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**Watching *Fight Club* in Tel Aviv: Or The 2011 Social Protests in Israel, a Political Postmortem**

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**Eran Kaplan,**

**"Watching Fight Club in Tel Aviv: Or The 2011 Social Protests in Israel, a Political Postmortem"**

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**Abstract:** In his article "Watching Fight Club in Tel Aviv: Or The 2011 Social Protests in Israel, a Political Postmortem," Eran Kaplan provides an analysis of the ideological underpinnings of the social protests that swept Israel in 2011 and the failure of these protests to bring about actual political change. The article draws on the manner by which David Fincher's film *Fight Club* exposes the ideological dimensions of modern, neoliberal consumerist society as a way to understand the driving forces behind the Israeli protests and to suggest a possible way out of the ideological quagmire that the protesters and their leaders were unable to traverse.

**Eran KAPLAN**

### **Watching *Fight Club* in Tel Aviv: Or The 2011 Social Protests in Israel, a Political Postmortem**

David Fincher's film *Fight Club* (1999) is one of the most powerful critiques of consumerist, neo-liberal ideology. In the movie, we follow the attempts of the film's anonymous protagonist and narrator to overcome his insomnia and overall sense of tedium. A product of late capitalism, this character travels constantly for work and seems to lack a sense of home or community. He tries to fill the emotional (and medical) voids in his life first with incessant consumption, as a kind of duty to fulfill some social codes--the way we try to fulfill the superego's injunction to enjoy ourselves in our neoliberal world, to follow Žižek's analysis of our current ideological condition (*In Defense* 34). And when that fails to alleviate his predicament, the protagonist of *Fight Club* begins to visit support groups for illnesses and conditions that are far worse than his own--groups that provide a sense of community and warmth that he cannot find anywhere else, very much in the tradition of the new-age cults of self-fulfillment and awareness that emerged alongside the cult of workaholicism of late capitalism.

But just like consumerism, attending support groups proves to be but a short-term remedy. The protagonist of *Fight Club* needs an even greater rush, and he finds one in a chance encounter with Tyler Durden (his alter ego, literally) who introduces him to a club where men fight each other without any protection, gloves or limits. Again, to draw on Žižek's observation, in a world where we have a sense of a loss of the Big Other, the ideological order that structures and regulates our social lives, we begin to fill its void by searching for alternatives. On the one hand, we feel that the lack of the Big Other allows us to fulfill, unhindered, the injunction to enjoy ourselves: but this type of unbridled enjoyment--economic or professional success--leaves us empty; it creates a sense of shame that we try to complete, first by giving a sense meaning to our life (new age ideas, support groups to those who are clearly less fortunate than we are), and then by embracing a kind of wild, random violence that has no meaning or purpose--it serves on political or social goals--but provides us with the ability to feel pain and empathy for those who we inflict pain on. In fact, *Fight Club* may tell us something very radical about our contemporary society: we inflict pain on others so we can then support, care and embrace them and feel good about ourselves as social beings. In a society that lacks the basic structures that rely on empathy and compassion, we generate random violence that would then necessitate warmth and kindness.

We, as a society, have become a collection of individuals, without political and social networks that bind us together, yet we yearn for a sense of community, where we are invested in one another's fortune. In *Fight Club* hurting random people was a means to create an artificial sense of community on the basis of shared pain. The social protests that erupted in Tel Aviv, and elsewhere in Israel, in 2011 were motivated by economic and social distress, mostly the rise in housing prices in the Tel Aviv area, which drove young Israelis to build tent cities and eventually drove thousands to the streets to protest the overall rising cost of living. Young people in Tel Aviv, like the hero of *Fight Club*, felt like victims of the neo-liberal order. The message that was heard that summer in Israel was that the privatization of the Israeli economy and the Israeli welfare state, the triumph of the neo-liberal order, has inflicted great pain on younger Israelis, who sought to bring back the type of Israeli social network that their parents benefited from a generation earlier. Young Israelis in 2011, much like the hero of *Fight Club*, were looking for a way out of the neo-liberal rabbit hole and they launched a battle (or fight) against the prevailing political order in the name of (re)new(ed) social solidarity. For a while, it seemed that they were able to launch a powerful social movement that might achieve real change. But today, more than five years after those protests, it seems that they have had, at best, modest achievements: some regulatory reforms and other limited governmental measures--perhaps the one that had the greatest impact on the lives of most Israelis was the reform in the cellular phones market in the summer of 2012, which has resulted in a dramatic reduction in the cost of cellular services in Israel (Tayag). There are few indications that the Israeli welfare state will be reconstituted in a way that would resemble the type of programs that the parents of the leaders of the protest movement had enjoyed in the 1960s and 70s. This article attempts to understand why the social protests, which drew hundreds of thousands to the streets, failed to generate substantive political change, and what this failure can tell us about our ideological condition, or predicament, today—a predicament that was so forcefully articulated in David Finch's film.

