

Beyond the Sociology of Suspicion

INTRODUCTION

How do ordinary people understand social justice? How do people who belong to marginalized groups make sense of their disadvantaged status? Drawing on extensive empirical research, this book attempts to answer these questions by probing the ways Mizrahim—Jews of Middle Eastern or North African origin—view social difference and inequality.

Understanding how people make sense of social justice and inequality is especially crucial in the current moment, when liberalism is floundering throughout the world, unable to contend with surging religious fundamentalism or right-wing nationalism in countries such as France, Austria, Hungary, Germany, and the United States (Mizrachi and Mautner, 2016). We are witnessing challenges to democracy in Eastern Europe; conflict over the diversified, multicultural reality emerging in post-Cold War Western Europe; disillusionment and authoritarian rule in the wake of the Arab Spring; growing resistance to the liberal left in Israel; the disregard for human rights in East Asia; struggles between human rights agencies and local authorities in Africa; and the election and presidency of Donald Trump in the United States, followed by the events of January 6, 2021. Without suggesting that these frequently violent political manifestations reflect legitimate political claims, this book seeks to shed a light on one deep and often misrecognized source of these clashes.

Liberalism is under attack not only from its ideological rivals, but also from working-class and other disadvantaged groups who are its ostensible supporters. Many of the very people liberals have long believed to be the main beneficiaries of their policies have rejected the progressive political agenda (Hochschild, 2016;

Mizrachi, 2016b; Wuthnow, 2018). In the American context, two decades ago, Thomas Frank (2004) referred to voters in poorer states who continued to vote for Republican candidates “against their own interests” as the “great paradox.” This paradox became even more striking during the 2016 elections.

In Israel, this “great paradox” expresses itself in a broad division into two major camps: the liberals and their opponents. The liberal camp is dominated by people who are educated, secular, upper middle class, and predominantly of European origin. In terms of their political positions, however, they do not form a monolithic group. On the left wing, one finds a non-Zionist minority that rejects the very concept of a Jewish and democratic state and advocates for a state of all its citizens. Some hold that the very notion of a Jewish state flies in the face of universal equal citizenship. Toward the center is a Zionist republican majority that, in accordance with the liberal democratic model of society, believes Israel should be a Jewish state and at the same time a democratic and egalitarian civil space for all citizens.

Their opponents, who come from religious and traditionalist groups and disadvantaged Mizrahim from Israel’s social periphery, reject the agenda of universal human rights and other core values of the progressive liberal left (Mizrachi, 2016b). The rejection of liberalism by marginalized groups has frustrated human rights advocates and liberal politicians who see themselves as acting in the defense of these same groups, as well as sociologists and social scientists who attempt to understand and explain the roots of this behavior. This book probes this quandary. In doing so, I take what may seem to be an unusual route. Rather than placing the explanatory burden on the subjects of the research, I seek to reverse the direction of inquiry. I suggest that the behavior of marginalized Mizrahim in Israel—or for that matter, poor voters in the United States—is not a paradox in itself; rather, the deficiency in the understanding of their behavior lies in the liberal grammar with which their behavior is read.

The Liberal Grammar: A Preliminary Glance

By *grammar*, I am referring to the unwritten set of analytic and normative principles that guide the interpretative act. These principles channel the processes of data collection and the articulation of analysis toward the emerging insights. Of course, I consider this grammar to be an ideal type (a la Weber)—that is, a category that emphasizes certain features for analytic purposes and is therefore a deliberate over-simplification.

I wish to make another clarification, which relates to the distinction between the terms *liberal* and *progressive*, both of which I use. The distinction comes from American political discourse. In many ways liberals and progressives belong to the same camp and share an individualist ontology, which posits an autonomous individual who is separate from the social space in which he/she acts, whether the free market or the democratic political arena. However, the progressive camp

is characterized by a radical position with regard to the existing economic, cultural, and political order. For example, many progressives take a critical view of neo-liberal economics, associating it with the tyranny of capitalism and the reproduction of structures of oppression, marking a clear difference from other liberals, whose position toward the market varies considerably. However, the distinction between the camps extends beyond neo-liberalism and its implications for ongoing inequality. Progressives in the United States, for example, are more supportive of ethnic and racial diversity and open borders for immigrants from a wide variety of backgrounds; they tend to be more negative than others in their assessment of the quality and moral character of life in the United States; they are skeptical of social change that does not entail the reconstruction of institutions they view as racist and gender-biased; and, finally, they place great value on identity and its expression and promote a mode of politics focused on the inclusion of diverse identity groups (Pew Research Center, 2021). The progressive agenda has gained prominence in American civil society and public discourse, and since the end of the 1980s has become the ideological basis for critical-academic research in the social sciences. From the United States, it has migrated to Israeli academe (Jacobs and Mizrahi, 2020).

Thus, when discussing the liberal grammar, I am most often referring to the progressive position now dominant in critical research, even though my focus on the concept of the autonomous individual is also relevant to more modest liberal positions. When modifying the word *grammar*, the adjective *liberal* refers to the progressive moral and political vision of the world embraced by contemporary critical sociology, through which it theorizes and investigates society.

This grammar, which I will discuss in greater depth below, joins together three positions. First is an **ontological position** that places power relations at its center. In its progressive iteration, this approach views the autonomous, equal, and free individual as oppressed by and trapped within those power relations. Second is a **political position** that glorifies the politics of liberation, an approach that, in its progressive iteration, seeks to liberate the individual from oppressive power structures. Third, we find an **interpretive stance** propelled by over-suspiciousness and constant negation of overt reality.

This skeptical analytic mode comes from a position of certainty about the nature of oppressive social structures—known to critical researchers but hidden from the eyes of the subjects in the field. The tendency toward negation depends on the view of deconstruction as the sine qua non of critical thinking (see Felski, 2015).

In this book, I seek to free the critical gaze from the shackles of liberal grammar and to reverse the direction of inquiry. Instead of observing the “non-liberal” disadvantaged subject through this familiar lens, I propose to turn the critical-progressive gaze upon itself by peering through the eyes of the non-liberal subject, exposing its parochial roots, cultural particularity, and social boundaries.¹

This reversal of the direction of inquiry involves activating non-liberal subjects by transforming them into critical analysts and shifting them from one interpretive position to another vis-à-vis the data they help to produce. I call this form of inquiry *multiple hermeneutics*, the methodological route that allows me to detect my own mode of suspicion during the data analysis.

Beyond the Liberal Grammar: The Emergence of Rootedness

The insights that emerged out of my theoretical and methodological turn led to the identification of an alternative grammar centered around the rooted ontology of my Mizrahi working-class subjects, rather than the individualistic ontology of liberal grammar. These subjects are deeply connected to a whole that is greater than themselves, engrained in history, and self-situated in a continuum that stretches from the imagined past through the present and into the future. They experience their lives within a greater Jewish whole; they feel obligated to maintain this whole in the present and to ensure its continuity for the coming generations; and they view the state as the epitome of this Jewish whole. Through examining this alternative grammar, we are able to learn about the subjects' relationship to structures of stratification; the temporalities they assign to their understanding of inequality, representation, under-representation, recognition, and misrecognition; the meaning they attach to religious-national identities together with collective and religious boundaries; and the ways they view social change, defiance, and "emancipation."

My subjects not only recognize but can tolerate inequality. From their point of view, inequality is not a static condition resulting from a continuously reproduced structure. Rather, they experience inequality as changing over time. While critical observers often frame reality pessimistically, shaped by mechanisms of social reproduction and power relations that are hidden from social actors, these rooted subjects are aware of social inequality yet are optimistic regarding the possibility of change, both in their own situations and for the whole within which they live. As we will see, their optimism is supported by independent empirical evidence (for example, data that chronicle upward social mobility for Mizrahim).

In the same vein, the politics of recognition and representation, which constitute the second principle of the overarching logic in liberal thinking, also take on different meanings for these rooted subjects. They measure representation according to its implications for the "greater good" and not solely according to the good of the individual subject. Here, too, the under-representation of Mizrahim in national narratives and symbolism—a reflection of the group's subordinate status within the Jewish whole and the bias they face—is viewed as temporary and expected to improve over time.

The liberal progressive and rooted worldviews attach diametrically opposed meanings to group boundaries. By examining the subversive political possibility of an Arab-Jewish identity, I shed light on the roots of the objection on the part of

these Mizrahim to the removal of national and religious boundaries in the name of Arab-Mizrahi solidarity. In the liberal progressive imagination, the ability to cross social, familial, and political boundaries is necessary for the creation of a respectful shared space, coexistence and peace; therefore, religious, national, and ethnic boundaries are viewed as obstacles to individual autonomy. By contrast, for rooted subjects, including Muslims and Mizrahim as well as other Jews, maintaining such boundaries is a requisite for a mutual acknowledgment of their shared humanity and for the creation of a mutually peaceful and respectful space (see also Mizrahi and Weiss, 2020).

Finally, defiance of the traditional order has been a feature of the liberal political imagination since the French Revolution. In critical discourse, overthrowing tradition is seen as key to social change. By contrast, the rooted subject views the common civil practice of defiance of the state as reprehensible, holding instead that continuity with the tradition is necessary for social change (see also Mizrahi, 2014).

The image of rootedness sketched here is by no means limited to the Mizrahi case; marginalized Mizrahim are far from the only rooted subjects in Israel, and certainly not all Mizrahim are rooted. We also note that rootedness, which has yet to be explored on a global scale, may appear in different guises across national borders and continents.

In this case, rootedness reveals itself as an organizing principle for the political behavior of Mizrahi right-wing voters from Israel's social periphery. The reading of these voting patterns suggested here differs from the accounts commonly found in the social sciences. The more prevalent readings view the persistent right-wing voting patterns among Mizrahim as a reaction stemming from their inferior economic, social, and cultural position; a "populist" outgrowth of a structural pathology in liberal democracy; or an expression of a social "disease," racism, or right-wing nationalism. Rootedness, by contrast, appears to be a generative social force stemming from a fundamental need and desire to belong.

