

Introduction to the Social Protest Forum

Uri Ram
Dani Filc

No one foresaw the social protest of the summer of 2011. It came out of the blue and immediately acquired great momentum and vast public sympathy. Over the years, Israel has experienced various waves of protest: the Wadi Salib protest and the Black Panthers, the mass demonstrations by Gush Emunim and Peace Now, the Palestinian intifadas and the protests by Israeli Arabs, and many others. But a social protest on this scale was unprecedented. What triggered it? Who led it and who took part? Who disliked it? What demands were raised and how was it conducted? These are some of the questions that the articles in this section try to answer.

But it was not only the protest and its parameters that were astonishing. No less astonishing was its almost immediate and total disappearance from the public agenda. Roughly a hundred days after it erupted with a bang, it vanished, leaving behind a trail of questions: Was it over or had it only changed its form? Did it have any impact? Did it change anything? Did it sow the start of a slow and more complex process of change, or was it swallowed up beyond recognition in the maze of Israeli politics? What, then, is the overall and historical import of the summer of 2011? The articles in this issue address these questions, too. They propose explanations that link various terms from the lexicon of sociology and cultural studies—capitalism, class, status, generation, gender, periphery, carnival, globalization, and more. Of course, these articles do not cover every aspect that could and should have been discussed in this context. Important topics that were omitted, to our regret, include Israeli Arabs' involvement in the protest, its cultural and symbolic facets, and political and theoretical aspects of democratic representation and participation in this day and age.

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In the article by the undersigned, **Uri Ram** and **Dani Filc**, we define the protest as an attempt to create a “new class-based coalition,” an effort by one sector of the middle class, led by the Tel Aviv Bobos (bourgeois bohemian), to join forces with a much broader circle of the middle class, as well as with lower strata throughout the country, in opposition to the economic elite. Our thesis is that, for the first time since the start of the neoliberal revolution in the 1980s, the middle class cast off its support for neoliberalism and tried to get the general public to join a social coalition against the capitalist elite. The middle class’s economic distress was aggravated by a sense that the republican contract between this class and the state had been violated, and that, for Netanyahu’s coalition, the favored sectors (in addition to the “tycoons”) were the settlers and the Ultraorthodox. Because the protest was a product of the conditions created by neoliberalism but was also a reaction to them, it expressed a new form of postmodern politics—neither protest by an organized class nor protest by an identity group, but an attempt to construct a “people” on the basis of broad social solidarity.

Zeev Rosenhek and **Michael Shalev** amalgamate considerations of class, generation and status. They provide statistical corroboration of the interpretation that the younger generation of the educated middle class had concrete reasons for launching the protest. They show that in recent years this sector has suffered from a relative decline in its standard of living, both as compared to the socioeconomic mobility of its parents’ generation and *vis-à-vis* other sectors. Since the turn of the century, the neoliberalism that the middle class supported in the 1990s has exacted a heavy price from it, too. Two tangible manifestations of this are their diminished prospects of purchasing an apartment (in the center of the country) and of finding a good job. Rosenhek and Shalev maintain that—as is usual in Israel—we are talking about a class-based protest in the guise of a battle over status. Unlike other status groups, though, which tend to translate class-based distress into identity-related demands, in this case the process moved in the other direction: this group translated its class-based distress into a universal demand for “social justice” and accordingly spoke in the name of the “people.”

Hanna Herzog sees the protest in generational and gender terms. In contrast to the authors of the first two articles, she does not believe that the class explanation, taken alone, is appropriate to the Israeli situation, in which identity factors—nationality, ethnicity and religion—have always been prominent. Nor does she see the summer of 2011 as a middle-class protest. She proposes, rather, that we focus on the generational aspect of the protest, which she interprets as cutting across social

classes, the protest of a generation shaped by the neoliberal experience and reacting to it using the tools it is familiar with. Herzog emphasizes the importance of the protest's political language, which depoliticizes conventional politics but repoliticizes civil society and daily life by "giving voice to speech from the margins, from below." Herzog sees this species of political culture as a reflection of the assimilation of the feminist struggle in Israel.

Departing from the common identification of the protest with its Rothschild Boulevard core, **Chen Misgav** focuses on the tent encampments of the urban periphery that were set up in the Hatikva Quarter, Lewinsky Park and Hashnayim Park in Jaffa. In this article, which is based on what he calls "militant ethnography," Misgav asserts that, unlike the new media culture of the middle-class activists on Rothschild, the residents of the encampments on the periphery saw themselves as representatives of the long struggle by the Mizrahim and disadvantaged neighborhoods, and even by the new migrants; in Jaffa, they saw themselves as representing the Palestinians. Among other ways, the difference found expression in the nature of their demands—"affordable housing" on Rothschild and "public housing" in the tent camps of the urban periphery. Here Misgav disputes the conventional image of a "middle-class protest," which is supported by several articles in this section, and asserts that it derives from the media's fixation on Rothschild at the expense of the social protest of those on the margins.