In 2011, Israel experienced a wave of social protests. A protest movement against the steep price of cottage cheese, a staple of the Israeli diet, which emerged on social media, signaled the growing frustration of many Israelis with the rising cost of living. Then young activists, mainly students, who could no longer afford to rent apartments in the Tel Aviv area, established a tent city on Rothschild

Boulevard--the site and symbolic center *par excellence* of Tel Aviv's booming real-estate market--and, again, used social media as a way to publicize their cause. Several smaller tent camps were erected elsewhere in Israel, but Tel Aviv was the epicenter of the social protest movement. The leaders of the movement also organized rallies and demonstrations that were dominated by such slogans as: "we are fed up with the corrupted [politicians]," "the people demand social justice," and "bring back the welfare state." Some of the bigger rallies drew multi-generational crowds to the streets. On the biggest rally, on September 3, 2011, more than 450,000 people (in a country of just over 8 million) took to the streets of Israel, again mainly in Tel Aviv.

Coinciding with the start of the Arab Spring and other social protests movements around the world (Occupy Wall Street), there was a sense for the potential of seismic political change in the air. Jamie Levin, in *Haaretz*, wrote in October of 2011, "These protesters are not alone. From Tel Aviv to Athens to Manhattan, hundreds of thousands have mobilized in recent months over their dissatisfaction with capitalism and their disenfranchisement from elitist politics." Daphni Leaf, the founder of Tel Aviv's "tent city" said in the September 3 rally, "My generation grew up feeling that we are alone in the world, that the other is our enemy, our competitor, that our life is a race that we could never win. This is capitalism—a competition that never ends" (Volinich).

This echoes the language of political revolutions. But a revolution did not break out in Israel. Less than two months after the height of the protests, the left-wing Israeli commentator Gideon Levy suggested on the pages of the daily *Haaretz* that the movement had lost its impetus. Indeed the movement fizzled as quickly as it had erupted, having achieved very little by way of social and economic change. Real-estate prices have only continued to skyrocket in the greater Tel Aviv area. The economic gaps in Israeli society increased since 2011, and the Israeli Prime-Minister in 2017, Benjamin Netanyahu, is the same Prime Minister who was in power in 2011. So why did the social protest movement fail to yield genuine political change? In trying to answer this question I will examine three factors: the nature of the current alignment of the Israeli political map, the failure of the leaders of the protest movement to deal with the core issue of Israeli politics, and the very nature of the movement which reflects our current a-political or post-political ideological moment. I will also examine this failure in contrast to the political possibility presented at the end of *Fight Club*, and what the end of that film may tell us about the type of social action that may yield viable results in our current ideological condition.