In order to understand rootedness, it is crucial to recognize its temporal dimension. In the rooted perspective, time is defined by the origin of the "whole," which shapes a vision of current political reality focused on fulfilling or preserving this whole. The temporal serves as a heuristic for an initial typology of rootedness, which I'll briefly sketch here in "ideal types" and elaborate on later. Ultra-Orthodox rootedness in Israel defines the chronicles of the whole as originating in the mythic, ancient time of divine revelation. This view of temporality, which is, of course, shared by other religious—Jewish and non-Jewish—communities, aligns with a political vision. As against the sacred sphere, the civic sphere for the ultra-Orthodox and many Religious Zionists is secondary, profane, mundane, administrative, non-Jewish, external, belonging to "others," and outside of the sacred Jewish whole. I refer to this as *closed rootedness*. By contrast, the rootedness of the democratic, secular national camp, referred to in

Israel as the center left, draws on Zionist time, a temporality based on the narrative of the rebirth of the nation: “From Holocaust to Redemption.” To them, the secular civic space, a key feature of liberal democracies throughout the world, is the whole from which their Israeli civil identity derives. This identity is articulated in terms of modern nationalism and the aspiration for the State of Israel to be like other Western nations. I refer to this as *open rootedness*, since it eschews religious and tribal criteria but sets the Israeli civic space that defines the boundaries of the collective. The liberal progressive identity, which I define as *rootless*, aligns perfectly with the liberal grammar, since it vehemently rejects any social connection (national, religious, or tribal) that does not translate into universal citizenship (according to which group identity is seen as secondary to the autonomous, equal, universal citizen). In this view, the state should be neutral and free of any ethnic or religious bias in its definition of the boundaries of the political community.

As I will show below, the Mizrahi rootedness discussed here moves along the boundary of religious and national time and between the civil and the religious conceptions of the whole. While I have not lost sight of its essentialist, orientalist, and racist connotations, I make use of the term *primordial* in my discussion of Mizrahi rootedness, although I want to reappropriate it by de-essentializing its usual critical meaning. What I call primordial is an elementary form of belonging that is most familiar in secular progressive circles in the context of familial relationships. Of course, rootedness among Mizrahi right-wing voters is by no means an essential “Mizrahi characteristic.” Nevertheless, the sense of Jewish continuity and loyalty to the Jewish whole are evident among right-wing Mizrahim (seen Buzaglo 2008). At the same time, it is important to note that Mizrahim can be found at all points along the various spectrums, and their worldviews are embedded in social networks of meaning, moral experience, and political position. I consider the sources of Mizrahi and any other rootedness to lie firmly within history and culture. Fischer (2016) points to a direction of research that aligns with this assumption and demonstrates how Mizrahi rootedness contrasts with the more universalist trends of the Jews of Ashkenaz, stemming from the different conditions in which these two communities encountered modernity. While a discussion of the historical sources of Mizrahi rootedness is far beyond the scope of this study, I will return to a discussion of Fischer’s research below.

Returning to the present, we are already getting ahead of ourselves, since “rootedness” was not the original subject of the research. Rather, it emerged as a conceptualization of the findings from the data. At its inception, this journey was motivated by my desire to closely examine the ways Mizrahim, and especially Mizrahim from Israel’s social periphery, make sense of the connection between their inferior socioeconomic position and their hawkish political positions, which has been at the center of sociological interest for several decades. However, the choice to focus on Mizrahim is not self-evident to general readers. In the

following chapter, I will detail the rationale for this choice, and I will provide the historical, social, and demographic background that is crucial for our understanding of this case.

WHY MIZRAHIM? MIZRAHIM AND THE “GREAT PARADOX”

Some readers may be surprised that I have chosen to focus my research on Mizrahim rather than on Palestinians.² In order to understand this decision, I must address the status of Palestinian citizens of Israel and the meaning of nationality in the Israeli-Palestinian context, together with the intra-Jewish cleavages in Israeli society³.

Palestinians and Jewish Polity

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Law of Return, passed in 1950, declared the right of all Jews in the world to immigrate to Israel and receive an expedited path to citizenship. As codified in a Basic Law, enacted in 1992, Israel has defined itself as a state that is both Jewish and democratic and therefore not neutral with regard to issues of citizenship. The Israeli polity is Jewish, and Jewishness is the most valuable asset for entrance into the national collectivity and participation in the polity.

Palestinians who are born in Israel are citizens of the country, unlike those who reside in the territories occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War. Their *de jure* status provides them with all the benefits of citizenship, including the right to vote and be elected to public office, social benefits (such as health care, free compulsory education, etc.), as well as civic responsibilities such as taxes (although they are exempt from Israel's otherwise mandatory, near-universal conscription). In actuality, however, they are not fully part of the Israeli polity. While political parties representing the Palestinian constituency participate in general elections, they have only once participated in a governing coalition.⁴

De facto segregation between Arabs and Jews is almost all-encompassing. Jews and Arabs speak different languages; with few exceptions, they live in different places; they maintain separate educational systems; they largely vote for different political parties; and they adhere to different religious faiths. In most cases, this separation is mutually acceptable and is not the result of exclusion by one side. For example, both sides object to intermarriage (Lamont et al., 2016; Mizrachi and Herzog, 2012). Most importantly, Jews and Arabs have different national identities. For Jews, Israeli citizenship and Jewish identity are inextricably intertwined; by contrast, many Palestinians citizens feel part of the larger Palestinian people and view their Israeli citizenship only in formal and instrumental terms. This separate national identity is not neutral, since Israel has been actively engaged in a bloody conflict over its legitimacy, borders, and its very existence for over a century.

Hence, with regard to Palestinian citizens of Israel, issues of social justice are confounded with issues of nationality and religion. Their stance vis-à-vis the state is civic rather than national, and often ambivalent. Palestinian citizens of Israel often cooperate with Israeli civil and human rights organizations, left-wing NGOs, and progressive and radical-left parties. However, given the national and religious orientations of Arabs in Israel,⁵ this does not necessarily indicate that they accept the progressive agenda in its entirety.

In sum, Arabs are the most excluded group in Israel society and largely vote for sectoral Arab political parties. From a progressive perspective, their behavior is neither “self-defeating” nor “paradoxical,” and they are not, therefore, at the heart of the Israeli version of the “great paradox.”⁶

Mizrahim: An Overview and Brief History

Mizrahim⁷ comprise the largest socio-demographic group⁸ in the Israeli Jewish population but suffer from under-representation in elite positions and over-representation in the lowest economic strata. Despite their under-representation at the top, Mizrahim, especially those who are members of the lower socioeconomic classes, have supported right-wing political parties for the last four decades.⁹ Mizrahim thus typify the Israeli version of the “great paradox.”

According to a census conducted shortly after the end of the hostilities in 1948, there were approximately 800,000 inhabitants in the new state of Israel, 18 percent of whom were Arab and 82 percent of whom were Jewish. Among the Jews, 80 percent were Ashkenazi and 20 percent Mizrahi (Rebhun et al., 2009). Over the next eighteen months, due to immigration, the Jewish population doubled, reaching 1,550,000 a decade after independence.

This massive population increase led to a dramatic transformation of the country's ethnic makeup. In the years before and immediately after the establishment of the state, most of the immigrants were Ashkenazi, including large numbers of Holocaust survivors who began to arrive in Israel after 1945. In the 1950s, however, the government of the young state encouraged immigration by Jews from Arab countries, driven by its aim of increasing the Jewish population and offsetting the high Arab birthrate (see Shenhav, 2006). In the decade that followed the establishment of the state, only 44.5 percent of immigrants were Ashkenazi, whereas 53.4 percent were Mizrahi. The Ashkenazi portion of the Jewish population decreased from its high of 80 percent after the war to 58 percent in 1960, with the Mizrahi portion rising from 18 to 42 percent. The Mizrahim have a higher average birth rate than the Ashkenazim, so their percentage of the Jewish population has continued to grow.¹⁰

At the time we began our research, in 2008, Mizrahim constituted 38.4 percent¹¹ of the Jewish population, compared to Ashkenazim, who comprised 25.8 percent; 14.6 percent were third-generation Israeli-born and/or mixed groups, and

21.1 percent were new immigrants (Y. Cohen, 2015).¹² In fact, the majority of Israeli Jews now have some Mizrahi ancestry (CBS, 2014).¹³

Mizrahim as the “Unfit”

The arrival of almost half a million Jews from Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African countries in the 1950s and 1960s created a new challenge for social integration. It was only during this period, in fact, that the word *Mizrahi* came into use as an umbrella term covering a range of social types and ethnic identities. Many Western Zionists viewed Mizrahi Jews as vulgar, premodern, and even primitive (Shiloah and Cohen, 1983). Using region of origin to distinguish the veteran Ashkenazi residents from the newer Mizrahi immigrants served to signify each group’s place in the diversifying social hierarchy (Herzog, 1985).¹⁴

In Israel, Mizrahim have often been viewed through one or another universalist prisms, whether socialism,¹⁵ modernization and secularization, or liberalism, all of which are ultimately products of Enlightenment thought. Ironically, both the earlier views of modernization theory, which would be dismissed as “establishment” by the later critical theories, and the critical theories themselves held that Mizrahi consciousness was a direct product of their position within a dominant power structure: the Mizrahim, according to the former, found themselves in a premodern stage in the linear, universal, progress towards modernity, or, in the view of the latter, they were victims of modernization, globalization, or neo-liberalism. Both schools viewed the hawkish and traditionalist Mizrahi positions as reactive, anomalous, or symptomatic of a problem or social ill.

In the early years of the state,¹⁶ modernization theories explained Mizrahi aversion to the secular left as an outcome of their backward cultural development.¹⁷ This theoretical frame was based in essentialist attitudes and was congruent with the Zionist project. As an inherently modernist national movement, Zionism not only sought to conquer the land, establish a nation-state, and exert control over the natural and social environments, it also sought to create a new kind of subject and identity, the “new Jew”—secular, Western, rational—fit for modern life in a liberal democracy with a modern economy (Mizrachi, 2014). Mizrahim, like ultra-Orthodox Jews, were initially considered “unfit” for the Zionist project.

Ever since their arrival in the early 1950s, Mizrahim have been judged according to entrenched orientalist stereotypes (Hever et al., 2002; Mizrachi, 2004; Shohat, 1988). State policies have also contributed to their marginalization in the economic-political (Grinberg, 1989), educational (Shavit, 1984), and cultural spheres. The state, for example, largely placed the new Mizrahi arrivals into lower-class occupations and settled them in “development towns” that were far from the centers of population (Bernstein and Swirski, 1982). To this day, the Hebrew term *periferia*, meaning both a social and geographic periphery, is closely associated with Mizrahim. To make them fit for the modern nation-building project, these

immigrants were thought to need moral, cultural, educational, and psychological development (Khazzoom, 2003; Mizrahi, 2004; Shenhav, 2006).

