Looking for a new legitimacy: internal challenges within the Israeli Left

Abstract

Considering current Israeli society in terms of the asymmetric power relations and privileges experienced by its heterogeneous population, this paper aims at questioning the role played by Israeli left-wing parties and grassroots organizations since the failure of the Oslo ‘peace process’, with a focus on the aftermath of the legislative elections of 2015. In general, most of the political initiatives led by the Zionist Left can be seen to have lost the internal legitimacy they need in order to challenge the assumptions underpinning the power asymmetries.

By taking account of those narrative identities excluded from the mainstream Zionist Left discourse, among which are the Palestinian citizens of Israel, Mizrahi Jews, women’s feminist activists and African asylum seekers, I attempt to problematize the ethnic, national, class and gender cleavages emerging in a situation which includes some complex instances of dispossession and marginalization. In a settler colonial context such as the one prevailing in Israel, I question whether the left-wing has been able to represent and to support the rights of the most marginalized communities, and to face up to the neo-liberal and ethno-nationalist drift which is gathering increasing momentum inside the country.

Deploying an approach that is contrary to the predominant narrative, which addresses the parties and the grassroots groups of the Israeli Left as types of activism based on a single and homogeneous platform, I draw attention to alternative socio-political initiatives that have often been silenced by the mainstream, such as those initiated by radical left-wingers, ’48 Palestinians, Mizrahim, feminist activists, and also more recently by African migrants and asylum seekers. In this way, the paper also deals with the necessity of providing a means of expression for the critical points of view emerging from the most marginalized backgrounds of Israeli society, a need which is underlined by a good number of my interviewees, and a need which, if fulfilled, could enable the building up of a new and broader legitimacy within the Israeli leftist political arena.
Keywords: Left, Zionist hegemony, Israel, political legitimacy, grassroots activism, marginality

1. Introduction

Just as the January 2013 Israeli elections, which resulted in the formation of a new coalition led by Benjamin Netanyahu, came after a military operation called ‘Pillar of Cloud’ which took place in 2012 in the Gaza Strip, the most recent Israeli elections in March 2015 occurred a few months after another military operation in the Gaza Strip named ‘Protective Edge’, which was pursued during the summer of 2014, when more than 2,200 Palestinians were killed (B’Tselem 2015, 5). The elections of 2015 have been characterized by the varied background of the right-wing parties, and especially by the political strategy of Netanyahu, which produced another election victory, albeit in a rather last minute and unexpected way. The Zionist left-wing leadership, on the other hand, failed to meet expectations and to be perceived by its electorate as having legitimacy, and the ‘Zionist Union’ (the coalition between the Labor Party, led by Isaac Herzog, and Hatnuah, founded by the former leader of Kadima Party’s Tzipi Livni) produced a disappointing performance in a final neck and neck situation with Likud\(^i\).

Within the settler colonial framework (Piterberg 2008, Veracini 2006 and 2010, Wolfe 1999) and as analyzed by a growing literature dealing with Israeli internal politics (Ghanem 2010, Grinberg 2010, Filc 2011, Pedahzur 2012), since the failure of the Oslo Accords the Israeli political panorama has moved from a ruling conservative coalition led by Likud to a more extreme right-wing scenario in which Netanyahu’s party has continued to keep a hold on power. In such a context, although the mainstream Israeli Zionist Left, namely the Labor Party along with what has been called the ‘peace camp’ (Bar-On 1996, Hermann 2009, Kaminer 1996), has announced its support for Palestinian statehood and its will to resume negotiations, it has not taken a clear position against the construction of settlements in the West Bank and the most recent rounds of military aggression in the Gaza Strip.

Looking at this situation, and with the outcome of the most recent legislative elections in 2015 in mind, this paper focuses on the contemporary nuances existing within Israeli leftist politics, in terms of both political parties and grassroots movements, and on the decline in importance of the role of the left and of its legitimacy, especially when viewed from the most marginalized communities and groups\(^ii\) within Israeli society. This leads to a detailed examination of the
asymmetries of power and privileges that have grown up between Jews themselves and between Jews and non-Jews, and I will attempt to connect this reality with the internal debate that is going on inside the Israeli Left, and more specifically among those political activists who have been named as being of the ‘radical Left’. This will allow me to shed light on the most critical and significant perspectives, strategies, and initiatives that have emerged from the experiences of several activists I met and interviewed during my latest fieldwork in Israel in November and December 2014, along with their analyses related to the results of the recent elections.

In order to examine issues of marginalization and inequality experienced from diverse components and backgrounds inside Israel, I argue that it is necessary to consider the relationship between the Israeli Left’s legitimacy and some further political alternatives that have called into question the Zionist hegemonic structure of Israeli society. In detail, I aim at contextualizing the weakening of this political legitimacy, and the reasons why this decline, as described in diverse ways since the early 2000s (Levy 2009, Pappé 2001), has been possible. This analytical pathway also directs attention towards the fact that Israel has become an increasingly fragmented society shaped by the growing ethno-national and class conflicts (Kemp, Newman, Ram and Yiftachel 2004, Kimmerling 2008, Pappé and Hilal 2010, Ram 2011, Shafir and Peled 2002, Yiftachel 2006).