One of the chief characteristics of Israeli politics since the 1970s, and more pronouncedly since the 1990s, has been the emergence of identity or ethnic politics as its primary feature. If early Zionist and Israeli politics have been defined by large ideological camps--Labor Zionism, Revisionists--that advocated for state control institutions or the free market respectively, more recent Israeli politics have been characterized by political parties that represent the identity and interests of the various groups (or tribes) in Israeli society: secular Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, various groups of observant Jews, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Arabs. It has become all but accepted knowledge among political scientists and sociologists that the rise of the right-wing Likud to power in the 1970s was the result of the Mizrahi (Jews who migrated to Israel from Arab and Muslim countries) vote shifting from Labor (Left) to the Likud (Right) because of the frustration of second-generation Mizrahim with the old Israeli establishment, which had been dominated by the Labor-Zionist camp. (Fischer 74-5)

In fact much political (and academic) ire has been directed at the group that led the Zionist movement and the young State of Israel until the 1970s. This group, which the late Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling has termed "*ahuslim*" (a Hebrew acronym, which is the Israeli version of the American wasps, and stands for secular, socialist, veteran, Zionist Ashkenazi) had lost its hegemonic position in Israeli society by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in favor of a fractured and divided Israeli political landscape, where more dominant authoritative leaders who promise stability in the face of an ever-changing world, and an increasingly fractured society, seem to have the upper hand (Kimmerling 14; Shafir 339).

And since 2009 that authoritative leader, to draw on Kimmerling's observation, has been Benjamin Netanyahu (after an earlier short tenure from 1996 to 1999), whose political base has consisted largely of Mizrahim and religious Jews, and who has routinely attacked the elitist Laborite order as hostile (unpatriotic, un-Jewish) to what has become the new Israeli mainstream. When the social protests broke out in 2011, Netanyahu and his supporters immediately described them as a political ploy to bring him and his supporters down by the old Israeli guard (Libeskind).

Even if the protesters were motivated by genuine economic distress, and their actions were spontaneous and driven by an authentic sense of rage, from the point of view of recent Israeli politics, Netanyahu was correct in seeing the protest movement as an attempt to restore the old political order: for him, quite understandably, the slogan "bring back the welfare state" meant bring back the Labor

party. While it is true that the protests were able at some point to reach a cross-section of Israeli society, the movements' core leaders did come from what Kimmerling termed the "*ahuslim*," and when the masses flooded the streets of Tel Aviv, most of them were indeed secular Ashkenazi who tend to vote to the more liberal parties on the Israeli political spectrum (Ram and Filc 20).

But there is something even deeper at play here, beyond the horse-race political analysis of which political party or camp may have benefited from the protests, and this goes to the heart of the demand to restore the welfare state. On the face of it, this demand seems like a universal demand that would benefit a wide array of groups and individuals in Israel. In fact, the majority of Likud and other right-wing parties in Israel tend to come from the lower economic strata. But was the call for the reconstitution of social programs indeed universal in nature, especially when it included a nostalgic invocation of a long gone era in Israeli society? Here an observation by Tony Judt about the welfare state that developed in the West in the aftermath of the defeat of fascism may be highly instructive:

[I]t was social democracy and the welfare state that bound the professional and commercial middle classes to liberal institutions in the wake of World War II. This was a matter of some consequence: it was the fear and disaffection of the middle class, which had given rise to fascism. Bonding the middle classes back to the democracies was by far the most important task facing postwar politicians—and by no means an easy one. In most cases it was achieved by the magic of "universalism." Instead of having their benefits keyed to income... the educated "middling sort" were offered the same social assistance and public services as the working population and the poor: free education, cheap or free medical treatment, public pensions and unemployment insurance. As a consequence, now that so many of life's necessities were covered by their taxes, the European middle class found itself by the 1960s with far greater disposable incomes than at any time since 1914. (Judt 52-3)

This reflection also holds true to the Israeli case, where the veteran, secular Ashkenazi class enjoyed the same "universal" welfare services as the poorer, mostly Mizrahi and religious, groups in Israel. This provided the secular Ashkenazi baby-boomers—overwhelmingly university-trained professionals—the types of economic advantages that no other group in Israel could aspire too. And the decline of the old welfare state has resulted in the fact that the children of the old secular-Ashkenazi order could not afford the type of lifestyle that their parents had attained, namely buying homes in the greater Tel Aviv area, the geographical core of the old Israeli elite.

