violent during local elections, the potential for violence existed had the Russian immigrants posed a threat to Mizrahi dominance. It was the different organizational ability of the immigrants that appears to have determined the intensity of conflict. In general, the more organized were the Russians, the more intense became local electioneering.

The elections in the development towns reveal a Mizrahi protest against the Russians, but this appears to have remained at a local level. The same action appears impossible in the national arena, given the persisting hegemony of Zionism. This impossibility led the Mizrahim to adopt a new strategy in order to

defend their control in the towns, i.e. a religious-national strategy. Accordingly, the Mizrahim undermined the connection between the Russian immigrants and the Israeli-Jewish nation, by claiming that most of the immigrants were not 'real' Jews. Since belonging to the Israeli-Jewish nation is defined by Jewish religious law, and since many of the immigrants were not recognized as religious Jews, the Mizrahim could exploit an advantage in the field of national belonging, and gain with it a high moral ground at the local level. By adopting this strategy, Shas (the Mizrahi ultra-orthodox party), presented a powerful (if racist) counter-narrative to the growing claims of Russians in the towns. This has occurred in several towns, including an incident which received wide media attention in November 1999, during a demonstration against opening non-kosher Russian grocery shops in the development town of Bet-Shemesh;¹⁷ Rabbi Shmuel Bennisri from Shas preached to a local Mizrahi audience:¹⁸

The Russians brought to Bet-Shemesh the diseases from Russia. Heaven forbid, the following biblical text is turning into a reality: *when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination* [Jeremiah, 2,7]. They [the Russians] inundated the land with tens of thousands of non-Jews, and they inundate the land with shops of abomination. Just after the town has developed, the devils raised their heads and inundate Bet-Shemesh with their abominations.

Hence, Shas and the Mizrahim have used the national Zionist discourse, which includes people according to their connections to (ethnic) Jewishness, but modified that discourse to the local-religious circumstances, where the Mizrahim enjoy an advantage. This allowed them to use an aggressive, essentialized rhetoric to maintain their control in the towns. But, notably, this strategy is another sign of Mizrahi entrapment: they could not challenge the pro-immigration (ethnic) Zionist ideology, so they emphasized the issue of religious boundaries. This gave them a high moral ground, within the very national project that continues to marginalize them. We can observe this as a strategy adopted by a trapped ethno-class, which illustrates the multi-layered nature of its collective identity.

In conclusion

This paper has explored the making of a Mizrahi ethno-class in Israel's development towns through the prism of ethnic mobilization, particularly in public

¹⁷The development town of Bet-Shemesh was established in the 1950s, 30 Kilometers south-west of Jerusalem. At the end of 2001, 22% of its 50,883 residents were new immigrants (*Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, 2002*).

¹⁸Quoted in Ma'ariv, November 22, 1999.

protest and local electioneering. In these arenas we found two prevailing voices—public protest and local politics. First, public protest, which has been consistent over the years, has ‘broadcast outwards’ a plea for social and economic equality, emanating from the towns’ persistent deprivation as compared to the rest of Israel’s Jewish society. As we have shown, the consistently disgruntled nature of the voice emerging from the towns can be partially explained by the relative deprivation. But the relatively docile nature of the protest should be further explained by their ‘trapped’ settings within a Jewish settler society. These settings have prevented the peripheral Mizrahim from challenging the very system which created their structural marginalization, as long as these challenges were made at the national scale.

Second, on a local-urban scale, as demonstrated in the local electoral campaigns, the towns’ Mizrahim spoke in a different voice, aiming ‘inwards’ and stressing the need to control ‘our’ space, while (indirectly) questioning some of the major tenets of Zionist ideology, such as the unconditional encouragement of Jewish immigration to Israel, or the unquestioned homogeneity and solidarity among all Jews. Here we can note the relevance of theories of resource competition and politics of identity to explain ethnic mobilization in the towns. On that scale, mobilization at times became more militant and less in line with the accepted norms of Ashkenazi-Zionist hegemony. We suggest here that this intensification is related to the local-urban scale, which is both closer to peoples lives and immediate needs, but also to the question of collective identity as articulated by the control over ‘our’ space.

Drawing on our findings, we may describe peripheral Mizrahi identity, like most collective identities, as composed of various ‘layers’ (Yuval-Davis, 2000), which can be conceptualized as geographic scales. Our study therefore offers a new link to be further explored by geographic and social research, between spatial scale and collective identities. It may be fruitful to examine, theoretically and comparatively, how the articulation of political projects in terms of spatial scales affects the construction of identities and the strategies used to voice a claim and mobilize the collective. In the case of Mizrahim in the development towns, it is clear that different discourses and mobilization mechanisms were used to address national and local matters, both contributing to the making of a complex, yet logical, composition of peripheral Mizrahi identity. The national scale, which stresses an active, loyal participation in the national (and Ashkenazi dominated) Zionist project, works to blur the differences between the towns and mainstream society. It hence ‘traps’ peripheral Mizrahim on the margins of Jewish society with no real ability to challenge the oppressive system that has created their structural deprivation, but on which they also depend. But the urban, local scale of Mizrahi mobilization and identity has been largely shaped during the last dec-

ade vis-à-vis the new influx of ‘Russian immigrants’. Here we notice a more militant stance, which works to differentiate Jewish identities and assert Mizrahi control over ‘their’ (threatened) towns. The prominence of Shas in both Kiryat Gat and Ofakim, as in most development towns, highlights the search for new resources, especially Jewish religious affiliation, as a tool in ethnic competition. Given the role of religion as a cornerstone of Israeli-Jewish identity, the Shas movements has developed a strategy which attempts to by-pass the ethnocratic entrapment of the Israeli settler society, with its emphasis on settlement, militarism and secularism. By emphasizing religion, traditional values and ethnic (Mizrahi) memory and solidarity, Shas was also able to present a powerful counter-narrative to the Russians in the towns, and effectively link local Mizrahi politics with a national agenda of ‘integration through difference’ (see: Peled, 2001).

The local conflicts documented above illustrate the power of place and identity in mobilizing ethnic communities, often in contradiction to broader national agendas. While this trend is still relatively minor, it should not be regarded as trivial, because, as noted at the outset, it is rooted in resistance to the hegemony of Ashkenazi forces, whose economic and cultural dominance has not waned. Peripheral Mizrahim in general, the new identification with the Sephardi-religious Shas movement and the increasing use of the religious card against the Russian in particular, are illustrations that ‘cracks’ have opened in the dominance of the secular Ashkenazi ethnocracy, at least among its Jewish peripheries. At present, it appears as if these ‘cracks’ are opening up mainly at the local scale. However, if the economic and cultural marginalization of peripheral Mizrahim continues, as likely under Israel’s intensifying neo-liberal regime, the cracks have the potential to spread ‘upward’ towards the national scale.

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Yiftachel, 1992

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