Building on this theoretical framework, the study I elaborate in the following pages aims to critically interrogate the legitimacy and the role of the Israeli Left in its wider sense, as seen through the eyes of those opposing the Zionist hegemonic mainstream. In this direction, and going along the lines set out by some academic debates dealing with the Israeli Left and its internal criticism (Greenstein 2014, Honig-Parnass 2011, Karpf, Klug, Rose and Rosenbaum 2008, Leon 2004), this paper discusses the reasons why interlinking a series of grassroots struggles that have involved different marginalized actors with the political legitimacy of the Israeli Left, still remains a challenging task, both within academia and in the context of recent Israeli politics. In doing this, in addition to examining the current discussion among radical leftists, I also focus on the most marginalized communities and groups, including the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the Mizrahim, and women and feminist activists, African migrants and asylum seekers, in an attempt to uncover some examples of politics that have been at the margins of Israeli society and excluded from the Zionist hegemony. In spite of their position on the margins, these examples play key role in expressing internal critical positions, and addressing the lack of credibility of the traditional Zionist Left.
2. The declining legitimacy of the Zionist Left

The Israeli context emerging in the aftermath of the 2015 legislative elections reveals a country that is undergoing very deep socio-economic fragmentation, and is exposed to the increasing volume of ethno-nationalist discourses. On the one hand, the far right-wing scene seems to have invested in a discourse aiming at reinforcing its political legitimacy, whilst on the other hand, the Zionist Left has lost its role in the Israeli political panorama and left aside its primary principles. Referring specifically to the latter bloc and to the most recent creation of the ‘Zionist Union’, the situation which has resulted from the latest elections has represented something that was already predicted by the majority of leftist activists who have been protagonists in several political struggles since the early 1990s. In general terms, and according to several political activists I met throughout my field research, during the whole electoral debate the Labor Party has been viewed as rather elitist and disconnected from the everyday reality of the Israeli population, while the right-wing has played its cards explicitly by denouncing the risk of recognizing an independent Palestinian state and by advocating the disqualification of any Palestinian citizen present in Israel from participation in the political system.

Looking at the Israeli Zionist Left, after the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin two years later they have passed through a prolonged and ongoing decline, failing to counter the view of a wide section of the public who supported the narrative that what failed to materialize during the ‘peace process’ has been due to the political decisions made by the Left. On this, it has been said, with some justification, that the three bullets that assassinated Rabin also determined the end of the Israeli Left, since they prevented Palestinian citizens of Israel from becoming part of the political space, and working together with the Jews (Grinberg 2015). Moreover, that period was the last one in which a left-wing bloc existed, consisting of Labor, Meretz and the Arab parties.

Accordingly, it is necessary to contextualize the declining political course of the Zionist Left, which means going back to the way through which the Zionist Left contributed to the failure of the Oslo Accords. In fact, if it is true that the ‘peace process’ broke down because of the Likud leadership’s rejection of the deal, it is critical to underline how ‘the more fundamental cause behind the loss of trust and the loss of momentum was the Israeli policy of expanding settlements on the West Bank which carried on under Labor as well as Likud’ (Shlaim 2005, 283), with this activity
precluding the end of the conflict and, consequently, the establishment of any viable Palestinian state. Because of this, the Zionist Left has gradually lost its legitimacy among its political activists, who have either abandoned their active political roles or joined in more radical leftist groups and initiatives. Many of my interviewees have experienced similar political transformations, and one of them, Ofer Neiman, co-founder of Boycott from Within⁶, has described this to me thus:

when I was a teenager I was a liberal Zionist, according to Meretz and B’tselem. During the Oslo years I was supporting the process, but I was sort of more supportive of Gush Shalom, another disillusionment I had. When the second Intifadah broke up, I joined a group for military refusers, Yesh Gvul, and also in Peace Now. First, I had no idea, I thought we could be together as a broad coalition and work together, but after I became more critical. In a way, it was a very gradual process, I came to the conclusion I do not want to justify the foundation of Israel and I see the connection between the problems of the occupation as an extension of the Israeli political system, an extension of Zionism, by taking more land and moving Palestinians out is much broader than going back to 1967. […] Here, in Israel, even the Jewish working class is in a way a master race in comparison with the Palestinians. For instance, I used to be also active in Hadash⁷, I am not longer active in it because I came to the conclusion that the socialist approach does not work here in an apartheid society (Neiman 2014).