And from this perspective, a protest movement that was sparked by rising housing costs in Tel Aviv and which galvanized around the call to reconstitute the old Israeli welfare state could very easily be understood as an attempt by the secular Ashkenazi camp in Israel to reclaim its hegemonic position in Israeli politics and be seen by other members of Israeli society, those supporting Netanyahu, as representing the limited interests of a (historically) privileged group at the expense of other groups who have seen their political fortunes rising since the 1970s. Thus the sectorial nature of the protest movement, doomed it to fail as a mass political movement that could bring about a radical re-alignment of the Israeli political map.

The issue that has defined Zionist and Israeli politics since the beginning of the modern Jewish national movement has been in its embryonic form the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine and after the creation of the State the broader Arab-Israeli conflict. Since 1967, the crucial political division in Israeli politics between Left and Right has been the one between those who seek some form of peace between Arabs and Israelis by way of some type of territorial compromise (Left) and those who support the vision of a Greater Israel, who reject territorial concessions, whether out of security concerns or out of devotion to some messianic vision of the Land of Israel and the redemption of the Jewish people in its promised land. When the social protests of 2011 began gaining steam, its leaders made a concerted effort to avoid questions regarding the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the potential relationship between Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians, and the conflict more broadly, and the economic changes that Israel has undergone over the past fifty years, changes which also may have contributed to the conditions that drove the protestors to the streets.

In fact, the leaders of the protest movement sought to present themselves as a-political when it came to the question of the conflict and the occupation. In early August 2011, several leaders of the settlement movement in the West Bank, headed by Dani Dayan, visited the Tent City in Tel Aviv and expressed their solidarity with the protesters, describing the call to combat rising housing costs as an issue that impacts all Israelis everywhere, including in the West Bank settlements (Filer).

The leaders of the protest movement, quite understandably did not want to be identified with a narrow sector of the Israeli political spectrum. Since the collapse of the Camp David summit in the summer of 2000 and the outbreak of the second Intifada later that year, the peace camp in Israel has seen its political support diminish quite dramatically. In fact, (Jewish) parties that support the peace

process have become niche parties that carry little political weight. The protesters sought to reject the "Leftist" label that would have insured that they would become a marginal social force. They wanted to appeal to all (Jewish) Israelis across the political spectrum. One of the slogans that the protesters carried in the rallies stated: "Neither Left nor Right: Solidarity above All." (Ram 22) As Talia Gorodess put it,

In order to succeed to the extent that it did, with thousands of people living in tent cities for a period of approximately 80 days, enjoying the backing of 90 per cent of the public (which 'identified with and/or supported' the protest), it had to put aside divisive issues and rise above traditional partisan politics. The protests therefore shunned any attempts of activists to sway discussion, introduce demands or even use language on signs in the squares that could be affiliated with either right- or left-wing politics and therefore alienate large portions of the public.

But not only could the leaders of protest movement, as we discussed earlier, not extend their base of support beyond their immediate social enclave of secular Ashkenazi—but they failed to situate their struggle within the broader parameters of Israeli politics. The issue that the protestors did not address was the crucial relationship between the transformation of the Israeli economy from state-controlled socialism and collectivism to free-market, privatized individualism and Israeli policies in the West Bank, especially since the Likud's rise to power in 1977.

The historian Daniel Gutwein has analyzed the relationship between the growing privatization of the Israeli economy and the dismantling of the Israeli welfare state and the massive investments in the West Bank settlements. According to Gutwein, "The enormous benefits, which the 'Land of Settlements' offers in housing, education, health, taxation, infrastructure and employment, have actually become a mechanism which compensated the lower classes for the damages inflicted upon them by the privatization of welfare services in Israel." One of the claims of the Israeli Left against the policies of right-wing governments has been that the various right-wing governments have invested more funds in the West Bank at the expense of the Israeli lower classes. Supporters of the Left have been baffled by the fact that working-class Israelis, mostly Mizrahim, did not realize that voting for the Right, therefore, went against their own economic interests (investment in their own struggling communities). What these liberal critics have failed to see is that the investment in the settlements has been, in fact as Gutwein has pointed out, an investment in the Israeli lower classes par excellence.