The vision of a Zionist melting pot is the ideal of the “ingathering of exiles,” that is, the coming-together of all the Jewish diasporas into one place, culminating in a single Jewish national entity. Although it constitutes a powerful, inclusive and unifying narrative, specific markers still serve to distinguish Mizrahim from Ashkenazim. These include their place of residence (“the periphery”) along with a specific class and ethnic habitus, expressed through a distinctive accent, “look,” and sets of cultural practices, such as musical taste and typical sonic cues (Katz-Guerro et al., 2007; Schwarz, 2015). The term “Mizrahi” is still understood by many Israelis as a stigmatized identity or degrading social label (DellaPergola, 2007; Lamont et al., 2016).

Measures of Mizrahi-Ashkenazi Inequality

The control of the secular, socialist, Zionist Ashkenazim over state institutions, culture, the economy, and especially politics was finally disrupted three decades after the founding of the state by a political reversal in 1977 (Kimmerling, 2001). In the elections that year, the Labor Party, which had founded the state and had never been out of power, lost to the opposition Likud, identified with the revisionist right and headed by Menachem Begin, a charismatic leader of Polish descent who received massive support from Mizrahim from Israel’s social periphery (Kimmerling, 2001). To this day, this reversal is regarded as a political earthquake that changed the face of Israeli politics and society.¹⁸

By the late 1980s, with the growth of a Mizrahi middle class, Mizrahim had begun to achieve political clout in both municipal and national politics. Nevertheless, they remain to this day overrepresented in the lowest rungs of the social strata and under-represented in elite positions in politics, the economy, and culture when contrasted with Ashkenazim (see Y. Cohen, 2015). This inequality persists despite substantial mobility among educated Mizrahim and the blurring of social boundaries, and even though 35 percent of all Jewish marriages are inter-ethnic (Stier and Shavit, 2003). Income disparities between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews have remained fairly constant throughout the first decade of twenty-first century, although Mizrahi Jews are slowly gaining in income.¹⁹

Educational inequality is even more striking. By 1995, 32 percent of male and 40 percent of female Ashkenazi Jews were college graduates, compared to only 10 percent of male and 13 percent of female Mizrahim (Swirski et al., 2014). When we began this study, Mizrahim held only 9 percent of tenure-track positions in Israeli universities (Blachman, 2008). Although between 1992 and 2010, the number of second-generation Mizrahim holding academic degrees and belonging to the middle class rose considerably (M. Dahan, 2016; Swirski et al., 2014)—which I will discuss further in chapter 3—at this point I emphasize that the strong correlation

between Mizrahi origin and low social status remains, especially in Israeli's social and geographic periphery.

Over the past three decades, socioeconomic inequality has decreased, and Mizrahim have achieved upward mobility, mainly through education (M. Dahan, 2016). These changes have also been associated with increased political representation (Rahat and Itzkovitch-Malka, 2012). Nevertheless, Mizrahim have remained under-represented among the elite and overrepresented in the lower class (Cohen et al., 2007; Haberfeld and Cohen, 2007), and orientalist attitudes and stereotypes remain entrenched (Mizrachi and Herzog 2012).

Voting "Against Their Own Best Interests"?

The 1977 political reversal, with all the changes it entailed (upon which I will expand in the chapters that follow), did not "solve the Mizrahi problem." In many spheres of life, inequality between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim remains empirically measurable and obvious. Theoretically, within liberal circles in academia, civil society, and politics, the fact that Mizrahim persist in voting for the Likud and other right-wing parties has only exacerbated the paradox. As I will attend to below, critical sociology only appeared in Israel after 1977, reaching its peak in the 1990s, though it has since continued to dominate the field.

From the point of view of the critical academic and political left, Mizrahi support for the political right, which pursues oppressive neo-liberal policies, maintains hawkish positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and encourages settlement in the occupied territories, which are largely populated by Palestinians, seems to be self-defeating. The Likud is perceived as part of an oppressive structure that has sucked the Mizrahim in. Their support for the Likud hasn't helped Mizrahim break any glass ceilings, nor do they lead the party. Within the progressive critical discourse in general, and in particular the critical discourse on Mizrahim, the massive support for the Likud by Mizrahim from the periphery has enabled the party to entrench its oppressive neo-liberal policies, deepen the occupation, expand the settlements in the occupied territories, and spread its national-religious chauvinistic attitudes toward minorities.

In his 2004 paper "Class Aspects of the Occupation: Some Remarks," Danny Gutwein, a central figure in Israeli critical discourse, argued that in the three previous decades, Israeli society had been shaped by two central processes—the privatization revolution and the persistence of the occupation—so that the expansion of the settlement project comes at the expense of the Israeli social periphery (Gutwein, 2004). According to Gutwein, the settlements, which had been increasingly populated by Mizrahim, served in part as a compensation mechanism for the structural inequality and privatization policies that had deepened inequality and which were particularly damaging to Mizrahim and other excluded groups. The Mizrahim were thus unwitting partners in the process of expanded inequality

in Israel and oppression of the Palestinians. I will return to this interpretive logic below. For the left, Mizrahi support for an agenda that keeps them at the periphery is an example of a public that votes “against its own best interests.” It is a riddle or, to use Thomas Frank’s phrase, “the great paradox,” and it echoes powerfully in Israeli political discourse.

Avi Dabush, a social activist and politician who had a realistic chance of being elected to the Knesset with Meretz, the liberal left party, in 2015, provides clear evidence for this. His book *The Rebellion of the Periphery*, published in 2021, was not meant to be academic, yet Dabush reviews a variety of data that echo Arlie Hochschild’s (2016) description of the gaps between the right-wing Republican areas of the United States and the Democratic areas identified with the progressive left. Dabush presents, among other factors, the tremendous discrepancies between the center and the periphery among high school graduates who receive highly ranked matriculation examinations that will enable them to continue on to university and those with more vocationally oriented certificates; the large differences in average salary; and gaps in the quality of the healthcare system and even in life expectancy. He also points to the educational tracking systems that are still in existence in the periphery, the emigration of successful young people from the periphery to urban centers, and the persistent structural inequality between the more established Ashkenazi-dominated towns and the development towns populated by Mizrahim and other ethnic groups, such as Ethiopians and Russians, who came to the country later.

For liberal left activists and politicians like Dabush, the question of how to “break the code” of the voting patterns of marginalized Mizrahim is the million-dollar question, since their turn to the right has been a game-changer in Israeli politics. However, the code refuses to be broken. Analysis of voting behavior in 2009, the period of time during which we prepared this research, revealed that in disadvantaged neighborhoods and towns populated primarily by Mizrahim, a majority had voted for right-wing or religious parties. In more affluent areas populated primarily by Ashkenazim, a majority had voted for left-liberal parties, a pattern that has remained stable to this day.²⁰

It should come as no surprise that the term “the great paradox” was easily assimilated into Israeli academic parlance, as readers encountered the phrase, borrowed from Frank, in Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016). Despite the obvious differences between the Israeli and the American political and cultural contexts, this phrase seemed to capture the similarities.

But is there a paradox? What are their “best interests”? Like Hochschild, I felt that in order to disperse the clouds surrounding “the paradox,” I should turn to the missing link—the subjects themselves. However, this research journey was not only about entering an “unknown land” to resolve a riddle, but rather an opportunity to explore the limitations of my own intellectual terrain. This was an opportunity to turn my sociological gaze upon itself and to read the parochial

assumptions of my critical sociology through the eyes of my disadvantaged Mizrahi subjects.

Nor was this turn solely the result of a theoretical epiphany that burst unbidden into my mind. I would be remiss if I kept my own story out of the text. I am aware of the risk of sinking into the auto-ethnographical narcissism that leads to endless cycles of observing oneself observing. Rather, I want to integrate my own experience as a Mizrahi critical sociologist and activist in the field and to describe how it fueled my theoretical and methodological search.

FROM PERSONAL JOURNEY TO THEORETICAL TURN

During the first years of my graduate studies in the United States, my social and political concerns were quite detached from my academic work.²¹ In fact, I had felt rather alienated from what I experienced as the intrusion of identity politics into the academic field. Although I sympathized with people of color and women who studied subjects that were personally relevant for them as well as politically important, I stuck to my areas of interest, focusing on medical sociology and the sociology of science and knowledge. While in the United States, I had the opportunity to meet with other Mizrahi graduate students, who, like me, came from disadvantaged backgrounds and were now attending top American schools. These events were organized by the Israel Scholarship Education Foundation (ISEF), an American-Israeli Jewish foundation dedicated to decreasing disparities in Israeli education.²² As we shared our stories as marginalized Mizrahim, the emancipatory power of the well-worn feminist slogan “the personal is political” came to life for me. This framework revived memories and helped me piece together my Mizrahi experiences and turn them into a powerful political narrative. I realized that as an undergraduate in Israel I had never met even a single Mizrahi professor, which was astonishing in view of the fact that Mizrahim then comprised more than half of Israel’s Jewish population.

Academic programs in the social sciences were preoccupied with the study of race, ethnicity, and gender, identity politics, multiculturalism, and all forms of social inequality. This progressive critical discourse dominated US campuses and equipped us with ideas and a common language. This political *zeitgeist* extended beyond the classroom; it was alive and kicking in extracurricular life. During my graduate days in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I proudly carried a placard reading “Unity, diversity, a better university” and participated enthusiastically in the constant debates over curricula, admissions policies, and funding. We were gaining tools to tell our own story.

At the same time, the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow had been founded in Israel by a core of Mizrahi academics and activists, some of whom had also graduated from leading American institutions. The Rainbow, as it was commonly called, was the flagship of the new Mizrahi critical discourse. Incorporated as an NGO in

the 1990s, it described itself as “an apolitical, non-parliamentary social movement whose goal is to affect the current public agenda in the aim of bringing a change into the Israeli society as a whole and to its institutions. The organization is Mizrahi (Jews from Arab and Muslim Lands and the East) in its goals, universal in its beliefs, and open to all those who identify with its values. The movement strives to bring about a meaningful change among the Israeli society and implement values of democracy, human rights, social justice, equality and multi culturalism.”²³

I returned home equipped with my American sociological toolkit and fueled by the emancipatory spirit of critical sociology. At the time, as noted above, Mizrahi held only 9 percent of tenure-track positions in Israeli universities (Blachman, 2008). In the early 2000s, I began a tenure-track job at Tel Aviv University. The school was then at the cutting edge of the new critical discourse, led by Yehouda Shenhav, a prominent critical scholar and one of the founders of the Rainbow. I soon joined the handful of Mizrahi academics engaging in social and political activism. Linked to the influential international network of critical scholars centered in the United States, we were empowered by the opportunity to tell our local story within this universal, progressive moral and political framework.