Moreover, the Israeli socio-economic situation has been worsening, and entering a stagnation that has amplified the gap between the richest and the poorest. The most demanding aspect has been the dramatic increase in the number of people below the poverty line, while a restricted financial elite has been gaining greater control over political and economic power (OECD 2014). Although the aim of this article is more focused on the current reality of the Israeli Left, of its forms of activism and of its internal challenges, it is not possible to overlook what happened in the summer of 2011, when protest activity was led mainly by what has become known as the ‘Tent Movement’.

In spite of the wide media coverage of what has been perceived by some as a crucial moment of hope among Israelis (Reider and Abu Sarah 2011, Sherwood 2011), pleading for social justice has not been sufficient to achieve greater fairness within Israeli society. By underlining its apolitical nature, the Tent Movement leadership decided to ignore the ways through which the military occupation, along with the expansion of illegal settlements in the Palestinian territories, have led to deterioration of the Israeli welfare state (Hever 2010, Who Profits⁸ 2015). The main
reasons why the 2011 protests did not tackle such issues can be associated with both the fear of losing their widespread support from common people and the fact that the majority of Israelis is still more interested in maintaining the military occupation and, thus, in maintaining the security discourse, rather than caring about the creation of a more affordable welfare state (Gordon 2012, Leibner 2012, Levy 2011, Ohayon 2011). In particular, the unfeasibility of interrelating political and social struggles has deepened the internal fragmentation founded on class, ethnic, national, gender, and political discriminations within Israeli society. As underlined by most of my interviewees, the majority of activists from the radical Left have not joined in such a wave of protests, while, on the other hand, they have criticized the Tent Movement as the expression of the mainstream, and as serving to hide the ongoing military occupation.

In relation to the factors discussed above and to those historical trajectories that have transformed the Israeli left-wing arena, it is also important to mention the process of ‘NGO-ization’ as something which characterizes several peace-oriented organizations associated with the Zionist Left. This concept refers to the way in which diverse forms of grassroots activism have moved towards more professionalized and institutionalized structures without considering the peculiarity of each context in which the political initiatives take place, and particularly the increasing influence of foreign donors, and, as a result, the organizations have mostly become depoliticized. The concept of ‘NGO-ization’ is cropping up in debates within academia from different disciplines and areas of study (Choudry and Kapoor 2013, Grewal and Bernal 2014, Lang 2013), and it has also been used in the Israeli-Palestinian context and with specific regard to women’s activism both in the West Bank (Jad 2004) and inside Israel (Herzog 2008). Despite the growing relevance of this political pattern in Israeli leftist politics, the Zionist Left has not openly taken on board the notion that the effects generated by such a process have significantly modified the policies, practices and tools of several leftist grassroots organizations.

3. Radical left-wing activists and their position inside Israel

At present, a general sense of ‘no alternative’ has spread across Israeli citizens, which can also be defined in terms of ‘the silent majority of complacency’ (Derfner, 2015), and is immobilizing any kind of feasible societal change. One of the resultant consequences has been the stigmatization of the radical Left, as being one of the major actors struggling against the hegemonic
structure of Israeli society. This stigmatization has taken place using means which have even included violence, something which has become a regularly-occurring symptom of the current political stagnation, and through the launch of intimidating attacks with the intention of intensifying the level of the pressure silencing dissent inside Israel, with these being directed firstly against the Palestinians, the non-Jews par excellence, and also against the most radical Israeli Jewish left-wingers. In most recent times, such a reality occurred during the military operation ‘Protective Edge’ in summer 2014, when the level of intra-Jewish hatred reached a frightening peak, although similar episodes of denigration towards leftist activists were not new in Israeli contemporary history (Filc 2010).

In a parallel way, in spite of the escalation in the number of Palestinian civilian casualties in Gaza throughout July and August 2014, the mainstream Zionist Left did not, with a few exceptions from some members of Meretz, join in the street protests organized in opposition to this military operation, which was also defined as an ‘incremental genocide in the Gaza ghetto’ (Pappé 2014). These mobilizations against the attack on Gaza were mostly led by radical leftist grassroots organizations, such as the Coalition of Women for Peace, the Socialist Struggle Movement, Anarchists against the Wall, New Profile, and Tarabut-Hithabrut (the Arab-Jewish Movement for Social & Political Change), together with a very few political parties including the Da’am Workers’ Party and Balad, and several Palestinian groups who were active mostly in Tel Aviv, but also in the major mixed Palestinian-Jewish cities such as in Jaffa, Haifa, and Lod.

In opposition to these political initiatives, over the summer of 2014, slogans saying ‘death to Arabs’ and ‘death to leftists’ became common (Scheindlin 2014, Zonszein 2014) and, as reported by several interviewees, radical leftist activists experienced violent assaults from supporters of organized right-wing groups, such as Lehava, who are against any kind of assimilation between Jews and Palestinians, Shadow’s Lions led by a well-know rapper named ‘Shadow’, and also from some more spontaneous right-wing factions, in some cases related to soccer fans’ clubs, who began to frequently attack Israeli Jewish left-wingers in the streets during public demonstrations (Mualem 2014).

