

## Introduction

This issue is devoted to the question, “What is the political?” The articles that appear here are the fruit of the workshop for young researchers, “Between the Political and the Professional: How Is Political Action Possible?” conducted at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute in September 2007. It was the third in a series of workshops that attended to topics in critical theory, after one on Postcolonial Studies (featured in *Theory and Criticism* 29) and another on the concept of “Bare Life.”

The workshop’s first goal was to address the question of what is the political, in terms of sociological power relations as well as on the textual and hermeneutic levels. As should be clear from the workshop title, we tried to deal with several topics simultaneously. First, we wanted to define the political and the tension between the political and the professional, starting from the assumption that, in professional fields and in social arenas that are clearly professional, professionalism acts as a power which identifies, defines, blurs and neutralizes the political. Second, we dealt with political action and the tensions entailed in its theoretical definitions, practices and shifting boundaries. The workshop schedule (printed at the end of this issue) lists the diverse topics, areas and questions that it addressed. As with its predecessors, the workshop was based on papers written by graduate students; this issue of *Theory and Criticism* serves as a platform for their work, not the least because there is no other platform for critical theory in Israeli journals today.

Following presentation and discussion at the workshop, the articles in this issue underwent a long process of re-writing, review process, revisions and editing for publication. Although the articles included here are only a small fraction of the research presented at the workshop, they faithfully reflect the creative spirit, intellectual diversity and enthusiasm that marked its three days.

The discussions were organized, in broad terms, around two poles: the political in the context of liberal thought and the political as defined in critical theory, including political theology. In the context of liberal political thought, the political is generally considered to be defined by the law and by the institutionalized rules of the “system”: the law, the state or the political economy. For liberal thought, politics and the law are the organized and institutionalized mechanisms that govern these processes and the allocation of power resources. Critical thought, by contrast, tends to locate the political

by tracing the boundary work of the system and by uncovering the mechanisms that determine what lies inside and what is left outside the system.

Thus we are dealing with the political in the range between its absolute presence (everything is political) and its utter annihilation (politics is the locus of the political). This is an overarching metatheoretical axis on which the political moves between the positions where it has a prominent magnitude and those where it is depoliticised. The structural gap between these two poles explains the differences in the mechanisms that expose the political. In the binary system of Carl Schmitt (“friend” versus “foe”), the political is explicitly present; by contrast, the liberal position dissolves the political in the diverse professional discourses of the judiciary, civil service and academia. These discourses may provide shelter to the political, but they are unable to suppress the fundamental tension between the political and the professional. Most of the struggles within the academic world are a result of the tension between these two poles, which sometimes also serve as a tool for differentiating intergenerational conflicts. In the social sciences and humanities in Israel, this struggle has been going on for some two decades now; the historians of 1948 can serve as a prominent example. Standing at one extreme are members of the younger generation, who explicitly include the political in their research agenda. Facing them is the older generation, which rejects their position precisely because it is political. The younger scholars want to lay bare the politics of the older (“establishment”) generation, which claims to be apolitical, but the process of identification and exposure is misleading precisely because of the movement between the two poles. In some places the political is explicitly present, whereas in others it is blurred until its tracks almost disappear. This movement between the absolute presence and ultimate disappearance of the political is reflected in all of the pieces in this issue.

The articles and essays deal with diverse professional domains, including linguistics, architectural planning, theater and political movements in which professionals are involved. Some of them propose definitions of the political and of political action in concrete fields or for certain groups.

In “Poetics and Politics of Linguistic Theories: Reading in Sayed Kashua’s Columns,” **Yair Adiel** employs literary criticism on concepts of linguistics, to show how linguistic ideas produce the political and social exclusion of individuals and minority groups. Adiel brings to the surface and highlights the inevitable link between the “linguistic” and the “political” and notes the political implications of any research in linguistics that ignores this inherent link. Through an analysis of columns by the

Israeli-Arab journalist and author Sayed Kashua, whose writing politicizes the debate on issues of and approaches to language, Adiel applies this critical process to the Hebrew linguistics that is embedded in the discourse about the rebirth of the Hebrew language and its function in Zionist politics.

**Lilian Abou-Tabickh**'s article is entitled "On Collective National Rights, Civil Equality and Women's Rights: The Violation of Palestinian Women's Right to Choose Their Place of Residence." She analyzes the "vision documents" of Israeli Arabs, written in 2006 and 2007, along with the political, legal and civic efforts of various organizations, in order to expose the tension between the demand for equal national and civil rights, on the one hand, and women's rights, on the other, as this relates to gender aspects of the right to land and housing. Abou-Tabickh argues that the lawsuits and public campaigns over issues of land ownership and the right to choose where one lives, are gender-blind and have not liberated women from the patrilocal residence pattern that typifies Palestinian society in Israel. The feminist critique of these campaigns which she proposes, discloses the limited nature of the discourse about national and civic equality, that does not extend to equality for women, and demonstrates that to implement the call for equality within the Palestinian and Israeli collective one must pursue a post-national discourse and praxis. The article shows how one political discourse – that of national rights – may perpetuate or even create a closed political arena of "customs" and "community," which harms women by requiring them to choose between their membership in the national collective and the exercise of their universal rights.

