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About Social Change in Israel and Palestine**

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ABSTRACT

Written in the midst of an 18 months ethnographic fieldwork conducted among religiously motivated Jewish settlers and Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, this field note article engages with the question of social change. I anchor the article around cases of settlement expansion and settlers' violence as a means to discuss the Jewish settlement movement in the occupied territories vis-à-vis the recent Israeli mass-protest movement for social change. Pondering upon the problematics of social change as a constant, the juxtaposition of the two social movements enables me to frame the question of social change as inextricably tied to violence and its normalization.

If the abnormal can be normalized through its routinization, then it can be easily argued that a rather normal summer passed-by at the occupied territories.¹ It was Little Israel which actually experienced an exceptional summer. Week after week, thousands upon thousands of Israelis took to the streets in a series of protests for social change that are already described as the largest ones in Israeli history. Joining ranks with the multitudes of protesters across the globe, Israelis protested against the skyrocketing housing prices; the concentration of wealth by the few; and the unchecked privatization of social services, natural resources and more (Edelman 2001; Nash 2005; Nugent 2012). Enacting the difficulty of making a home, tent “towns” were established and occupied various sites across Israeli cities, with Tel-Aviv functioning as the central tent hub.

The protesters steered clear of the traditional fault-lines dividing Israeli society. There weren't too many evocations of Jews, Arabs, Religious, Secular, the occupation of the West-Bank or the settlements. This silence enabled the unification and mobilization of the masses around the rallying cry, “The People! Demand! Social Justice!” Yet, this silence also spoke of fundamental problems with the protest movement. How do Palestinians figure within “The People” and how far on the map does the demand for “Social Justice” travel? Is it tenable to speak of justice while ignoring the millions who live about an hour away from Tel-Aviv but lack liberties enjoyed by the protesters? What kind of social change can be brought about when the most socially divisive issues remain largely untouched? And, isn't the obstruction of socially divisive issues from the public eye also a useful way of actually strengthening their effects?

Many settlers received the mass protests with suspicion. “These are Leftist demonstrations camouflaged as a nonpartisan movement,” was one typical reaction pointing out to an uneasiness linked with the undefined place of settlers within the protest movement. Religiously motivated settlers have a clearly defined sense of “The People.” In addition, they are highly engaged in socially-oriented activities such as education, welfare and communal outreach, both within and without. At the same time, the vast majority of settlers vote for Right-Wing parties that support settlement growth and these parties tend to uphold neo-liberal ideologies. As a result, even though baring much in common with their own social sensibilities, the anti-capitalist tone of the protest movement also hindered the participation of many settlers. As one recently-married settler told me, “we finally have a rare opportunity to make Israel better through a social project of unification rather than separation. We could easily bring hundreds of thousands of our people to the streets. People with passion, commitment and experience, but we are just too obsessed with borders.”

The uneasiness felt by many settlers toward the mass protests was often articulated in a patronizing manner: “how bad do they really have it at Tel-Aviv?” or “maybe they should cut down on their European vacations.” Coming from within a population which brought about changes of historical proportions, such remarks also reflect feelings of seniority.

Baruch is a small-statured man in his early fifties. He recently opened a sandwich stand at the newly-built commercial center by the main crossroad. Known for his good-humored nature, Baruch is easily identified by the long brown patch of thinning hair he borrows from the right side of his head to cover an expanding baldness. His surviving hair seems to possess a rebellious will of its own. Resisting the hairpins holding it to bind the yarmulke with his head, the surviving hair allows the bluish yarmulke to slide downward and away from its place of rest until the yarmulke eventually hangs by some invisible threads on the left ear. Having escaped the hairpins while liberating the top of the head from the temporary occupant, the hair is left to freely wave in

1 This article refers to the events of the summer of 2011.

an audacious defiance of gravity. "Going out to the streets and chanting and yelling is not enough," says Baruch. "At the beginning it was just me, the tent and the hill. It was cold, rainy and muddy and the wind blew my tent away several times, but I stayed there night after night until the rest joined me." What started thirty years ago as a single tent upon a muddy hill transformed into a thriving religious community of two thousand people, red-roofed houses and green backyards.