Regarding the peculiarity of the internal political debate among radical leftist activists, some of my interviewees have preferred to define themselves as either ‘non-Zionist’ or ‘anti-Zionist’, seeing Zionism as one of the major objects of their political struggle. On the other hand, in further cases, activists have not really felt the need to define themselves by means of exclusive references to Zionism, and they have preferred to use broader self-definitions of the diverse, and parallel,
narrative identities with which they have engaged. However, generally speaking, the political perspectives articulated by several Israeli Jewish leftists I met have confirmed a general sense of isolation within their society and sometimes also among their families and friendships, as described in the following words:

sometimes I define myself as a political and cultural refugee, exiled in my own community, sometimes a Jew from occupied Palestine/apartheid Israel. I do not define myself either as an Israeli or as a Palestinian Jew, although I could do in the future, but I do not now. This is my house on the emotional level, but I do not have any narrative, any story to identify with, I am anti-nationalist anyway. I learn to live on very basic identity food, my relationships, my actions, my places. The stories, the narratives, the symbols, the songs I do not identify with, it is a kind of cut off. I do not have a new identity to compensate for what I lost. It is disturbing to be isolated, but it is not disturbing to be without a national narrative I identify with. I do not need it (Aviyah 2014).

In connection with the demise of the Oslo ‘peace process’, the present crisis of Israeli left-wing activism provides evidence of how the relationship between the Zionist Left and the Palestinian struggle can be described as an historical oxymoron rather than a source of real support for the Palestinian people in striving to achieve self-determination. In fact, most of those Israelis who have been involved in peace-oriented initiatives throughout the 1990s have questioned neither the hegemonic Zionist consensus within Israel nor any feasible change of Israelis’ consciousness towards the Palestinian cause. Such a perspective has been reinforced by the fact that both the Labor and Meretz partiesviii:

do not want to deal with anything through which they could lose votes. In particular, they do not want to have a clear position on the conflict since they would lose votes. They do not do anything, they do not have any perspective on the conflict. They do not have an alternative socio-political plan as well, because this would lead them into losing votes (Yahni 2014).

As a consequence, this has implied a reduction in numbers participating, kinds of mobilization and the articulating of effective proposals for alternative pathways to be taken, and has also led to the development of a deeper sense of frustration experienced by many radical left-wing activists. For example, the majority of my interviewees, who belong to diverse backgrounds among the Israeli Left political scenario and often express multiple narrative identities, have experienced the complexity of being outsiders from within their own society, from which so little internal criticism has risen up. On this subject, some of them have pressed for action inside Israel to explain
to the Israeli people that it is still possible to work on societal changes from within and to push the Israeli government itself to take another strategy; on the other hand, other activists, who no longer have any hope for internal transformation, have continued to be involved, suggesting something different could only come from abroad\textsuperscript{x}.

Another significant consequence of similar collective as well as individual conditions experienced by the majority of activists from the radical Left has arisen due to a sense of alienation. In addition to the sense of isolation previously mentioned, this is an alienation that is related to the huge disillusion felt with regard to any possible change in the near future. This has caused a disconnection from everyday life that the activist Guy Butavia from Ta’ayush (the Arab Jewish Partnership where a number of Israelis and Palestinians struggle together with the aim of ending the Israeli military occupation and of reaching full civil equality by means of everyday non-violent actions) has described as follows:

I am living in a bubble, it is like the activists’ family, I have only relationship with people whose views are more or less the same as mine; also with family it was hard, now I have disconnected relationships with most of my larger family which have totally different views, many of them are settlers, so it is very hard to have relationships with them. In my view, activism is not like one part of my life, but it is surrounding me, it is very hard to separate parts of life from others (Butavia 2015).

If historically a few examples of dissident political activism towards the Zionist hegemony have arisen in Israel, such as the most well-known group called Matzpen in the 1970s and 1980s (Davis 2003, Greenstein 2014), the ongoing climate of fear and intimidation against Israeli leftists has become commonly accepted in a society increasingly dominated by the silencing of dissent and, in particular, of alternative political discourses growing up from some of the most marginalized actors within Israel. As will be also discussed in the next paragraph, many of these contributions have confronted controversial concerns about the increase of power asymmetries, and can be considered a testimony to the attempt to spread critical debates inside Israel, and to oppose the ‘passive Left scenario’ (Scheindlin 2014).

4. From the margins to the core of alternative politics

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At least, the most current political events inside Israel have enabled us to get a clearer view of the real nature of the Zionist Left, and also helped us to speculate on whether Israel can be a democracy for its Jewish citizens, although it is apparent that it is not for the non-Jews, since it is becoming even more repressive especially for Palestinians (Gordon 2015). Nonetheless, as I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, and in spite of its emergence from very different backgrounds and histories, alternative politics advocated by marginalized actors and directed towards the Zionist hegemony, along with the intersecting ethnic, national, class, and gender narrative identities of these actors, requires further examination with reference to the present Israeli political context.