As Gutwein has shown, the majority of the Israelis who have migrated to the West Bank are not messianic zealots who seek to reconstitute the Third Temple (the common image of the settlers), but lower-class Israelis--Mizrahim, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and the ultra-Orthodox—who chose to move to the West Bank because of the economic incentives offered by the government (lower mortgages, tax breaks, disproportionately large number of government jobs). In fact, while the protesters in Tel Aviv called to bring back the Israeli welfare state, there is an Israeli welfare state in the West Bank that was created in order to draw Israeli Jews to the West Bank in order to curtail the possibility of a future territorial compromise. From this perspective, the attempt of the leaders of the protest movement to "transcend" the Left-Right divide has not only been a case of political myopia but a failure to understand the core forces of Israeli politics. Reconstituting the welfare state in the pre-1967 Israel cannot be achieved without dismantling the massive welfare investments beyond the Green Line. This is the fundamental issue of the Israeli political economy, and no real political change can be achieved without addressing it headfirst.

Moreover, the idea of social justice has to have universal content in order to have real meaning. The call for social justice cannot stop at the Green Line. Millions of Palestinians live under Israel control in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Their economic plight is far greater than any of the Jewish groups in Israel. In fact, the groups that comprise the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum in the areas that Israel controls are the Palestinians residents of the Territories, non-Jewish refugees and foreign workers in Israel and the Arab citizens of Israel.

A true call for social justice, that would have universal, political meaning, has to begin with addressing the economic predicament of the weakest groups of the social body, before dealing with the housing crisis inflicting middle-class Jewish students in the greater Tel Aviv area. A political movement that acts in the name of social justice cannot but acknowledge that as long as there exist deep gaps among various groups in society—the very logic of marketplace that needs these gaps in the name of competition—politics based on the ideals of social justice are unattainable.

The reluctance to address the political elephant in the Israeli public "room," has doomed the social protest movement to become a niche movement. Over the past several decades several "niche" parties that focused on specific issues and interests, while forsaking staking a position of the conflict—a

"retirees" party, various anti-religious, secular parties, parties that call for the legalization of marijuana—have appeared on the Israeli political radar, but they failed to make any substantial impact. It is all but impossible to offer a real platform of change in Israeli politics without addressing the core issues that ultimately determine how a majority Israelis cast their votes on Election Day.

The protestors in Tel Aviv directed much of their ire at the Israeli tycoons, who over the past three decades have consolidated under their control vast swaths of the Israeli economy, rather than attacking the fundamental issues underlying the Israeli political economy. The protestors, and their supporters in some quarters of Israeli media, claimed that this process of consolidation has stifled competition and resulted in rising prices of consumer goods (Rolnik). Regulating limits on monopolies, they proposed, and severing the deep connections between the business elite and Israeli politicians, are key to lowering prices. What this reveals is not only the protestors' predilection to avoid "sensitive" political issues that may drive away potential supporters, but also, more importantly to our analysis here, the fundamentally a-political, or post-political nature of the 2011 social protest movement: not only because its leaders failed to address the question of the occupation but because they remained captives of the current ideological condition, which is governed by the logic of neo-liberalism, and which by its very nature eschews real political action.

Just as they failed to address the key issue of Israeli politics, when it came to the more "purely" economic realm, the preference of the protestors has been market reforms rather than structural change. What they called for is some amorphous, wistful notion of a welfare state but not *the* state. A reversal of economic trends, that resulted in the dismantling of the welfare state, cannot be limited to more efficient re-distribution or better allocation of governmental funds—it has to address the core processes that resulted in the ending of the welfare programs. These changes were the privatization and de-regulation of the Israeli economy, which among other things led to the abolishment of many welfare programs. When Israel had a robust welfare system, it was a country where the state and its institutions played a crucial role in many aspects of its citizens' lives. Many aspects of the lives of Israelis, from the size of standard subsidized bread, to the content of programming on the airwaves, to the ability of individuals to purchase foreign currency and to travel abroad, were controlled and regulated by the state. This was the essence of Israeli *mamlachtiyut* or statism (or republicanism with a distinctly lower case "r")—the dominant social, ideological ethos that defined Israel in its early years. Bringing back the welfare state cannot be achieved while adhering to entirely different economic and social principles (privatization, individualism); the reconstitution of the welfare state can only be achieved as a byproduct of more fundamental changes, changes that demand genuine political action that seeks to re-assert real control by the government over the market. The differences between reforms (greater regulation on tycoons for example), that ultimately adhere to the dictates of the market, and political action that seeks to fundamentally alter the contours of the economic landscape bring us back to the movie *Fight Club*.