In "The Activism of Knowledge: The Reporting Practices of 'Machsom [Checkpoint] Watch' as Political Action," **Merav Amir** investigates the organizational subjectivity of that organization's work. She focuses in particular on how the women of Machsom Watch come to be embedded in the architecture of the checkpoints and on the ways in which they report. Instead of taking the organization as an a priori and analytic starting point, she inverts the perspective and describes the organizational entity as a set of practices that create an organizational quasi-unity, by means of what she calls, following Foucault, "parrhesia." She examines the key themes of the reports published by its members, the narratives of their texts, and the responses of their target audience. One fascinating conclusion of her study, which reviews a number of reports, is the absence of a consistent speaker and fixed target audience. These insights are important for understanding the architecture of the occupation and the ways in which it is possible to speak about it, think about it, and dispute its conceptualizations. She

finds that in some reports the observer's position was determined in advance; "the political element is eroded and evaporates because of the very absence of a horizon that deviates from the observed political arrangement." For this reason, the reporting practice is hard put to create an alternative to the present system of forces and modes of control, and the reports degenerate from "criticism to monitoring."

**Ronnen Ben-Arie's** "Alternative Spatial Planning: Between the Professional and the Political" looks for the political in the professional discourse of spatial planning. He notes the ways in which the political constructs the worldview of planners and how this view is embedded in the professional space itself. In other words, he shows how professional discourse enables political discourse and uncovers the mechanisms employed to conceal the political act. The professional discourse about space is also a discourse about power, political economy and historical time. It is a discourse that maintains a correspondence with the space over which the state asserts sovereignty. This discourse also shapes identities and populations and responds to the logic of the regime. These are the populations over which the government must rule. Ben-Arie addresses this issue through an analysis of alternative plans for the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev and examines the tension between the political and the professional among the planners.

**Naphtaly Shem-Tov**, in "The 'Exception' Holds a Stage? The Acre Festival and the Political," examines the Acre Festival of Israeli Theater as a political praxis that is defined by means of the exception. The festival's overt goal is to widen the borders of the medium to make room for "deviant" or "outside" works. Within the space created, Shem-Tov identifies a number of possible "exceptions" – possibilities that are normalized into the system and thereby collapse the very meaning of "exception." Like every bureaucratic organization, the system institutionalizes the instrumental means that support and justify this normalization. After the exception has been brought inside, it becomes more difficult to identify the political. But, Shem-Tov shows, the system will be confronted by new outsiders who seek to undermine the system by exposing the political. This is precisely what Shem-Tov himself does in his article. This is a fascinating example of the possibilities for the close interaction of theory and practice.

In this issue we continue the section "Research Report," which offers our readers a look at the initial findings of recently concluded research. This time we publish a report by **Hagai Boaz**, "Altruism on Trial: The Political Economy of Organ Transplants," which holds up to critical scrutiny the epistemology of the "normative"

altruism of medical and social research. Boaz develops new and ingenious indexes for the concept of privatization, examining the transition from a public economy of organs for transplant to a private market, and notes the gulf between the discourse on this topic and the practice. He shows in particular that the altruistic economy is organized along political-economic lines which undercut the philosophy of altruism.

The essays in this issue propose diverse and sometimes contradictory definitions of the concept of the political and of political action.

**Hanna Herzog** writes about the challenge posed by feminist thought to the traditional definition of the political as part of the public sphere. A feminist perspective on the political enables Herzog to trace the transformations in the distinction between the private and the public, and to apply constant criticism to the power relations that this distinction expresses and creates. Feminist logic, she maintains, emphasizes a reflexive political stance that demands the constant exposure of the mechanisms that oppress and exclude various groups, and a constant focus on the margins and the relations between marginal groups and more central ones. This stance demands social awareness of the sociopolitical conditions that create knowledge and of the ways in which knowledge constitutes the relations between oppressed and oppressor, so that it is essentially political.

**Raef Zreik** deals with the tension between the political and the professional and endeavors to bypass the dichotomy, drawing on his view of the present, in a historical inquiry into the possibilities of the relations between them in the political philosophy of Hobbes and Kant. He starts off with the concept of sovereignty as it was defined by Hobbes as a Munchausian act — a mechanistic *deus ex machina*. Sovereignty drags itself by its hair, thereby concealing the fact that it is based on essential contradictions, including the contradictions of secularization itself. Zreik asks us, raised on critical theory, not to neglect the achievements of the Kantian liberal project, which supports complex interactions between the political and the professional, on the one hand, and makes it possible to get around the threat to liberty that might stem from the concept of the *Leviathan*, in which all is political, on the other.