Starting with the analysis of the most historic marginalized community inside Israel, namely the Palestinian citizens of Israel, in March 2015 a relatively unexpected electoral result was achieved by the Palestinians inside Israel, who created a united front called the Joint Arab List by involving the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash), the United Arab List, the National Democratic Assembly (Balad), and the Arab Movement for Renewal (Ta’al) to pursue the cause of full democracy and equality within Israel. With participants coming from diverse political traditions, such a unity has required the identification of common tasks, and specifically a national common front to overcome their internal divergences. In contrast with past initiatives that resulted in disillusion, and as a result of what has been defined as ‘the winter of despair, but also the spring of hope’ (Diab 2015b), in 2015 elections they reached a third position without signing either an agreement with the Zionist Camp or one with Meretz, as the Palestinian leaders claimed that those parties have only represented an intra-Jewish discourse.

Seen as a political transformation among ‘48 Palestinians, as the Palestinian citizens of Israel prefer to define themselves, the united front of the Joint Arab List has been also considered as a potential tool to counter the calls to boycott the elections that have frequently been made in previous times. In order to achieve this strategic aim, one of their major focuses has continued to be the Palestinian national identity, since this is the core issue which determines their methods of resistance and internal struggle, and this approach is especially supported by generations of Palestinians who have increasingly identified their social as well as political objectives in terms of a collective national struggle of non-Jews in a majority Jewish society.

In support of this political initiative, several Israeli Jewish radical leftists voted for the Joint List. The discourse surrounding these developments owes much to those activists who have gone on fighting against the exclusive status of Israel, in which only a powerful section of society has rights
and privileges, and calling for a state that will be able to adopt an inclusive vision among all its citizens. With the primary aim of questioning the idea of Israel as a place only for Jews, but also going beyond their common feeling of disillusionment, this push for political transformation has obtained significant encouragement from within the Israeli radical left-wing, in spite of uncertainty as to whether it represents a real change. By speaking on behalf of the most oppressed people within Israel, they have declared themselves to represent not only the interests of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, but also of Israeli Jewish voters supporting a political project through which Israel will move from being a Jewish state to a state for all its citizens. For such reasons, several Israeli Jewish radical leftists have given their vote to the Joint List, as Guy Butavia has confirmed in this statement made prior to the election:

> generally I do not believe that change will come from within the Israeli public, I do not see any change coming from the next elections. The only thing that has changed is that the Arab parties are united, it is good, but I am not sure it will be really effective. I do not know if it is good to be part of this game or not, it is also a question for myself. I’m going to vote because of this Joint Arab List, but I am not sure if we will create any difference (Butavia 2015).

Although this list looked beyond the deterministic idea that ’48 Palestinians cannot be represented by prominent leaders and cannot influence the Israeli political structure, a number of critical statements have been expressed from different perspectives, calling attention to the role of Palestinian political parties as well as grassroots movements inside Israel. First, what has emerged from the 2015 elections has demonstrated how the Joint List can be considered an important step forward, but more in terms of symbolism than as a real transformation based on the effective representation of Palestinians within the state of Israel. Second, such a political challenge has been questioned saying that ‘the List is the wrong antidote, addressing the symptom rather than the root cause’ (Sultany 2015) since the enthusiastic celebration of the Joint List has moved the prospect from the issue of inclusion and active participation to a slow but relentless process of exclusion from the Israeli social and political scene, at both formal and grassroots levels. Third, even though the List will not produce any substantial impact on Israeli politics, its role could partially influence the Palestinian Authority, as a result of the evident demise of the two-state solution and its consequential necessity to undertake a new strategy in line with an intra-Palestinian agreement that includes Palestinians from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and also from inside Israel (Pappé in Diab 2015b).

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Another major marginalized community of Israeli society, the Mizrahim, have represented heterogeneous standpoints rather than distinctive positions, placing themselves between leftists and rightists, between religious and secular people, and between Palestinians and Ashkenazi Jews (Chetrit 2010, Shenhav 2006). In general terms, the Zionist Left, mainly led by middle class Ashkenazi Jews, has historically delegitimized the Mizrahi claim, focusing more on the Palestinian cause, on the conflict and on the military occupation, and pretending that there has been not a social, economic, political, and cultural gap between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim due to the power asymmetry of the former over the latter (Dahan-Kalev 2004, Ghanem 2010, Lavie 2014, Shenhav 2012). Also, by means of an orientalist approach, the Mizrahim have often been perceived as people coming from underdeveloped countries and without adequate tools, both economically and socio-culturally speaking, to have an influential role in the Left as well as in Israeli society in general. As explained by one of the leading Mizrahi feminist activists and director of Achoti (‘Sister’ in Hebrew) - for Women in Israel, Shula Keshet:

there is a huge difference between the situation, the way of living in the Mizrahi, Palestinian and Ethiopian periphery if you compare them to the white Jewish colonies. We are the majority of Israeli society, both Jews and non-Jews, the colored community, such as the Mizrahi, Palestinian, Ethiopian, are being neglected, oppressed, getting a very small percentage of the state budget, while the rich hegemony is white Jewish Ashkenazi, they have always got the most of the state budget. The whole power structure is on their behalf. The gaps are in all spheres of life, social, cultural, educational, housing. It’s not that the gaps and the oppressions are only in a few issues, they go throughout everything. There are no equal opportunities in the Israeli state, even though they say Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, the reality is another (Keshet 2014).