Whereas Baruch's settlement began as a small tent, the small settlement of Migron started about twelve years ago as a freight container on a hill overlooking the main West Bank highway. During the early days of the Second Palestinian Intifada a cellular radio tower was added to assist military communication. Soon after, caravans emerged next to the tower, with settlers voluntarily safeguarding both tower and land. Assisted by different state agencies, Migron is now the home of about Forty families. Nonetheless, this summer the Supreme Court ordered the state to dismantle Migron by April of 2012 because it was built upon a private Palestinian Land. In addition, Defense Minister Ehud Barak ordered the speedy demolition of three homes that were built and housed in the last two years. Interestingly, a good many settlers who wish to align themselves with the Israeli state see the legal entanglement of little Migron as possibly undermining the validity of the larger settlement enterprise. Consequently, aside from legal actions, the order to displace Jewish families and to surrender land to the hands of the enemies was met mostly with vocal opposition.

Still, several hundred settlers attended a support rally at Migron. Speaking in front of a crowd of mostly young mothers and their toddlers, the Regional Rabbi of Samaria unraveled some of the confounding dimensions of these times:

This is a struggle for all or nothing. There are positive forces that build and contribute [...] Forces of unification. And there are forces of expulsion, destruction and freezing. Forces that stem from the academia, from the legal system, from all of these bodies that come from above and are unfamiliar, incapable and lack the will to go down to the ground level. From above they determine what will be. These forces, and I am saying this with great pain, are joined by good people, that instead of shouting "to give, to give, and to give," all we hear from them is "I deserve, I deserve, give me free education, everything is free, I deserve everything." They do not realize that they are being lead by the same negative forces, and this is what the struggle is about, it is about who rules.

While the infantilization of the protest movement and the metaphysical othering of political opposition are useful methods of self-glorification and collective mobilization, they also reveal much about reality. In their beliefs, actions and growth, settlers embody social change.

Ramat-Migron is the satellite outpost of Migron. Unlike neighboring Migron, Ramat-Migron is not the kind of place to raise a family. Yet, Ramat Migron is an exciting place for teenagers who desire to protest the bourgeoisie lifestyle of their parents' generation through an adventurous demonstration of religious devotion. Ramat Migron awakens during the hot summer months in the form of several scattered room-sized wood and tin structures, an outdoor kitchen and hammocks which hang from the entwined branches of ancient olive trees. A manifestation of settler counter-culture, the outpost attracts mostly male teenagers who are not afraid to confront the hardships of the weather, the Palestinians or the Israeli security forces. Aside from operating as a disobedience summer camp, Ramat Migron serves an important strategic role. It diverts

attention from neighboring Migron, functioning as an easy target which allows the Israeli security forces to maintain a semblance of sovereignty in the area. Over the last few years, Ramat Migron was demolished and rebuilt too many times to keep track. Dozens of teenagers were arrested only to be quickly released in what has become by now a well rehearsed performance of a conflict between adolescent settlers and the Israeli state.

"Urgent! The forces of destruction are marching toward Ramat Migron accompanied by a large tractor. Come everyone!" I've been receiving such text message on my cell phone throughout summer. By the time I arrived Ramat Migron laid in ruins again. A young settler was being pushed down on the hot asphalt road by several policemen in black uniforms, his large earth-colored woolen yarmulke held tight with handcuffed hands. Too young to grow a beard, old enough to be man. "The road is blocked!" declared a policeman of the Special Patrol Unit which specializes in riots and crowd control. "Where are you headed to?" he asked. I lied, naming a nearby settlement and he allowed me to continue and drive along. My yarmulke helped to get me pass the police, but now I had to tuck it into my back pocket. It was too small and thin for the likes of the inhabitants of Ramat Migron, designating me as not pious enough and too statist. The secular Anthropologist had a better chance of gaining access at such a sensitive moment.

The police left the area. Long brown tracts of piled earth led to heaps of wood, mattresses, papers and other remnants of the temporary homes of Ramat Migron. However, the infrastructure remained untouched: the kitchen and the hammocks were still intact. A small group of teenage girls rested beneath the shade of a large olive tree, listening to the teachings of a young and very pregnant mother. A white mule grazed nearby. The boys were scattered around the site, about twenty teenagers and three adults in their early twenties. Two junior scouts approached me, asking to identify the newspaper I worked for. Knowing the mass-media is



conceived as part of the "forces of destruction," I proudly identified myself as an anthropologist who studies the native population, mentioned a couple of names of radical settlers who know of my work, and Open Sesame, I was permitted to wander around and do my thing. This was a pleasant improvement over a similar encounter which occurred a year ago and ended with me running away from the stones that were thrown at me.