In this local version of the universal critical-progressive script, the old Ashkenazi establishment, represented by the Zionist state, was assigned the role of “victimizers,” and the Mizrahi—alongside Palestinian Arabs, Ethiopian Jews, asylum seekers, the LGBTQ community and people with disabilities, among other oppressed groups—were cast in the role of its “victims.” My role was that of the Mizrahi progressive critical sociologist and activist. I met with parents and students in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods; I participated in demonstrations against discrimination, racism, and exclusion; and I crafted alliances between marginalized groups. In all these ventures, my colleagues and I attempted to recruit Mizrahi to the struggle for equal opportunity and opposition to the Ashkenazi mainstream that stifled and limited us as individuals and as a community.

Returning to the community I had grown up in was heartwarming. Our shared background and upbringing made me feel at home and intensified my sense of purpose and dreams of social change. And for the most part, my colleagues and I were received with warmth and sincere appreciation. Yet these close and affectionate relations were always limited to the interpersonal and the communal; they never extended to the political. Our audience did not seem to embrace our “personal is political” concept. A clear line separated personal and communal gratitude from political discontent with any attempt to frame their lived experience in progressive, liberal terms. Put bluntly, they were reluctant to accept their roles as “victims” in our pre-packaged progressive script.

In my private life, my role was just as difficult. Among my extended family and friends, I could feel the strong dissonance between the enthusiasm and warmth expressed toward me personally and the responses to my political agenda, which ranged from reticence to feelings of insult and resentment. Their fidelity to Zionist

discourse and their loyalty to the State of Israel appeared unshakable. Any attempt on my part to question their unequivocal allegiance to Israel's dominant narratives—the “history of the victorious” (Gandler, 2010)—or to free them from the “shackles of the oppressive powers” was met, in the best of cases, with stubborn refusal and, in the worst, with fierce counterattacks and anger.

The “great paradox” seemed to be coming alive. When I turned to my sociological toolkit for answers, I found it was quite impoverished.

MIZRAHIM AS AN ANOMALY IN ISRAELI SOCIOLOGY

Throughout their history, the social sciences in Israel have viewed Mizrahim through universalist prisms, such as socialism, modernization, secularization, and liberalism, all of which share an Enlightenment heritage. According to each of these universal programs, Mizrahim were an *anomaly*, a problem seeking an explanation or awaiting a solution. They were insufficiently “modern” according to modernization theories, lacked “class consciousness” in Marxist terms, or lacked “political awareness” from the point of view of post-colonialism and identity politics.

By the 1990s modernization theory, which held sway in the field for several decades, had come under attack from the critical approaches branding it “establishment sociology,” arguing it disguised itself as neutral science when actually serving the Ashkenazi vision (Ram, 2006; Swirski, 1989). In the view of critical sociology, which has continued to dominate the field, labeling Mizrahim “premodern” was a form “blaming the victim.” Hence, critical researchers shifted the position of the Mizrahi subject from “premodern” or even “primitive” to that of the “blameless victim.” Three major critical approaches have dealt with Mizrahim in the role of victims: class-structural, post-colonial, and the multiple-citizenship approach.

According to the *class-structural* approach, Mizrahi conservatism derives from the group's socioeconomic position within the Israeli class structure (Swirski, 1988). Mizrahi right-wing preferences are described as the outcome of competition between Mizrahim and Palestinian citizens of Israel over access to limited resources such as jobs and wages (Peled, 1990; Swirski, 1988), given respective places on the lowest socioeconomic strata. According to class-structural research, Israel's political left, while employing dovish rhetoric on matters of security, pursued the interests of its upper middle class constituency, neglecting and oppressing the lower classes (see Gutwein, 2000; Swirski, 1988). In this view, Mizrahi hawkishness is seen as a rational response to class exclusion and discrimination.

The *post-colonial* approach combined an emphasis on identity politics with attention to power relations.²⁴ As previously noted, Mizrahim were thought unsuited to the Ashkenazi Zionist project, based on the image of them as non-Western and unmodern (Khazzoom, 2003; Mizrachi, 2004). A salient example of the post-colonial reading of Mizrahi political attitudes can be found in Shohat's

(1988) pioneering work, in which she presents Mizrahi hawkishness and hostility to Peace Now (a left-wing NGO) as a reaction to social pathology, that is, to the oppressive, exclusionary and unequal treatment of Mizrahim

Echoing the arguments of the class-structural approach, Shohat points to the hypocrisy of the Ashkenazi left, who excluded Mizrahim from their ranks, as the cause of the Mizrahi drift to the right. Shohat views Mizrahi animosity toward Arabs as a form of revolt against the Ashkenazi elite's orientalism.²⁵ Sami Shalom Chetrit (2004) likewise suggests that the Mizrahi rejection of the liberal left's agenda is a symptom of a social malady, resulting in what he calls the "Mizrahi identity complex," a desire for recognition and integration into the Ashkenazi Zionist nation-building project. In his subversive post-colonial genealogy of the category of Mizrahi, Shenhav (2006) characterizes Mizrahi identity as caught between *Jewish* and *Arab*, which, he argues, explains Mizrahi right-wing attitudes and hostility toward Arabs. He traces Mizrahi identity to its historical ground zero, where Zionist discourse created a binary opposition between Arabs and Jews. The "religionization" of the Mizrahim by the Ashkenazi Zionist establishment, intended to be an act of inclusion, simultaneously demanded that they negate their stigmatized Arab identity. Any traces of Arabness were painted in culturally degrading orientalist colors and threatened identification of Mizrahim with the active external enemy. The unqualified loyalty of Mizrahim to their Jewish identity, the State of Israel, and the Zionist narrative is once again explained as an understandable outcome.

Finally, the *multiple-citizenship* approach, most notably associated with Gershon Shafir and Yohav Peled (2002), argues that the reluctance of working-class Mizrahim to embrace the liberal progressive agenda is a perfectly rational choice. According to Shafir and Peled, the liberal discourse is just one of the three civil discourses, along with the republican and the ethno-national, that shape the boundaries of Israeli civil society during different periods. In their explanation, the liberal discourse extols individual rights, autonomy, and private property while downplaying the meaning of group identification. In the republican discourse, civil status is conditioned on active participation in the polity, embracing state goals, and willingness to contribute to the national good and the fulfillment of national goals. The Jewish ethno-national discourse, by contrast, endows rights exclusively to Jews as Jews. In the republican discourse, Mizrahi membership in the national collectivity has been marginalized, while the liberal discourse, as represented by Israel's Labor Party, has never been more than an exclusionary sham that failed to uphold the universalism it espoused. Shafir and Peled argue that the Mizrahi exclusion from both the republican and the liberal discourses explains their adherence to the ethno-national discourse—it was the only choice left for them. The authors' argument implies that in a "true" liberal democracy free of constraints, Mizrahim would not have to cling to the ethno-national discourse.

This brief review suggests that all three critical approaches, whatever their intellectual tradition or heuristic power, view Mizrahi aversion to the progressive liberal agenda as a reaction to their victim status. Their political behavior is regarded as a symptom of a structural pathology, the post-colonial condition, or discursive constraints. Put succinctly, Mizrahi right-leaning, ethno-national tendencies have always been considered a run-off, never a wellspring. As different as they are, all three theories view Mizrahi reservations about modern, universal, and secular reforms (from early socialist to recent liberal progressive agendas) as an *anomaly*, a social malady awaiting a cure.

I became increasingly uncomfortable with what appeared to be the essentialist, missionary, and paternalistic views underlying the emancipatory spirit of these critical visions. It was obvious that there was a dramatic rift between Mizrahi activists and academics like myself and other segments of the Mizrahi population. We molded them into one imagined entity—a “group” (see Brubaker, 2004)—to whom we had attributed “real interests” derived from their structural position. We had reduced their subjectivity into an assigned fixed role and muted any of the voices that could have ruined the precious story that we so zealously wanted to tell. Striving for liberation had never felt closer to tyranny.

I had come to feel that the same critical-progressive vision that had been my only avenue for thinking about ethnic inequality in Israel was now taking me down a path that could not lead to any new or refreshing insights. And I came to realize that the problem was much broader. This was not merely a failure of Israeli sociology; my quandary pointed to issues in the discipline of sociology throughout the world.

THE CRITICAL-LIBERAL BLIND SPOT: THE DOMINANCE OF US SOCIOLOGY

In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States became a major—if not *the* major—producer of professional sociologists, and the center of gravity in the field shifted from Europe to America. In many countries, the United States is now also the arbiter of professional success, and publication in top American journals provides sociologists with the imprimatur of excellence, grants worldwide scientific recognition, and determines career success (Azarya, 2010; Jacobs and Mizrahi, 2020). The international field has become stratified, and American sociology has a tremendous impact on theoretical and research agendas in many countries (Jacobs and Mizrahi, 2020).

In his 2004 presidential address to the American Sociological Association (ASA), as well as in a later article entitled “For Public Sociology,” Burawoy (2005) argued that during the second half of the twentieth century, sociology and the world had moved in opposite directions—sociology to the left, the world to

the right. Burawoy used the metaphor of a “scissors movement” to describe the process and noted that while sociology had taken a critical position toward the political and economic order, the world had gone in reverse, as evidenced by the expansion of the global market economy, the rise of neo-liberalism, and the recurrence of human rights violations. Burawoy’s observation was not only descriptive; it was prescriptive. The synthesis of sociology and civil society, he argued, was an ethos that needed to be cultivated. His address, described as electrifying, was widely applauded in the American sociological community as it reflected its dominant political and professional sensibility (Brint, 2005).

Almost two decades later, the distance between the blades of the scissors has grown wider. Voters in many blue-collar areas have continued to vote Republican (Hochschild, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018). At the same time, American sociology’s explicit commitment to liberal justice and human rights has taken on a messianic fervor. Tellingly, the theme of the 2019 annual meeting of the ASA was “Engaging Social Justice for a Better World.” The 2021 theme was even more combative: “Emancipatory Sociology: Rising to the Du Boisian Challenge.”²⁶

Meanwhile, sociology’s sister discipline, cultural anthropology, has undergone similar developments. This trend has been particularly consequential in Israeli universities, where the two disciplines reside in the same department. New ideas and assumptions made their way onto the agenda of the discipline during the 1980s. The cultural approach that dealt with issues of meaning, identified primarily with the work of Clifford Geertz, was replaced by conflictual approaches (especially post-colonialist and feminist) that view culture as a field of power relations characterized by domination, exploitation of the underclass, repression, and various forms of inequality (Ortner, 2016). “Dark anthropology” emerged in this context, highlighting the cruelty and aggression in the human experience as well as the historical and structural conditions (such as neo-liberalism) that produce them. As anthropological research embarked on this new track, it was no longer the primitive, savage and (culturally) distant “other” that preoccupied scholarship, but rather the suffering subject (Robbins, 2013), and the field came to view vulnerability and exploitation as the nucleus of its research agenda (Kleinman et al., 1997).