Further to such marginalization and controversial patronage from within the panorama of the Israeli Left, the divide between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi leftists has increasingly enlarged in the most recent years. If solidarity with the most deprived parts of society should have been considered as one of the main founding pillars of the left-wing, on the other side such a socio-economic, political, cultural and ethnic disparity has represented a demagogic discourse - used mainly by the Zionist Left - that has not provided any solution to the problem of power asymmetries inside Israel.

A similar reality has become even more difficult for those Mizrahi radical activists, as told by a few of my interviewees, who are living in between two challenging and, in several cases, opposite narrative identities, namely being leftists and belonging to a community in which the huge
majority sustain right-wing and nationalist visions. Accordingly, this has explained the reason why Mizrahi left-wingers have never held influential positions in the Israeli Left arena, though a few Mizrahi political initiatives have been historically recognized, such as the Black Panthers which grew up in the 1970s and is still represented by one of its founders, Reuven Abergel, who called for boycotting of the 2015 elections (Abergel 2015), and the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition that has attempted to overcome the separation established among Mizrahim, Palestinians and other marginalized communities experiencing common struggles against analogous inequalities and discriminations.

Another significant component that has been silenced in the Israeli political scenario, and in a few cases excluded from the leftists’ voice too, has been represented by women’s and feminist movements. Whilst struggling not only for advancement of their rights, but also to recommend an alternative view of society, they have problematized the major challenges women have to face every day, due mainly to ethnic, social, national and economic disparities. Such activists have attempted to bring their differences out, although internal asymmetries have continued to exist among them, as demonstrated by the leading position taken by Ashkenazi middle-class feminists towards women activists coming from the most marginalized communities (Dahan-Kalev 2001, Lavie 2011, Shadmi 2003). In addition, as some of my interviewees have highlighted, a number of feminist activists have suffered from panic and depression following episodes of gender-based violence and sexual harassments that have occurred within the left-wing groups themselves as well as from the attacks of right-wing groups, as happened during the breaking out of extreme violence throughout demonstrations in the summer of 2014, when many of them were standing up against the military operation in the Gaza Strip (Raz 2014, Scheindlin 2014).

Through both the institutional and the grassroots discourse, the building up of a solid relationship and mutual cooperation between women feminist activists and the Zionist Left has been at times problematic. In the specificity of the most recent elections in 2015, even with the increasing number of female MKs elected, especially those belonging to the left-wing, the integration of women’s narratives from diverse political groups and identities into decision-making positions has not been feasible, since a gender-focused agenda has been put on the table in a very few occasions (Salaime 2015).

What’s more, in relation to the transformation of women’s role within social and political movements in the last decade, apart from the most well-known feminist initiatives such as the Coalition of Women for Peace founded in 2000 by the union of nine feminist organizations,
examples of the most recent ones, such as those called ‘Courage’ and ‘Women Wage Peace’, have suggested the enlargement of women’s participation beyond past paradigms and approaches. Whilst the current forms of women’s feminist mobilization have been sometimes put into question by the most historic ones, the intersection of plural narrative identities has needed to accompany any development of women’s feminist political activism in the direction of improvement of a broader opposition to the present situation of ongoing violent de-humanization by way of a gendered specific awareness, as underlined by one of the participants in historic feminist activism, Edna Zaretsky-Toledano:

I really feel that we must bring the very humanistic basic concepts and terminology back, I feel that we as women - although we have also very right-wing women - must work on the concept of humanistic perception. My dignity is your dignity. If I reduce you and de-humanize you I am de-humanizing myself. If there is not security for you, there is not security for me. If we are not going towards the right direction, if we are part of the perception of a Jewish state then we are doomed. I feel responsibility, I am trying to see who we can mobilize, even though we need the help of the world to put pressure on Israel. The situation is exploding, our society has become indifferent to the ‘Other’, not only the Palestinians, but many ‘Others’ (Zaretsky-Toledano 2014).

Such a discourse has also been relevant in relation to the internal debate growing up inside Israeli women’s and feminist organizations dealing with asymmetric relationships based on class, ethnic and national disparities and among the women activists themselves. Therefore, in parallel with what has happened in general terms between the Ashkenazi white middle-class left-wingers and activists from marginalized communities inside Israel, discriminatory actions among and within different women’s and feminist backgrounds have taken place (Lavie 2011). On the other hand, and in contrast to the creation of further ‘peripheries’ defined by geographical, ethnic, political, socio-economic, educational and gendered divisions across the country, many of these women and feminist activists have sustained the necessity of recognizing connections among the numerous forms of power asymmetry that have remained in existence up to the present time.