As we discussed earlier, the protagonist of *Fight Club* is an individual who is a product of the global, neo-liberal order, and who spends much of his professional life flying around the world. He developed an incurable case of insomnia, which he tried to cure through shopping sprees, attending support groups for terminally ill people, and then joining (or creating) a club where people inflict and receive random violent pain as a way to try and connect with their self: a self that has become a victim of the modern, alienating world of modern-day professionals.

In the 1960s, the ideological injunction--for the rapidly expanding middle-class and professional crowd--was to break away from the rigid, collectivist ethos of the post Second World War period: to explore the self through sexual liberation, drugs and consumption, to satisfy our desires without a menacing superego (the old collectivist, uniformist and puritanical order). There is a wonderful scene in David Lodge's "academic" novel *Changing Places: a Tale of Two Campuses*, which partly takes place in a fictionalized Berkeley at the height of the students' revolt and the flower-power revolution of the late 1960s. An older woman, a representative of the older generation, calls in to a radio show that has been a bastion of the youth movement in Berkeley, of sex drugs and rock n' roll. The older woman tells the host of the show that the only remedy to the utter breakdown of the social order is contained in two letters: N and O, to simply say no. She of course becomes the object of ridicule by the host, the champion of the ethos of saying yes to everything (198). The great irony is that four decades later, it is the Berkeley radicals who are the champions of saying "no"—and exploring the very meaning of the word no--as sexual harassment has become *the* defining struggle of radicals and progressives. There is still lots of sex, drugs and rock n' roll on the Berkeley campus, but they are now regulated by (ideological) restrictions aimed at curbing our sense of unrestrained enjoyment.

Since the 1980s, as Žižek so illuminatingly has shown, this sense of unrestrained freedom of the sexual (and consumption) revolution, the ideological injunction to enjoy ourselves--as consumers in an

ever-expanding marketplace, as individuals concerned with cultivating our sense of selves, as objects of desire--has created a sense of guilt and anxiety: we are destroying our bodies in this bacchanalia; we are destroying the planet with our unbounded consumerism. And so we began to impose limits on ourselves. As Žižek, linking consumerism and politics, described our ideological landscape: "In today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of war with no casualties (on our side, of course) as war without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics..." ("From Politics" 297). And this is precisely what was at play at Tel Aviv's social protests; it was revolution without a revolt, politics devoid of political action. The protestors created a (fleeting) sense of community that made them feel good about themselves and generated sympathy from others—but it never went beyond this stage; it was akin to the hero of *Fight Club* attending support groups or allowing lost souls to feel a sense of self and community by beating each other senseless.

The very problematic ending of *Fight Club* may offer a path out of the ideological quagmire, which among other things deprived the main character of the ability to sleep. At the end of the film, the fight club transforms into a guerilla (or terrorist) cell that, in the movie's final scene, blows up what looks like downtown office towers—the centers of power of the contemporary world. The movie's ending may suggest that as long as the individual is concerned with his own ills, he will not be able to escape the malaise caused by the dictates of the existing economic system. Only through action that leads to a radical restructuring of the ruling order redemption may come to the individual person.

What the terrorists blow up are the headquarters of credit card companies. They believe that only by erasing the records of global debt would the current global economic structure collapse (along with buildings being blown up), opening up a new ideological horizon. Only a radical restructuring can lead us out of the malaise brought about by the neo-liberal, globalized economic order (Wegner 125). If, as Fredric Jameson has suggested, it has become easier, in our current ideological order, to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism; *Fight Club's* ending may suggest that only a truly radical act can lead us out of this ideological predicament. And this act involves both unified, collective action and the will to confront the fundamental structures of the market place. As Jameson put it in his article "Future City," "As for consumption, it has been volatilized altogether in this perspective; and, as Marx feared, has become altogether spiritual. Materiality is here a mere pretext for our exercise of the mental pleasures: what is any longer particularly material in the consumption of an expensive new car one drives around the local streets and has washed and polished as frequently as one can?" The terrorists in *Fight Club* committed a very material act against the globalized order. They did not seek to reform the market, to make it more efficient, thus yielding more and more products for us to consume. The hero of *Fight Club* wanted to escape the ennui brought about by the culture of consumption. Social protests that only call for a more efficient marketplace and denies the need of the people to assert their will against the interests of the market cannot truly escape their ideological predicament.