**Adi Ophir** formulates the political in correspondence with political philosophy as the public problematization of government. Through a direct interchange with Schmitt's argument that the concept of the state presumes the concept of the political, Ophir turns everything upside down and argues that the notion of the political presupposes the state. For him, "a discussion of the political must begin from the question of what government is." He shows that three conditions must be met

before something can be defined as political: (1) it must exist in relationship to government; (2) government must be a problem for it; and (3) it must conduct a public problematization of government.

**Yehouda Shenhav** formulates the political more broadly: as the exception that challenges any order, system, classification or language. He shows that the statement that “everything is political” is overblown and overflowed, chiefly because it does not allow for any apolitical space and consequently negates its own validity. It is true that everything is potentially political, but nothing is political until it has been politicized. Defining the gulf between politics and the political as based on the gulf between the system and the exception, he consequently inverts the question: instead of inquiring what is the political, he looks for the set of epistemological principles that makes it possible to point to a particular act as “political.” Unlike Schmitt, Shenhav defines the political by means of a historical and contingent moment rather than through the institutionalized politics of war. He also proposes that “the political’s challenge to authority aims to expose it as an expression of power or of violence and demands that it identify itself as such.” Such a formula, according to Shenhav, permits a distinction between the political and the apolitical while permitting a dynamic movement that can lay bare the tension between them.

Ophir and Shenhav agree on many points but there are also significant differences between them, such as the ability to understand the manifestations of the political in nongovernmental contexts — that is, as exception vis-à-vis the law, vis-à-vis the dominant discourse, vis-à-vis the corporation, vis-à-vis public administration or vis-à-vis a dominant cultural and semantic logic or sociological practice. Here there is an interesting contrast between Schmitt’s view of the political as linked exclusively to government and Schmitt’s view of the political, which is intertwined with Foucault’s idea of governance.

In her essay, **Michal Givoni** deals with the problematization of government mentioned by Ophir, by analyzing the politics of nongovernmental organizations. This politics, she argues, focuses on the “how” of governing by posing a constant challenge to how governments act in various domains of their responsibility. What is unique about this politics, consequently, is that it is a “politics of the ruled as such” and that its key technique is bearing witness, which is a collection of actions and statements that create the shared logic of nongovernmental political action. Through presence, documentation and reporting, and what Givoni refers to as “contentious speech,” nongovernmental organizations turn themselves into the creators of public interest.

This is also their main political contribution in an age of diffused, individualized, and privatized power.

**Yuval Evri**'s essay is dedicated to the memory of the late Galit Saada-Ophir. Galit, who passed away at the end of 2008 under tragic circumstances, was a regular participant in the workshop and contributed her wisdom and insights to it.

The book review section contains three essays that deal with the concept of the political, whether directly or implicitly. **Yagil Levi** examines freedom of the press and civilian oversight of the military. Looking at books written by journalists after the second Lebanon War, he shows that all of the authors are the captives of a uniform narrative built from the current biases in journalistic writing and the information created by the media. As a result they obscure alternative narratives and other critical tools.

**Leora Bilsky**'s survey of feminism and law deals with two books on the topic. One, by law professor Janet Halley, proposes that feminism has reached the end of its theoretical path due to the epistemological crisis produced by the encounter between feminism and post-structuralism. The other, *Studies in Gender Law and Feminism*, an Israeli ontology, considers legal issues from feminist perspectives. A comparison of the books makes it possible for Bilsky to consider the extent and significance of the epistemological crisis of feminism in Israel.

**Aziz Haidar** reviews the Arab economy in Israel, as presented in studies published over the last two years. He shows the complex dynamic between Israeli government policy concerning economic development in Arab society, on the one hand, and the internal factors in that society that also influence this development, on the other.

*Ronna Brayer-Garb, Hanna Herzog and Yehouda Shenhav, Editors*

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I am delighted to be able to inform our readers that a special search committee has chosen Prof. Leora Bilsky as the next editor of *Theory and Criticism*. Although Prof. Bilsky officially assumes her new post as of the publication of the current issue, as part of the division of labor between us I will continue to be responsible for the next two issues (35 and 36). I am confident that Prof. Bilsky will steer *Theory and Criticism*

to new and fascinating shores, where the two components of its title can correspond with each other. On behalf of the community of our readers, the editorial board and its chair, Prof. Gabriel Motzkin, and everyone associated with the production of the journal and in the publications department of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, I wish her every success in her new role.

*Yehouda Shenhav*