As with sociology, this moral turn (Fassin, 2012) has had far-reaching implications for anthropology’s interpretative space, transforming it from a field whose mission was to understand the “other” and discern the meaning assigned to various forms of life to one that saw itself as politically committed to a mode of analysis that would protect the vulnerable and the oppressed. Notably, this turn did not emerge from theoretical reflection alone; it came from the cultural and political changes convulsing the West and the rise and institutionalization of humanitarian and human rights discourses (Robbins, 2013).

A glance at the history of relations between American anthropology and human rights discourse reveals the dramatic change that anthropology has undergone in the past two decades. The story begins in 1947, two years after the end of World War II, when the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was asked to sign

the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR). The Association, then headed by Melville Herskovitz, declined to be a signatory, claiming that the AAA's fidelity to the values of scientific neutrality and cultural relativism barred it from doing so (American Anthropological Association Executive Board 1947). Half a century later, in 1999, the AAA made an about-face, publicly declaring its commitment to human rights (Engle, 2001; Goodale, 2006). Many AAA members supported the change in the organization's position, believing that it was now imperative for cultural anthropology to facilitate the translation of human rights into local, non-Western dialects, introduce cultural and socioeconomic rights into human rights discourse, and, most importantly, address human rights violations by going beyond mere description (Messer, 1993, p. 242).

The Liberal Grammar of Contemporary Critical Discourse

In American sociology and cultural anthropology, these trends have coalesced into what I refer to as the liberal grammar of contemporary critical research (see Mizrahi, 2022). To be sure, I make no claim that critical sociology represents the entirety of American sociology. Other branches, such as professional and policy sociology (in Burawoy's terms), are still alive and less politically committed (see Turner, 2019), while public sociologies, especially those that closely cooperate with liberal progressive NGOs, are by necessity politically committed. However, critical sociology, with its high levels of political commitment, holds a grip on American sociology and, as such, plays a crucial role in determining the current discourse in Israeli sociology.

Beneath this critical discourse is the liberal grammar. This grammar, shared by critical sociologists at the core of the discipline (in the United States) and its periphery (in Israel), consists of three major components, the ontological, political, and interpretive. A fourth, which I refer to as *moralistic methodological atheism*, while not always present among all critical researchers, nevertheless exerts a strong influence.²⁷

The *ontological* stance is made up of two building blocks. The first is a conflictual view of social reality, according to which relationships of domination are at the core of social life. The second is the belief in the sovereign, rational, equal, autonomous individual, awaiting rescue from the prison-like constraints of oppressive structures. Such structures can be national and religious boundaries, exploitative global markets or the neo-liberal order, the post-colonial condition, or pervasive structural inequalities—whether based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or disability (Abbott, 2016). These two components come into view in what Abbott describes as the *liberal contractarian ontology*,²⁸ which is essential to the normative underpinnings of contemporary social science.²⁹

Many conflictual approaches focus on power structures in economic, organizational, and institutional contexts and the inequalities they create without reference to the idea of the autonomous individual, and some of these approaches even deny its existence. However, it is important to emphasize that the focus on inequality is

related to the concept of the autonomous individual, even if the approaches that deal with inequality do not always attend to it directly.

As their organizing principle, these approaches share what anthropologist Louis Dumont (1980) called the *homo aequalis*, which is regarded as both a desirable and “natural” feature of the political and social order (the “is” and the “ought”). My use of “natural” indicates that the concept of the *homo aequalis* draws its validity from universal moral reason (rather than from God or other transcendental religious powers) as the transcendental determinant of the social order. This political vision, which stems from the Enlightenment, is nourished by the close connection between the principle of the rational and autonomous individual, who is differentiated from the society in which he/she lives, and by the principle of equality.³⁰ Dumont (1980, p. 11), characterizing the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, captures the relation of these two principles:

The ideal of liberty and equality follows immediately from the conception of man as an individual. In effect, if the whole of humanity is deemed present in each man, then each man should be free, and all men are equal. This is the foundation of the two great ideals of the modern age. By contrast, as soon as a collective end is adopted by several men, their liberty is limited and their equality brought into question.

Thus, the concept of the individual as an indivisible entity—the in-dividual—is the ontological Archimedean point of the liberal grammar (see, for example, Dumont, 1992; Abbott, 2016; Mizrachi, 2022). It is fundamental to the proper order of things, and from the progressive critical position, situations where individual autonomy is under threat require interpretive suspicion and are explained as false consciousness (see, for example, Enoch, 2020). The acceptance of the hegemonic order by subjects defined as its victims is a paradigmatic instance of false consciousness (with some variation among the approaches) because it stands in opposition to their only authentic choice, that of fulfilling their autonomy.

Readers from various critical schools may still wonder why I ascribe a common individualist ontology to such diverse approaches and intellectual traditions as Marxism and neo-Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, different schools of feminism, queer theory, and communitarian approaches,³¹ some of which take the concept of the embedded individual as the theoretical starting point. It is, therefore, important to briefly distinguish between the concept of the “embedded individual” as classically figured in the discipline of sociology and its use in contemporary critical discourse. In the classical formulation, the individual was viewed as deeply embedded in a weave of social relations, within which the very meaning of personhood is constructed.³² Most contemporary critical approaches also perceive the individual as deeply embedded; however, in this formulation the individual is embedded in structures of domination and inequality that constrain his/her liberty.³³

The concept of the *homo aequalis*, which is deeply embedded in the individualistic ontology, gives rise to the liberal grammar’s *political* stance, which extols

liberation. In its progressive version, this stance prioritizes actions of “resistance,” “subversion,” and “disruption,” all of which are crucial to the struggle against repressive power structures. This emancipatory spirit can nonetheless warp our view of those communities (such as religious communities) that maintain continuity with, rather than break from, tradition, since such a break is considered necessary for social change. Yet the refusal to break from tradition might signify that these communities await neither liberal salvation nor emancipation from the “oppressive” past (Mahmood, 2005; Mizrahi, 2014).

This overview leads to the heart of my inquiry—the liberal grammar’s *interpretive* component, which is fueled by suspicion, the negation of overt reality, and an ethos of deconstruction.³⁴ When read according to the liberal grammar, social reality is determined by underlying power structures that are known to critical researchers yet invisible to the research subjects. This mode of suspicion becomes excessive when strong moral and ideological meaning is attached to the power structures.

I here note an additional aspect of the liberal interpretive mode: a *secular anti-traditional stance*, that is, the negation of any tradition as a source of authority if it seems to conflict with the secular and individualist ontology.

On the question of religion, the liberal interpretive mode is characterized by what I term *moralistic methodological atheism*, an interpretive stance according to which religious norms of behavior are judged by progressive moral and political standards, especially when they are viewed as harmful to the individual’s autonomy or bolstering oppressive social forces. My term draws on Peter Berger’s notion of *methodological atheism* (Berger, 1967, 1979), which he defines as “the practice of bracketing—or refusing to consider for the purpose of sociological study—the ultimate reality of such religious objects such as God, angels, or cosmic unity” (Porpora, 2006, p. 75). In contrast, my term refers to cases in which religious phenomena are “unbracketed.” This occurs when critical sociologists either stop maintaining neutrality regarding the true value of some religious phenomena or adopt an agnostic stance toward them (Porpora, 2006). Instead, they tend to vilify religious content and behavior, especially in cases where religious content and behavior deny the inherent priority of the *autonomous equal individual* (for example gender inequality).³⁵

What I call *primordial relations* serve as an organizing principle (Eisenstadt, 1998) of group boundaries and social roles and duties for some rooted subjects. These primordial relations are based on kinship, land, ancestry, and other “tribal” and familial affinities, and in the progressive secular vision, they are viewed negatively if they seem to threaten individual autonomy and social equality. Hence, while I am fully aware of the orientalist connotation of the term *primordial*, my reappropriation is based precisely on the interpretive space that lies beyond the liberal grammar. I will further clarify my use of *primordial* when I present my discussion of its connection to sources of collective identity.

To return for a moment to the repertoire of explanations for Mizrahi hawkishness, as reflected in their adherence to Jewish identity and loyalty to the Jewish

people and the State of Israel, we see that all of these approaches built around a conception of the embedded individual view Mizrahi political behavior as an inevitable reaction to broader social forces. Even if some are aware of the paternalism inherent in attributing the political positions of disadvantaged Mizrahim to “false consciousness,” their subjective consciousness and lived experience are perceived as a reflection of social and symbolic inequality. Ironically, the attribution of false consciousness to the victims of oppression who refuse to self-categorize according to the liberal grammar is intended to defend them from the possibility that they might be convinced of their own opinions and refuse the liberal redemption so fervently offered to them. If the researcher acknowledges this possibility, even if it stems from a reliable description of the attitudes of the research subject, he/she risks being suspected of essentialism. In other words, from the position of liberal certainty, the research subject, and especially the subject who has been identified as a victim, is expected to recognize universal reason and morality and realize their individual autonomy as the only human authentic choice.

However, giving voice to right-wing Mizrahim does not mean essentializing non-liberal subjects; rather, it aims to de-essentialize the liberal grammar by which they are read. This allows for the liberation of the interpretive space and bringing the non-liberal subject in. In order to do this, we must understand what enables the liberal grammar to reign as the *modus operandi* of critical discourse. We must ask why the sense of certainty held by the liberal-critical discourse has persisted, despite the refusal of so many subjects in the field to be classified by its components. To answer this question, I focus on the interpretive mode of the critical discourse and, more precisely, on its propensity to adopt an excessively suspicious mode of interpretation. As we will see, this is perpetuated by a circular logic: the position of certainty, based on the liberal grammar’s view of social structure and its moral and political meaning, nourishes an overly suspicious regard for any counterevidence. Adopting this heightened suspicion serves not only a meta-methodological purpose but is also intended to ensure an authentic mode of critique. Liberal certainty feeds on interpretive suspicion aimed at the production of truth, which does not allow much opportunity for counterevidence to disrupt the underlying grammar. All counterevidence is labeled anomalous, and the grammar itself is reinforced. To understand this, we must delve into notions of hermeneutics.