Of course, the social protest movement did not have to become a guerilla army in order to achieve its goals. Israel is governed by democratic, parliamentary institutions and they are the arena where political goals could and should be attained. But the a-political nature of the social protest movement was not limited to its leaders' deliberate decision to ignore any issues relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also to their determination not to turn the movement into a political movement—to stay out of the political fray (Shenhav 126). Several factors may have played a role here, but paramount among them were a sense that young people have become disillusioned with the political process, and the general trend among progressive and liberal movements in the West over the past three decades to prefer to work within non-governmental institutions and organizations rather than try to affect change from within the political system itself. We can also add here the proliferation of social media sites as a way to reach people and spread ideas, which are seen as more effective than more traditional political means of rallying support behind political causes.

Eventually two of the leaders of the social protest movement, Stav Shafir and Itzik Shmuli have joined the Labor party and have become Members of Knesset. But their ability to generate genuine change in what has become a marginalized, if not outright moribund, opposition party, where they continue to stay away from the heated political issues related to the conflict, is rather limited. The biggest political winner though to emerge out of the wave of protests may have been Yair Lapid, a journalist, writer, actor and TV personality, who in July 2011 compared the protests to a slaves' revolt (Lapid). He went on to form a political party in 2013, the oddly named *Yesh Atid* (There is a Future), which swept into the Knesset with nearly 20% of the popular vote, many coming from people who

flooded the streets of Tel Aviv in the summer of 2011 and sought a political alternative to Netanyahu and his Likud government.

Lapid is a devout neo-liberal, who strongly believes in privatization and de-regulation. He is a champion of reforms that would increase competition in the marketplace. In the same article in which he compared the protestors in the streets to slaves, he also declared that, "We are not socialists my brothers the slaves, but we can identify injustice when we see it. The Israeli middle class is paying for those who are below them [the working class, E.K.], and that's fine, and for those who are above them [the rich, E.K.] and that is certainly not fine." A card-carrying member of the International he is not. Similarly, in September 2011, Daphni Leaf, the founder of Tel Aviv's tent city declared that, "We are not communists, not even socialists—we are for competition" (Datal). These are middle-class warriors who want to ease the burden on the professional classes—or as Lapid characterized them in the same article: the producers (in the new high-tech, globalized economy) as opposed to the lower classes (mostly Arabs and the ultra-orthodox), who live off the labor of the professional classes. This is not a call for deep, structural changes that would challenge the prevailing ideological order of the marketplace (competition) in the name of an alternative system.

Jacques Ranciere's observation on the nature of contemporary liberal politics may also prove instructive in evaluating the lack of political horizon in the current ideological climate:

There is one particular idea about the end of politics which goes like this: secularize politics as all other activities affecting the production and reproduction of individuals and groups have been secularized; give up the illusions attached to power, to the voluntaristic representation of the art of politics as a programme of liberation and a promise of happiness. Give up the assimilation of political *potestas* to the *imperium* of some idea, some *telos* of the group; make it more akin to the power of the secularized activities of work, exchange and pleasure. Conceive of an exercise of politics synchronous with the rhythms of the world, with the buzz of things, with the circulation of energies, information and desires: a politics exercised altogether in the present, with the future being nothing but an expansion of the present, paid for, of course, by the requisite austerities and cutbacks. Such is the new sense of time to which we are now said to be acceding. At last, they tell us, we are entering the twentieth century--several decades late. (6)

This is quite accurately what was at play on the streets of Tel Aviv: a secularized form of politics, in the sense that the protestors gave up on formulating a vision for the future. Instead they opted for fetishized, nostalgic sound bites (bring back the welfare state)—without addressing the core conditions that lay at the basis of the past social structures that they were pining for. *Fight Club* is also infused with a pining for pre-capitalist masculine social harmony—but its ending, however problematic, also offers a path forward (Giroux and Szeman 101). It forces us to consider what are the structural causes of our current social conditions that both the protestors in Tel Aviv and the members of the fight club were unhappy with.