Among other groups that have often been ignored by the political agenda of the Israeli Left, African migrants and asylum seekers - mostly from Eritrea and Sudan - have experienced extreme difficulties inside the state of Israel, living with threats of jail and deportation by the Israeli authorities. By occupying one of the worst and lowest places in the Israeli societal ranking, especially since the beginning of 2014, when hundreds of protesters demonstrated against the
dreadful conditions of detention and difficulty in obtaining refugee status, African asylum seekers have asked recognition as political actors. In such a context, the so-called ‘Marches for Freedom’ have set out alternative ways of resisting those policies developed by the Israeli government that are hostile to the refugees (Sheen 2015). At the same time, as the Zionist Left has not been involved in such issues, just a few Israeli leftist organizations have provided legal and political assistance to them. One of the activists working in the strategy team to help asylum seekers for logistics, authorizations, and contacts with media, Tamar Aviyah, described:

they very quick pushed out Israelis, they wanted to run their own struggle. This was the first time I saw Israelis working in total support of, not being involved in the strategy. I was very proud of it. But it fell apart very quickly. […] The Sudanese activists made very strong campaigns about the great violations of international law these people had to pass through (and also regarding the issue of missing passports), the diplomats were shocked. I do not know any country that sends back its asylum seekers to the exact country where they run away from, only Israel does it. This was ignored by the Israeli NGOs and was not part of the public debate (Aviyah 2014).

As the above testimony proves, only a tiny group of radical left-leaning activists, along with a few human rights organizations such as Physicians for Human Rights, the Hotline for Refugees, and Assaf – the Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, have backed the African refugees’ voice as a part of the widespread intersectional struggle against oppression and discriminations inside Israel. On the whole, such forms of activism are essentially concentrated on achieving a recognized role in the Israeli political scenario, as an essential step towards obtaining a full citizenship status that does not relegate them to the margins of society.

5. Conclusion

The Israeli current reality has shown an ongoing exclusivist conception of politics, through which it has been possible to preserve considerable gaps of economic, political and cultural power among its citizens. According to the latest electoral results in March 2015, what has become clear is the unfeasibility of reaching internal change in the near future as well as of making progress
forward the historical two-state solution (Pappé 2015). Although this outcome has confirmed the trend in the Israeli political panorama which is moving much more towards a narrow-minded neo-liberal and ethno-nationalist view, it has also provided a glimpse of some new options that cannot be ignored as potential for managing alternatives to the present impasse.

Whilst in some cases the inclusion of more heterogeneous voices can generate a consequential difficulty in recognizing further internal disparities (Young 1986), I believe a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the Zionist Left and the most marginalized components of Israeli society is still required in order to understand whether and, if so, in which way, its political legitimacy has progressively declined. In this sense, such a story of hierarchies, divisions and exploitations has been strictly correlated with people’s identification with their own class, gender, ethnic, national, political narratives, and has created further types of domination and, by contrast, of resistance. In particular, the role of the Zionist Left has been significant in creating the current regime in terms of Ashkenazi Jewish white middle-class hegemony.

Although such a standpoint has been marginal both in the political and academic environments, I argue that this paper can be considered a further contribution towards a workable analytical pathway to be taken to explore the positions of the least visible political players inside Israel, following the lead of the most prominent of the recent works that have critically put into question the contemporary status of Israeli society and politics. In going along with such a prospect, I have primarily questioned the current political legitimacy of the main strategies taken by the Zionist Left since the failure of the Oslo process. Overall, by discussing those alternative political responses to the left-wing mainstream coming from the most marginalized communities and groups, I have attempted to demonstrate that the heterogeneity of these forms of activism can be considered as one of the most valuable tools to be deployed in order to overcome such a particular moment of crisis within Israeli politics.

An important crossroads now seems to have been reached, from which it is possible to look at Israeli internal criticism and give relevance to the different political perspectives emerging from this fragmented scenario, and this can also provoke thought about the way through which such political alternatives might enable transformation from within. In fact, since the end of the 1990s, the Zionist Left has mostly ceased to focus on a just resolution of the conflict and internal issues regarding socio-political struggles against increasing inequalities. On the contrary, it has directed its major political efforts to widen its electorate, with the attempt to include voters from center and
other Zionist parties as much as possible, but it has consequently decreased its original political legitimacy, following a common trend occurring in many other countries across the world.

On the other hand, a number of grassroots leftist struggles have still developed alternative political initiatives, which have primarily included the support to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, demonstrations led by popular resistance committees in the occupied Palestinian territories, civil disobedience actions against Israeli governmental decisions, and international networking. If a one-state regime has already been set up, and is based on asymmetries of power and privileges, the reversal of this situation is complicated by the fact that such deep-seated asymmetries would be difficult to uproot. Nevertheless, in opposition to this reality, as has been demonstrated by many of my interviewees, a minority inside Israel still believes that it is not time to close the door to looking forward to something different from the present, something that will reverse the current gap between the possible and the existing scenario.