The Hermeneutical Bend: Becoming Overly Suspicious

I first used the term *sociology of suspicion* in a programmatic paper describing the critical movement in Israeli sociology (Mizrachi, 2017). Drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the hermeneutics of suspicion, I sought to probe sociology’s interpretive stance and to suggest a movement along an interpretive pendulum, from the pole of excessive suspicion to the pole of meaning.

In Ricoeur's monumental philosophical project, human interpretive activity mediates between the person and their surroundings, whether the object of that activity is a written or a social text. In his book *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), Ricoeur hails Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche as the masters of a new art of interpreting. Despite the obvious difference among the three, what they share in common, as Rita Felski (2015, p. 31) describes,

is a spirit of ferocious and blistering disenchantment—a desire to puncture illusions, topple idols, and destroy divinities. In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur contrasts this iconoclastic verve to the yearning of the reader who approaches a text in the hope of revelation. Here meaning is disguised in a quite different sense. The reader luxuriates in the fullness of language rather than lamenting its poverty; the text's latent meaning 'dwells' in its first meaning, rather than exposing, subverting, or canceling it out. To interpret in this way is to feel oneself addressed by the text as if by a message or a proclamation, to defer to a presence rather than diagnose an absence. The words on the page do not disguise truth but disclose it. Such a 'hermeneutics of restoration' is infused with moments of wonder, reverence, exaltation, hope, epiphany, or joy. The difference between a hermeneutics of restoration and a hermeneutics of suspicion, we might say, lies in the difference between unveiling and unmasking.

However, the two forms of hermeneutics coexist, and thus, the interpretive act is dually motivated, according to Ricoeur, by the tendency to suspect, on the one hand, and the effort to decipher the text or restore its meaning as fully as possible, on the other. "Suspicious" interpretation is propelled by the desire to discover the text's "true meaning," assumed to lie beneath its surface. Texts thus require excavation, as it were, before their original meanings can be discerned. In the context of the social sciences, I refer to the hermeneutics of suspicion as an interpretive mode driven by a belief in an "essential truth," known to the critical observer but often hidden from the subjects in the field. As such, the hermeneutics of suspicion relates to Ricoeur's other mode of interpretation, the *hermeneutics of meaning or faith*, which he juxtaposes against suspicion. The motivation in this hermeneutic mode is to dig into the text in order to unearth and restore its inherent meaning, this time through its subject. As such, it calls for total attention to the text—studying it, learning from it, and being utterly open to its influence. This allows us to reconstruct its original meaning, its creator's "true" intent.

For Ricoeur, the interpretive act requires both the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of meaning. Each is constitutive of the act of interpretation; neither can be done away with. The balance between them, however, is difficult to maintain. On the one hand, an overly faithful interpretive mode may lead to naïve readings by taking the text/subject at face value. On the other, an *overly suspicious* reading may flatten the text/subject and reduce their meaning to what is "hidden" underneath. Ricoeur (1970) identified the two core factors that may induce an overly suspicious imbalance: a structuralist approach and ideology.

Put simply, when the observer (in our case, the social scientist) maintains a clear and robust vision of a social structure, the addition of an ideology endowed with absolute moral meaning may lead them to adopt an overly suspicious mode of interpretation.

If we think of the liberal grammar as a paradigm, as defined by Thomas Kuhn (1962), or, more precisely in this case, a metaparadigm, then understanding its principles of action will serve as the key to understanding the role of critical discourse as “normal science,” despite the aggregation of anomalies it has amassed (which, in this context, are referred to as paradoxes) that threaten its validity. Similar to the behavior of the scientific community when it confronts evidence that disrupts or contradicts its normal assumptions, the progressive critical community acts to defend itself against contradictory evidence and “paradoxes.” Critique or empirical discoveries that question the validity of the liberal grammar itself are headed off by community members, who seek to protect their precious story and vision of a moral and political order. Understood this way, their conditioned response to shy away from, reject, or treat as threatening any conflicting evidence is intrinsic to the mode of excessive suspicion.³⁶ A clear example of the interpretive significance of the uncritical movement of the hermeneutic pendulum from the pole of meaning to the pole of over-suspicion can be found in what I describe as the “failure of representation of the non-liberal subject.”

Subjects without Subjectivities: Chronic Misrepresentation

How are we to relate to subjects who refuse to perform their assigned roles in the meta-script rooted in the liberal grammar? Whether the critical observer labels the non-liberal subject a “victimizer” or a “victim,” the risk of misrepresentation is great—whether through flattening social reality, emptying the subjects of their subjectivities, or reducing the subjects’ experiences to their position in the hidden power structure (Mizrachi, 2016b, 2017).

The Non-liberal as Victimizer. With regard to the non-liberal subject as victimizer, the problem of representation has become increasingly acute with regard to what anthropologist Susan Harding (1991) defined nearly three decades ago as “repugnant cultural others.” Harding argued that this definition entails a homogenization of people into a marked group, and she questions the selective use of cultural criticism. “It seems that anti-Orientalizing tools of cultural criticism are better suited for some ‘others’ and not other ‘others,’” she quips (p. 375).

Harding’s observation of the creeping moral policing in the field of anthropology and its implications for the subject representation has been recently revisited. In 2019, a panel of anthropologists working with “repugnant others” described their marginalization in the field and their colleagues’ skepticism about their work and their subjects’ reliability, especially when those subjects are labeled as “victimizers” (see Carey, 2019). Colleagues, panelists reported, doubted that the

conservative elite, the police, and other “repugnant communities” were actually cooperating with them. These arguments, the panelists claimed, were based on several assumptions, including

- (1) that all people in such categories are politically, socially, racially, and economically homogenous; (2) that they are so insular and/or closeminded that *they* would not talk to anyone different from themselves; (3) that building intimate relationships with people means necessarily sympathizing with them; (4) that humanizing them in our writing is an act of supporting their political and other positions; and, (5) that all anthropologists share a homogenizing political orientation (Carey, 2019).

The Non-liberal as Victim. And what of the non-liberal subject who is not branded as a “bad subject”? This problem can be illustrated by paraphrasing Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) query “Can the subaltern speak?” I would ask: “Can the *non-liberal* subaltern speak?” And are we listening? As Spivak asked: Do we hear the voices of those subalterns who refuse to play their part in the critical script? Or could it be that the only ones who are allowed to speak are those who, overtly or covertly, echo the progressive view held by critical researchers? As anthropologist James Laidlaw (2014, p. 176–77) warns, “It is also important not to imagine or pretend that people (even or perhaps especially ‘subaltern’ people) will always use their freedom toward ends of which the ‘progressive’ observer approves.” Hence, when attending to “victims,” we must be wary of an interpretive danger that stems from the hermeneutics of suspicion which I will broadly refer to as “liberal paternalism.”

In the American context, sociologist Orlando Patterson (2006, 2014; Patterson and Fosse, 2015) describes a case in which critical sociology chose to define young African American slum dwellers as “cultural dopes” who must be saved from themselves.³⁷ According to Patterson, the view held by young African Americans that “culture” (in the sense of “ghetto culture” or “culture of poverty”) plays a constitutive role in patterning their life in the ghetto and has enormous influence on their chances of extricating themselves from poverty led critical sociology to characterize these subjects as dopes. The subjects’ position is at complete odds with the structural and ideological assumptions of critical sociologists. The term “culture of poverty” was in fact taboo in critical sociology for several decades due to the concern about shifting attention from poverty’s (“true”) structural causes to the behavior of the poor, a shift that entailed “blaming the victim” (see also Lamont and Small, 2010). Identifying the culture of poverty as the source of the problem was also portrayed as pathologizing black culture (Patterson and Fosse, 2015).

In retrospect, in my own past as a critical sociologist and social activist, I see that I, too, had adopted a protective position toward marginalized Mizrahi victims. I had silenced them when their voices were in dissonance with my own tune, and in many cases I had diminished and even dismissed the meaning they gave to their own lives. Putting it bluntly, I tended to reduce the Mizrahi subjects’ subjectivity to a fixed role in the structural meta-script of the critical story, and they became

components in the social structure with which I had imbued essential moral meaning. Most importantly, I silenced or denied my Mizrahi subjects' own reading of the same structure and the moral meaning they attached to it. In these situations, I simply separated the speaker's words from the speaker themselves, as if the story they were telling were not theirs. In my mind, the story they told was merely hiding a different story, known to me as a critical observer but hidden from them.

I have seen that this behavior occurs among critical sociologists especially when the situation "weakens" the essential story to which the critical-progressive researcher in the field is committed. In such cases, they may find no alternative to treating the research subjects' story as untrue and their consciousness as false. Critical sociologists are currently revisiting the concept of "false consciousness," but their *de facto* use of it is often implicit, unreasoned and undertheorized. Only a few critical sociologists nowadays would admit to using the concept in its Marxist sense.³⁸ I was not one of them.

In fact, the true meaning of the non-liberal subjects' story appears most clearly in those cases in which they are tagged as "bad subjects" or even as dangerous subjects. In these cases, the critical-liberal discourse overtly or covertly recoils from understanding the internal logic of one tagged as victimizer.

Within the Israeli left, Mizrahim from the social periphery are viewed as both victims and victimizers. As we have seen, overall, the critical discourse tends to view Mizrahim as victims of Ashkenazi Zionism. At the same time, however, there can be no doubt that they belong to the Jewish majority (see Mizrahi and Herzog, 2012), and, as a result, they benefit from Jewish supremacy in a state where being Jewish is a valuable civil resource. Because of their support for the political right (especially for Likud and Shas, the Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox party that has been part of the right-wing bloc for decades), they are a "problem" for the left: they constitute a large component of the coalition that prevents the secular-democratic left-center bloc from winning elections and facilitates the right wing in fulfilling its ostensibly unenlightened, oppressive policies. Finally, the active involvement of Mizrahim in anti-Arab activities, especially in mass riots after security-related incidents, and their calls for "Death to the Arabs" in soccer matches, as described by Rimón Or (2002), are perceived by the center-left mainstream as expressions of a fascist and racist worldview of Jewish supremacy, a victimizing, rather than victimized, position. Although the right-wing behavior of the Mizrahim is disturbing to left-wing Mizrahi activists and intellectuals, the latter have been a bit more tolerant of it than was the rest of the liberal left.³⁹

Whether victims or victimizers, non-liberal Mizrahi subjects often appear in the critical literature as empty vessels, subjects without subjectivity. This trend has intensified over the past decade or so, with the growing discourse on the rise of populism in both popular and critical literature. Right-wing Mizrahi voters from the social periphery are often identified in popular discourse as "populists." The term "Bibi-ism"⁴⁰—most often used pejoratively to describe Mizrahim who vote for Benjamin Netanyahu—appeared over a decade after the conclusion of

this research. However, the term pertains to our research population, which has remained loyal to the national-religious right, and it resonates with current interest in populism around the world. When I think of an imaginary reader today, I know that he or she will read this research through the lenses of the current discourse.