Yehouda Shenhav proposes a perspective that deviates from the standard view of the protest. In essence, he turns everything upside down and sees the protest as its own contrary—the creation of a consensus. By this he means that the protest was a conformist movement that did not construct a genuine economic and political resistance and in fact betrayed democratic values. The apolitical nature of the protest meant that it ignored the acute antidemocratic inclinations of the Israeli regime in recent years; its republican and meritocratic all-inclusive national discourse blurred the real divisions—ethnic, national and gender—that exist in the political economy and struck them from the agenda. The protest was run as a carnival; but unlike carnivals in hierarchical settings, which challenge authority, in the postmodern neoliberal context the carnival turns (against its celebrants' will) into an activity that actually affirms the social order rather than unraveling it. As time passes, substantial evidence to support this view is being amassed.

The essay by **Shlomo Swirski**, which concludes the special section, expands the canvas from the distress and protest of the Israeli middle class to look at the

wobbly status of the middle class all over the contemporary Western capitalist world. Swirski paints the contours of Western society since the Second World War in broad strokes. The first three decades after the war seemed to realize the modern promise of equality and a higher standard of living, thanks to a compromise among the classes, in which industry, the trade unions, big government (the welfare state) and the nation state all played key roles. But all of this has been undermined since then. The emergence of globalization created technological and economic conditions that subverted the previous interclass compact and made it possible for giant corporations, governments and the upper middle class to pursue profits on the world stage, while abandoning the people at home. The younger generation of the middle middle class can no longer expect a better future, as their forerunners could. To the extent that these were middle-class protests, Swirski believes they were too little too late. The only possible remedy for the general decline of society is not a change in income distribution but a change in the control and management of capital.

Thus the articles in this section hope to contribute to our understanding of the social protest of the summer of 2011 from diverse perspectives, sometimes incompatible; they were written shortly after the events themselves. This introduction was written much later, after the elections to the 19th Knesset in January 2013. The summer of 2011 was the point of departure for this forum, while the summer of 2013 provides us, as editors, with a first significant reference point to take a retrospective look at the protest. What can we say about the protest from the vantage point of the elections? How did the groups that led and took part in the protest affect the elections and their result? How were the demands raised by the protest expressed? And how was the crisis of representation of the conventional political system and the civic demands attached to it expressed?

After a lengthy period during which the middle class kept away from politics, the protest seems to have brought it back there. In middle-class and upper-middle-class communities, voter turnout in the 2013 elections was much higher than the national average and closer to that of the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the turnout in Kfar Veradim was 75%, in Modi'in 78%, in Meitar 76%, in Lehavim 77%, in Ra'anana 70% and in Shoham 80%. So we can say that after years when large sectors of the middle class turned their backs on the public political space, one result of the social protests was an inclination to return there. In addition, the prominence of young adults and women in the protest was reflected in the elections, which saw the largest turnover in the Knesset in history and seated many new members and women.

The large middle-class turnout on Election Day clearly affected the results. The parties that did best—Yesh Atid, Habayit Hayehudi, Labor, Meretz and Tzipi Livni's Hatenuah—registered strong support among middle-class voters.

The common denominator of all these parties, except for Meretz (and, to some extent, Hatenuah), was also a feature of the protest—total obliviousness to the Occupation as a key datum in the Israeli political situation, to the point that even Habayit Hayehudi, which is identified with the settlers, emphasized domestic issues such as “equalizing the burden,” education and the economy; its leader's lifestyle represents north Tel Aviv as much as the settlements. However, more than the parties emulated the protest, their blind eye to the Occupation and to those who protest against it was a faithful expression of the mood among the middle class, which, after the collapse of the Oslo Accords, abandoned the campaign for a national arrangement, which had attracted so much of its political energy since the 1970s and the founding of Peace Now.

And what of the demands raised by the protesters? These had two dimensions: On the social plane, they called for social justice against the neoliberal order; and on the civic plane, their demands expressed the crisis of representation and opposition to the patterns of politics as usual, including the sectoral politics of identities.