The boys were clearly exhausted, but the intense heat and the recent clash with

the Israeli security forces provided a perfect opportunity for the physical expression of their religious ardor. One by one they began to slowly descend down a rugged and shrubby slope toward the direction of a stone-fenced plot about three hundred meters away. Nothing grew at this Palestinian plot aside from three olive trees and dried golden weeds. This was clearly not a

good place for Palestinians to work the land. Prepared in advance for such an occasion, a cache of brand-new wooden plates and beams laid behind the stone fence, right next to its opening. Mounting the heavy plates on their backs, the boys began to silently climb back, bodies bent forward, arms spread wide to the sides in a posture resembling a crucifixion. Long wooden beams were mounted on the mule. Within fifteen minutes, the cache was nearly emptied.

Looking around, I suddenly noticed a thick column of smoke rising from another field at my back. The smoke signaled "Price Tag:" the economic euphemism given to violent acts of



intimidation and revenge that are usually carried out against

Palestinians, sometimes as part of a battle of attrition with Israeli security forces. I was about to walk to the burning field when I spotted strange movement to my side, no more than a hundred meters away. Face camouflaged with a bright-colored shirt wrapped around a head. A poncho-like praying shawl worn on a muscular upper male body, tied at the sides to facilitate ease of movement. Running in low, long strides, this guy was

impressively fast and agile. I photographed him when he ran through an area clear of grassland, wishing for a better camera lens. He slowed down before casually entering the land plot in front of me, ducking and disappearing behind the stone fence. Smoke began to rise. Soon after, a stocky settler emerged from the smoke like a Jewish Clark Kent. Bright T-shirt covering his fit body, the last wooden beam resting on his shoulder, bright yellow flames raging behind. Ramat Migron was rebuilt again by sunset.

A month later, and less than a week after the support rally, the three Migron houses targeted by the Defense Minister were demolished in the middle of the night. A force sizing about 1500 security personnel was utilized to accomplish this task. The military misled inhabitants of the surrounding settlements, informing them that the unusual concentration of forces was merely a preparedness drill for expected Palestinian riots. Arab porters were humiliatingly employed to empty the houses from their main contents, further deepening the rift between the Israeli state and an ever growing numbers of settlers. "They got what they deserve," said a resident of Ramat Migron in reference to the people of Migron. "They are too statist, too obedient and they learn nothing," he finished. Standing in front the ruined houses, another settler told me, "I know this sounds horrible, but aside from the tragedy of the three families, this is actually good for us, you know, these houses can save the rest of Migron."

Within hours following the destruction of the three Migron houses, a mosque was vandalized at the Palestinian village Qusra. Tires were set ablaze on the bottom floor. "Mohammad is a Pig" and "Migron = Social Justice" were sprayed on its outside walls, a black

Star of David adding a final touch. A day later, several vehicles inside a military base nearby Migron were vandalized. Tires slashed, windows smashed, engine cables torn, sugar poured into gas tanks, and among a wide assortment of other slogans, "Price Tag" and "Ramat Migron" were sprayed on the vehicles and nearby structures. The vast majority of settler leaders condemn Price Tag actions, but the unparalleled Price Tag against the military produced an equally unparalleled widespread condemnation: "These immoral actions stand against the spirit of Judaism," "Individuals cannot take the law into their own hands," "Price Tag endangers the settlements in Judea and Samaria," and "These children of the devil must be expelled from this land."

Up until recently, Israel's internal security service (*Shabak*) conceptualized Price Tag as spontaneous acts of revenge. Now, according to the Shabak, these are well-planned operations of organized Jewish terror cells. These terror cells are said to employ professional methods such as reconnaissance missions and the compartmentalization of knowledge and identities. Speaking about the rationale of Price Tag methods, a fledgling terrorist explained, "they need to understand that we can be as crazy as the Arabs" (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009; Goldstein 2003; Taussig 1989). Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu instructed the Justice Minister to assemble a special task force that would explore possible ways of legalizing illegal settlement houses, including those built on privately owned Palestinian land. Change is already here. It always is.

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