This identification has only intensified the tendency to attribute the political behavior of disadvantaged Mizrahi right-wing voters to the manipulative power of political leaders such as Netanyahu and populist parties such as Likud, populist rhetoric and discourse, and structural forces. As always, the voice of the illiberal subject—the Mizrahi as a “consumer of populism”—is completely absent from public and academic discourse in Israel. I will now move on to a description of the research and methodology, which were designed precisely to amplify this voice that has been silenced.

POPULISM, BIBI-ISM, AND RIGHT-WING NATIONALISM

Over the past decade, and most especially since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was investigated, indicted, and subsequently put on trial for alleged criminal offenses, the term “Bibi-ism” has flooded social networks and mass media.

Over the past two decades, the loyalty of Mizrahim from the social periphery to the political right has been a striking feature of every election. Likud, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, has formed the government coalition throughout this entire time, with the exception of the Bennett-Lapid government, which governed for less than a year (during 2021–22).⁴¹ Even during this period of constitutional crisis, support by Mizrahim from the social periphery for Likud and the national and religious right has remained strong.⁴² The difference between the poorer towns and villages, populated by Mizrahim and other disadvantaged groups, and the more affluent areas, which voted for the democratic-secular center or left, remains clear and consistent. This situation has been visually represented in interactive maps that detail the voting patterns according to location.⁴³

The central bloc of Netanyahu supporters among the Mizrahim from the social periphery continue to support him. They stand in opposition to the elite, whom they identify as the treacherous left-wing Ashkenazim who prefer foreign asylum seekers and Palestinians over Jews and greedily pursue status and power. They believe that the progressive faction among the elite represent a threat to their well-being, their Jewish identity, and the very existence of the State of Israel. As we have noted, it is difficult to escape the comparison between these Israeli phenomena and the divisions in American socio-political life galvanized by the populism of Trump and his supporters.

The recent surge of populism around the world includes parties and leaders from the right and the left, from the AfD in Germany to Núñez Feijóo in Spain ; from the indigenous former president of Bolivia Evo Morales to the pro-Flemish Vlamms Beland party in Belgium. We might also list Britain’s Brexit, the rise of

Viktor Orbán in Hungary, the increasing power of the populist right in France, Germany, Austria, Holland, and more (Brubaker, 2017; Filc, 2020) as a few of the key components of what some are calling a populist moment in world history. Until the 1990s, extreme right-wing parties, or populist radical right-wing parties (PRRP), enjoyed only limited electoral success (Barr, 2009; Betz, 1993; Mudde, 2007, 2010). It is their increasing control of the political center in recent years that has drawn the attention of researchers and the media.

The term *populism* is one the most contested in the contemporary vocabulary of the social sciences (Brubaker, 2017, 2020; Ron and Nadesan, 2020). It refers to a broad spectrum of political orientations—right-wing as well as left-wing political parties and leaders—and to diverse phenomena that cross states and continents and deploy distinct political and rhetorical styles. Populist leaders are often described as manipulative, using their charismatic power over their supporters (“the people”) and striving to bypass or undermine the power of stable institutions, the courts, the party, mechanisms of checks and balances, and the “hostile” media. They oppose what they refer to as the rule of the experts and the deep state and claim to defend the people from greedy, power-hungry elites. As a concept, therefore, populism has not led to a clear, articulated research tradition or to a comprehensive, linear body of work (see Brubaker, 2020). Rather, the literature on the subject suffers from ad hoc definitions employed to analyze specific case studies (Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 527).

To be sure, analysis of the populist conjuncture throughout the world is a task that extends well beyond the boundaries of this research and its purpose. However, in Israel the reference to individuals and groups as “Bibi-ists,” along with the general term “Bibi-ism,” reflects the disparaging way in which opponents of Likud view the “fanatic devotion” of marginalized Mizrahim, their unconditional admiration for Netanyahu and his actions, and their uncompromising defense of him from attacks from the left, the media, the legal system, and the civil service.⁴⁴ Since it clearly resonates with the broad outlines of populism, it would be prudent to examine the similarities and differences between the so-called Bibi-ism of the popular discourse in Israel and the characterization of populism in the literature.

THE POPULIST MIND: A FEELING OF DÉJÀ VU

The study of populism shares some common assumptions. The first of these might ring a bell for readers, as it echoes the assumptions about the non-liberal Mizrahi mind in the critical discourse: the tendency to portray the consumer (or victim) of populism as reactive rather than generative. That is, subscribing to populist politics is not considered a behavior that stems from an independent source with its own internal logic (Brubaker, 2020). Its supporters are usually viewed as passive and subject to the leader’s rhetorical and emotional manipulation. Their reactive behavior is seen as a symptom of a social “pathology” or, alternatively, an expected behavior under the conditions of structural deficiencies and other failures of

liberal democracy. In either case, populism is viewed as an *anomaly* or a problem for the proper social order.

There is a tacit assumption here that in a properly functioning, welcoming, egalitarian liberal democracy, populism will disappear, since it has no generative sources of its own. This normative valence fuses “is”—the perceived nature of social and political order—and “ought”—what a proper social and political order should be (Brubaker, 2020). Indeed, the normative valence is revealed in the very use of the word “populism” as an ostensibly clean analytic category for the description of the increasing power of the extreme right throughout the world. In other words, the motivation for the research and its normative basis slide into a description and analysis of phenomena that represent a threat to liberalism, a concern shared by researchers and public figures. Furthermore, the academic effort is implicitly or explicitly directed at exploring the conditions that give rise to populism and strategies for overcoming “populist” forces.

The pathologizing of the non-liberal mind, as we have seen in critical sociology and anthropology, is now revisited in the guise of an analysis of populism. In some of these studies, populist voters are often presented as a resentful mass (Müller, 2016, p. 12; Ricci, 2020). According to Pappas (2019, p. 215), the “populist mindset” is motivated by “moral and other largely non-rational concerns, with little respect for institutional order.”

Some scholars in the field do have reservations about the depiction of populism as an attack on “the soul and body of liberal democracy” (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 501) and about the pathologizing and mystification of populism (see Canovan, 1999; Müller, 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). These scholars view populism not as a force external to democracy but rather as an integral part of it (Müller, 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) and find the source of the problem in the deficiencies in the democratic system of representation (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Kessel, 2015; Muis and Immerzeel, 2017).

Both approaches view populist behavior as an *anomaly*, a problem in need of a solution, and a reactive behavior to a social pathology or structural deficiency. The portrayal of the “consumer” of populism as passive and reactive brings us to the second broad tendency in the literature: to focus on parties, leaders, rhetoric, and discourse, as if the consumer’s mind were an empty black box in terms of input and output. Simply put, the research on populism tends to focus on the suppliers of populism rather than its consumers. This trend is particularly strong in the growing literature on right-wing populism that has come to define the views of the political center in Europe and elsewhere.⁴⁵ If, as discussed above, a researcher views populism as an anomaly, then it is unnecessary to look for the internal and generative forces that motivates its supporters, and the researcher can settle for the assumption that this behavior is merely reactive.

In the same vein, scholars have emphasized the constitutive role of discourse and rhetoric in determining the rise and decline of the phenomenon.⁴⁶ Bonikowski and colleagues, for example, have explored structural conditions that

exacerbate populist discourse (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2015), and looked to the efficacy of its rhetorical mode of operation, described as a “dog whistle.”⁴⁷ I do not rule out *a priori* the possibility of reactive behaviors, nor do I refute the validity of research that points to the efficacy of particular rhetoric on a target audience. At the same time, it is possible to identify rhetoric that is particularly appealing to liberal progressive populations, yet I doubt that this would be referred to as dog-whistle politics. It would appear that even in research on rhetoric, the rhetoric of the research itself—the conceptualization of the word choice—demonstrates the thin line between description and prescription, between “is” and “ought.” Bonikowski (2017) clearly recognizes the need to clarify the sources of the complementarity between “supply” and “demand,” that is, between the discursive strategies employed by politicians and the beliefs of the public. His in-depth research does indeed search for the sources of public support. However, here too he explains the support of various ethnic groups for populist leaders as stemming from threats to their position: behavior is viewed as a reaction to structural constraints.

The literature tends to portray populists as “democracy’s deviants,” neglecting the perspective of the people concerned (Bulli, 2022; Kemmers et al., 2016). This trend appears in its purest form in the Israeli literature on populism in analyses of rhetorical, structural, and economic forces. For example, the literature examines political and economic policies (Avigur-Eshel and Filc, 2021); populist rhetoric, its implications for change, and the need to keep the legal system independent of judicial populism (Harel and Kolt, 2020); Netanyahu’s behavior as a populist leader (Leslie, 2017); the role of national security in accelerating populism (Levi and Agmon, 2020).

In American sociology, Arlie Hochschild (2016) and Robert Wuthnow (2018), both of whom belong to leading departments of sociology recognized as progressive bastions, have come to the conclusion that it is necessary to reach out and listen closely to non-liberal subjects. Hochschild’s research has focused on right-wing whites in arch-conservative Louisiana bayou country, while Wuthnow’s has focused on rural, small-town America. Both have explicitly discussed the challenge that progressive researchers face in looking at an “other” who is geographically and politically distant and holds to a worldview that is perhaps diametrically opposed to their own.

As a first step, Hochschild notes, she had to turn her “moral and political alarm system off” in order to feel curiosity toward her subjects and follow their life experiences closely (Inequality Media Civic Action, 2017). She realized she must truly listen to their grievances and beliefs, their moral world, and their lived experiences. Hochschild enlarges upon her conscious efforts to bridge this gap by what she calls “breaking through the empathy wall” (2016). From this empathic position, Hochschild elicits what she refers to as the “deep story” of subjects who feel like strangers in their own land.

For me, Hochschild’s humble position towards her non-liberal subjects in the field, along with her empathic and nuanced reading of their stories, provided a ray of hope. Some of the similarities I found between Hochschild’s white Americans in

Louisiana and my Mizrahi informants in Israel's social peripheries were remarkable. One of the most striking was the threat that the liberal-progressive vision of the politics of universalism seems to pose to the core identity of both blue-collar voters in Louisiana bayou country and disadvantaged Mizrahim in Israel. But as I walked along Hochschild's pathway, I sought to take the act of empathic and curious listening a crucial step further. Listening is not only a means to elicit an adequate picture of the other's world of meaning; it is also an invitation to a new reading of my own position as seen through my subjects' eyes. This demanded recognition of the incompleteness of my own stance. My methodological turn therefore begins at the point that Hochschild concluded.