The parties that were most successful appropriated prominent messages of the protest in various ways; social and civic demands were the stars of the campaign. Nevertheless, today it seems that economic policy has seized on the budget deficit as an excuse to frustrate the realization of the demands for social change and even blames the protest for the deficit. In the end, the demands for greater democracy in the political system, too, will probably be translated into provisions that actually reinforce the regime, such as a higher electoral threshold or larger Knesset majority to unseat a government through a no-confidence motion.

The Labor Party, led by Shelly Yachimovich, explicitly adopted the spirit of the protest, placed itself at the forefront of the opposition to the neoliberal order and its social ramifications, and assigned realistic slots on its Knesset slate to prominent leaders of the protest (Itzik Shmuli and Stav Shaffir) and other new faces. Meretz's new MKs, too, represent this spirit. Hatenuah assigned the slots right after its chair, Tzipi Livni, to persons with a strong social record (Amram Mitzna and Amir Peretz). Because they are sitting in the opposition, Labor and Meretz are unlikely to have any influence on the Government's social policy; nor, practically speaking, will Hatenuah, even though it is part of the coalition.

During the campaign, Yesh Atid and its chair, Yair Lapid, reflected another facet of the protest by presenting themselves as the true representatives of the middle class, with slogans like “Where’s the money?” and “Yesh Atid will be the Shas of the middle class.” But the party also won strong support from the wealthier strata, both during the campaign and on election day. Yesh Atid, like its coalition partners, is neoliberal on economic matters but flaunts a “social” rhetoric. We can say, then, that a very large bloc of parties that ran for the Knesset adopted the social rhetoric made popular during the protest, but in fact support the political economy that the protesters had in their sights.

The collegiality that emerged after the elections between Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid and Naftali Bennett of Habayit Hayehudi is based on this blend of neoliberal policy and “social” rhetoric, but even more so on the second dimension of the protesters’ demands—the civic dimension. These parties expressed, in different ways, the protesters’ yearning for a “new politics” and disgust with the old politics. Lapid spoke about new politics and Bennett said that “something new is happening.” Another expression of the longing reflected by the protest for a new politics that would rectify the crisis of representation was Yesh Atid’s slate of candidates, made up of persons generally identified with social activism or the business world and outside the normal frameworks of representative democracy.

But the post-postmodern aspect of the protest—the attempt to overcome the crisis of representation of conventional politics—was not victorious on Election Day. The new parties were simply eclectic collections of persons (including quite a few media celebrities) with no true common denominator. Their appeal to the public was based on an extreme media-based (and commercial) personalization of politics; authority within the parties and the appeal to the public focused entirely on the party leaders.

Another element of the post-postmodern politics that crashed in the elections was the attempt to consolidate a democratic and egalitarian “people” (demos), centered on material demands rather than identity barriers. The idea of a people, based on civic solidarity, was shattered after the elections by the exclusionary concept of Israeli identity represented by the new “brothers” Lapid and Bennett: an Israeli identity without the Ultraorthodox and without the Arabs.

What is more, if we saw during the protest a transient alliance between middle-class elements and the unempowered strata, the elections reflected its fragility. No political entity emerged to represent both groups in tandem. They voted the way

they always do, with the middle class tending to cast its ballots for the Left and, even more so, the Center (precisely where several parties were located on this spectrum was a controversial issue during the campaign), whereas the lower classes voted for right-wing or rightist Haredi parties.

Thus the results of the election demonstrated the power of the postmodern politics that has held sway in Israel since the 1980s, which combines the commercialization and sectorialization of identity, on the one hand, with preservation and even reinforcement of the ethno-national hierarchies and the power differential between center and periphery, on the other. We can say that even though the core topics of the protest featured prominently in the campaign, in practice the protest lost the election and the winners were precisely those sectors that were hostile to the protest: the “tycoons,” who can now be confident that the Netanyahu-Lapid-Bennett axis will continue the neoliberal policy; and the settlers, who, thanks to the same coalition, received key positions in the Economics Ministry (the minister), the Housing Ministry (the minister), and the Knesset Finance Committee (its chair).

So the 2013 elections do not herald any realization of the spirit of the protest, even though they co-opted its rhetorics and some of its leaders. If the summer of 2011 was the summer of discontent, the winter of 2013 was conservatism’s high season. In terms taken from American political culture, if the protest was Democratic, the coalition formed after the elections is Republican. Of course, this does not mean that the protest was not a historical turning point. But that remains an open question that only the passage of time can answer. Future research will benefit from a more generous temporal perspective on the protest and its results and from the accumulation of facts and processes. Nevertheless, we believe that, in years to come, the initial research orientations and thoughts about the protest, as presented here, will still prove to be valuable.