One of the more successful movements to emerge in Israel, after the social protest movement of 2011, has been the (self-proclaimed) Mizrahi radical cultural activists, who made headlines with the establishment of *A'rs Poetica*--a group of Mizrahi poets who challenge the perceived dominant Ashkenazi voice in Israeli poetry--in 2013. These activists do not seek to advance a universal message; theirs is a platform rooted in identity politics: to create an alternative Mizrahi cultural voice. As Ron Kahlili, a writer and filmmaker, who has been one of the most outspoken voices of this group, wrote, "The Mizrahi tribe, as I view it, is divided into many sub-tribes that are mostly hostile to one another. The bourgeois Mizrahi—a group that has grown dramatically over the last decade—is hostile to the poor Mizrahi; the poor Mizrahi detests the intellectual Mizrahi; the Mizrahi settler vehemently opposes the Mizrahi Left and so forth." And Kahlili's hope is that the Mizrahi tribe will come together as a unified force to dethrone the hegemonic Ashkenazi establishment. This is identity politics in which class differences, or ideological differences (Left and Right) are irrelevant in the face of a single-minded cultural struggle: to create a new cultural hegemony on the basis of ethnic identity.

Nadav Peretz, another activist who supports the call for enhancing the visibility of Mizrahiyut in the Israeli cultural realm, has argued that the success of *A'rs Poetica* and that of other Mizrahi cultural activists is rooted in the fact that they did not try to overthrow the existing cultural establishment; rather they used the fact that we live in a privatized public sphere to carve out their own space for cultural activity (Peretz). Instead of fighting the dominant ideology, they used its very logic: competition, to expand its reach and cultivate their own voice in it. This is a revolution that celebrates the political status quo rather than challenges it. In fact, Peretz suggests that trying to become the new establishment, the new Mizrahi power, should not adopt the very political methods of the old Ashkenazi order (Labor Zionism). Instead, the new Mizrahi activists should adopt the spirit of the free-market and

privatization (the ideology that the Likud championed as it came to power with the support of Mizrahi voters) and work from within it.

The advocates of the new Mizrahi cultural politics choose to focus on a single goal (enhance the Mizrahi presence in the cultural sphere) in lieu of a universal platform. They have identified it as the way to achieve goals in our fragmented, privatized society; and so far they have proved to be quite successful. The social protest movement advocated a universal message that transcends ethnic divisions, but it operated under the rules of the market and competition, eschewing real political action in favor of feel-good slogans. Had the social activists decided to pursue their economic goals as part of a broader challenge to the political system—bring back the state in the full meaning of the sense; choose class struggle over competition—they may have had more long-lasting legacy.

In the extraordinary Israeli novel from 2014 *Melech, Balash* (Melech, Detective, which was published under the pseudonym Ben Paul), the narrator, who sees the 2011 protestors in Tel Aviv from his living-room window, compares the people out there, on the streets, to ants and raises the following passing thoughts: "What has happened to the general process of growing loneliness, the steps that researchers who preceded me described as the process of isolation? Is nature (human nature) revolting? Or is this the final, desperate explosion that always precedes the final capitulation? And may be not so? Perhaps, on the contrary, the veil is about to be shattered, the desire to connect will prevail and in the future we will no longer seal ourselves off from one another... in air-conditioned cages with our devices, and we will return to the pack?" (221). It may now seem that the middle-class bliss of air-conditioned cages and devices has won over the urge to unite against social evils. We are living in the ideological age of exchange and competition, of the need to constantly upgrade our devices, to enhance our ethnic and cultural uniqueness, not of political revolutions.

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