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In the end, and by means of a final anti-Arab incitement (Abunimah 2015), Likud won the 2015 elections (30 seats), followed by the Zionist Union (24 seats) and the Joint Arab List (13 seats).

In spite of being mostly explained by the spatial and societal dimensions (Cullen and Pretes 2000, Jussila, Majoral, Mutambirwa 1999, Rutledge 2005), I refer to the concept of marginality within the Israeli context to understand the way through which the Zionist hegemony has built up internal divisions and deep gaps among its citizens in relation to social, economic, ethnic, national and gender discriminations. This also concerns the notion of minority that requires to be problematized in relation to what happened in 1948, and, as Hannah Arendt stated, ‘the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people’ (Arendt 1951, 290).
With reference to both the fieldwork methodology and the political standpoints from which axes of power at the base of class, political, economic, ethnic, national, and gender differences in defined historical moments and locations need to be analyzed, I have mostly used the ‘intersectionality’ approach (Crenshaw 1989, Hancock 2007, McCall 2005, Yuval-Davis 2006 and 2011) in order to highlight how various forms of inequalities are strictly intertwined within Israeli society and in the Israeli Left context as well. As regards my fieldwork, in the end of 2014, I have conducted more than thirty open-ended semi-structured interviews with representatives of what I have defined as marginalized communities and groups along with differing class, ethnic, national, age, and gender narrative identities, and who had been involved in diverse initiatives both in relation to the end of the Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and to the most challenging internal issues emerging from within Israel. In addition to the material resulting from my interviews, I have also used the documentation from conferences, initiatives and demonstrations organized by such political actors. If it was necessary to participate in some initiatives during my fieldwork in order to maintain the quality of information I was producing, I did this whilst maintaining awareness of my own background and my positionality towards the core of this study.

Israeli society has been historically composed of the hegemonic Ashkenazi elite and of other marginalized communities including the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the Mizrahim, the Russian-speaking community, Ethiopians, African asylum seekers, and foreign workers.

By following the Palestinian call for the BDS - Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions - campaign launched in 2005 (see note ix), Israeli Jewish activists have also decided to support this struggle from within Israel.

Founded in 1977, Hadash - the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, has been based on the aim of uniting ‘most of the supporters for peace, equality, democracy and workers’ rights, Jews and Arabs, in order to create a political alternative to the government’s policy of occupation and exploitation’ (from their website http://www.hadash.org.il/english/). It has represented the party for which Palestinian citizens of Israel have traditionally voted. In 2015 elections, it has participated in a new political entity, known as the Joint List, in partnership with the United Arab List, the National Democratic Assembly (Balad), and the Arab Movement for Renewal (Ta’al).

The research centre ‘Who Profits from the Occupation’ has conducted several studies on the multifaceted boundaries among the settlement industry, economic exploitation and control over population. Their analyses are available at the following website: www.whoprofits.org/ (accessed 7 September 2015).
Although it has maintained a residual formal representation after 2015 elections, this party, which represented a central position within the Zionist Left in the 1990s, has effectively been crushed by the migration of most of its former supporters to either the Zionist Camp or the Joint List.

This debate is mainly related to the BDS campaign (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) that has represented an economic as well as political initiative, through exertion of strong international pressure. Considered as a primary challenge to be accomplished by many Israeli radical leftist activists since ‘it is a rights-based approach, rather than a solution-based approach’ (Barkan 2014), this struggle has been initially a Palestinian campaign, before it became international. Since its launch in 2005 by the Palestinian civil society, when its initial statement described it as a ‘call for a campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights’, it has been founded on demands for equality for Palestinians and preventing participation in the mainstream peace negotiations that have only continued to delay the discussion of rights, which is needed in order to achieve a just conflict resolution.

In the 2015 electoral scenario, alternative options from the Mizrahi background have emerged for voters: Shas, the ultra-orthodox political party, has used a very powerful electoral message directed towards the large variety of ‘invisible Israelis’ (Diab 2015a), and Kulanu, a new political party founded by a former Likud member, has focused on socio-economic issues and in particular on the cost of living of the most marginalized people (Omer-Man 2015).

Being out of the scope of political interest of the mainstream Left, foreign workers’ rights have not been taken into consideration in the public debate at all, even if the numbers of such workers have increased in the past few years, especially those coming from China, Nigeria, Romania, Thailand and the Philippines.

Among the most significant works based on critical analyses of the current Israel and on perspectives of alternative politics, see those by Judith Butler (2012), Tikva Honig-Parnass (2011), Smadar Lavie (2014), Ilan Pappé (2014), Shlomo Sand (2014), and Yehouda Shenhav (2012).