A METHODOLOGICAL TURN: MULTIPLE HERMENEUTICS

The emancipatory potential of knowledge is put to the test—and indeed, may be actualized—only with the beginning of a dialogue, when the objects of theoretical statements turn into active partners in the incipient process of authentication.

—ZYGMUNT BAUMAN (1976, p. 106)

At this point, it should be clear why adherence to the liberal grammar may intensify sociology's suspicious mode of interpretation and hamper its ability to provide a fuller reading of the non-liberal subject. However, this step leaves us with a methodological question: how can we know if we are being overly suspicious? On the one hand, being overly suspicious is motivated by the desire to unmask oppressive social constraints and structures. On the other, an unsuspicious reading of a text can easily lead us to a naïve interpretation that takes reality solely at its face value. How do we open the social text to acquire a more balanced reading?

This swing of the hermeneutic pendulum, from suspicion to meaning, is an elusive task. It invites a conscious methodological and phenomenological effort to become suspicious of suspicion, vigilant against over-suspicion, and wary of the hermeneutics of suspicion. But how is this achieved? This vexing question invites rigorous interrogation. How can we sense that we are overly suspicious during moments of ethnographic reading, statistical analysis, in-depth interviews, and narrative analysis? Such modes of reading the field are yet to be articulated. At this preliminary stage of my inquiry, I suggest an intuitive rule of thumb for detecting an overly suspicious stance in sociological research: "If your findings match your moral position too frequently, suspect your sociology" (Mizrachi, 2017).

However, this is only possible in retrospect. In this study, I tried to stay alert to the pitfalls of excessive suspicion. I was able to sustain my alertness by turning my informants into active interpreters during the two stages of data analysis. That is, at each stage I put my own reading of the data that they themselves helped to produce to the test of their own interpretation. Hence, the participants became interpreters of my own interpretive repertoire. I term this method *multiple hermeneutics*.

This goal was facilitated by my choice of a mixed methods approach. It included a telephone survey of a representative sample of Israeli society followed by focus groups. The survey concentrated on the knowledge (not opinions) of respondents about social inequality in Israeli society, and the focus groups were composed of participants from the study. The survey findings served as a trigger for group discussions, a step that enabled the informants to shift from one interpretive position to another, first as participants in a form of a quiz examining their knowledge about inequality, and then as interpreters of the results of the survey that they had helped to produce.

Throughout the research, I confronted my subjects with heated issues of inequality, taken from the two primary pillars of liberal justice—distributive justice and the politics of recognition. In other words, I confronted them with the stratification of the social structure within which they live and asked them to explain the situation. At each stage of the research, the subjects' reading of the findings flew in the face of the interpretive progressive critical repertoire at my disposal. In this way, we were able to unpack an alternative logic that enabled them to "refuse to be liberated," recognizing their inferior position while simultaneously maintaining a sense of self-worth.

In the following chapters, I discuss how my informants understood the core issues of social inequality, including equal opportunity in education; identity politics; recognition and representation; group (religious and national) boundaries; social change over time (historical and temporal significance); and the role of protest and opposition as means of change. Through their eyes, I explore the binary portrayal of social reality inherent in the liberal grammar and its critical image of power, between "surrender" and "resistance;" "internalization of oppression" and "liberation;" and even "false consciousness" (in its widest use) and "political consciousness" (class, ethnic, or other).

*Mixed Methods: Nested Design and an "Actor-Researcher"
Abductive Analysis*

The methodological route I took in this research, which I have termed multiple hermeneutics, echoes certain prevailing methodological approaches. First, this methodology can be positioned among the growing number of approaches that seek to combine qualitative and quantitative data sets; these are generally referred to as mixed methods (Palinkas et al., 2019; Small, 2011). Multiple hermeneutics belongs to a specific subset of these mixed methods, known as "nested design," that entails the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data from the same actors (Small, 2011).

In this case, the nested design is intended to transform research subjects into interpreters of statistical data, thus turning them into active participants in the broad process of meaning-making. Transforming them into analysts of the statistical data that they have generated turns them into both the objects and the subjects of the research, assuming each role during at least one stage of the study.

The participants' reading of the data played a double role. First, it enabled them to be present and to make their voices heard during the interpretation of the data, a stage from which respondents are missing in most research projects. Second, it added a crucial interpretive dimension to the statistical findings, which are at the heart of the "great paradox" that the research seeks to address. This enabled me to compare and contrast prevalent overly suspicious interpretations with the interpretations provided by the respondents themselves. In other words, the actors themselves nurtured the suspicion of suspicion that has been part of this research since its inception.

In this attempt to strike an interpretive balance between the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of meaning, I see a parallel to the methodological concern in the literature regarding the tension between a research position that is overly dependent on deduction and one that is overly dependent on induction (see Tavory and Timmermans, 2014; for a brief review see Thompson, 2022). Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans (2014) have described this concern extensively. They argue that an extreme inductive position could fall into the trap of "over-descriptiveness" by presenting a detailed picture of reality that does not provide any new theoretical insight. However, an extreme deductive position could lead to an unwarranted imposition of theory on the empirical field.

Drawing on the work of pragmatic philosopher Charles S. Peirce, Tavory and Timmermans maintain that if we limit our analysis to either an inductive or a deductive form of interpretation, it remains incomplete, as it cannot adequately account for what Peirce termed "inference" (2014, p. 122). According to Tavory and Timmermans, Peirce "realized that the structure of inference through which new insights are crafted is different, and termed this mode of inference abduction" (2014, p. 122–23). Abduction allows us to fit surprising, unexpected findings into our interpretive framework, even if they contradict prevalent explanations. Abduction is thus a crucial tool that enables us to recognize "anomalies" in the field and to expand and even reshuffle our theoretical toolkit.

This returns to Peirce's building blocks of the meaning-making process: signs, objects, and interpreters. In our case, the informants serve as both objects and interpreters. The statistical findings that they helped to create turned them into an object for interpretation—for themselves and for me. The statistical findings are composed of a "bundle of signs;" however, the interpretation of their meaning is not infinite.

At this point in the discussion, the research subjects/interpreters and I, as a researcher, were puzzled as we faced the findings and attempted to make sense of them. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that I did not entirely eliminate the boundaries between the participants and myself as a researcher. This will be clear throughout the entire process: I am the one who manipulates the meaning-making process. In contrast to my research subjects, I am motivated by the search for and interpretation of anomalies. Furthermore, throughout, I reflect on the theoretical meaning of the actors' accounts and position in the

wider theoretical context. This process continues as we progress across the different issues and findings. So, while most of the actors simultaneously fill the roles of objects and interpreters, their interpretation as active subjects serves as an object for my interpretation.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the shared interpretation was limited to a specific stage in the research. At the end of the meaning-making process, it is I who has combined all of the accounts of the actors into one greater, and hopefully compelling, account that cannot be categorized according to the prevailing progressive critical grammar. This marks the terrain for an alternative grammar. At the ontological foundation of this grammar lies the rooted subject.

THE STUDY

A Survey of Knowledge

I began my empirical investigation by conducting telephone surveys of a random sample of Israeli society, including Israel's three main population groups: Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. $N = 1,022$. All were interviewed in their native language (Hebrew, Russian, or Arabic.)

While the survey's sample represented the entire population of Israel, some of its questions focused more on Mizrahim than on other groups. Some of the items in the survey were taken from published research on social stratification, such as studies of the structure of opportunities in education (for example, the tracking system that channels Mizrahim into vocational programs), as well as ethnic, national, and gender representation on various rungs of the social ladder (politics, academia, high and popular culture, poverty and incarceration rates). The bulk of the questions focused almost exclusively on facts drawn from authoritative published sources and recognized databanks. The informants' responses were meant to reflect their knowledge about inequality rather than their opinions. The only question not strictly factual in nature was: "Could Mizrahi Jews who came from Arab countries and were Arabic speakers be considered 'Arabs'?" This question was meant to confront our informants with one of the most provocative identity issues in contemporary critical academic and political discourse in Israel (Shenhav, 2006; Shohat, 1988). This question will be the focus of our discussion in chapter 5.

Assembling the Focus Groups

This process laid the foundations for the next stage, in which we divided the informants into distinctly defined focus groups chosen from among the 25 percent of survey respondents who had agreed to continue participating in our study. All the group discussions were taped, videotaped, and transcribed.

We formed twelve focus groups. The ten original groups comprised two groups of Mizrahi men, one with and one without college education; two groups of Mizrahi women, one with and one without college education; two groups of

Ashkenazi men, one with and one without college education; two groups of Ashkenazi women, one with and one without college education; and two groups of Palestinian citizens of Israel, one with and one without college education. Subsequently we formed two additional mixed-gender groups of Mizrahim, one with and one without college education.

Two groups were not included in the analysis of the data: the group of educated Ashkenazi women and the group of Ashkenazi men with no college education. This is because the individuals who comprised these two mini focus groups were very different from the expected profile.⁴⁸ In sum, the analysis presented in the book is based on eight out of the original ten groups and ten of the twelve groups that participated in both rounds.

One initial statistical finding was the presence of a gender difference regarding knowledge of social inequality. Women from all demographic segments provided significantly fewer correct answers to most of the questions on the subject. Interesting in itself, this finding lies beyond the scope of this book and must wait for investigation in a different framework. However, as far as the focus groups were concerned, this finding was a decisive factor in our decision to divide all the groups by gender during the first round of sessions. This finding led me to expect that a unisex environment would enable the participants (especially women) to speak up and allow their voices to be clearly heard, uninhibited by the presence of the opposite sex.

The groups were formed in order to create an echo chamber, made up of participants who, we presumed, shared cultural, class, and political commonalities and a moral language. The rationale for this was that creating an environment similar to one they live in and a social network similar to the social network of meaning within which they are embedded would provide participants a safe and comfortable space to express their opinions and compare them with the positions of the other participants.⁴⁹

During the first round of sessions, we used the survey findings to trigger discussions in two ways. We began by asking the participants to reach a group decision about the correct answers to the questions they had already answered individually during the telephone survey. We sought to trace the participants' systems of classification and justification during their effort to reach an agreement about the "right" answers. The participants attempted to make sense of the survey data by applying public and personal narratives. We observed how participants moved from the *graphic* (the statistical data) to the *biographic* (their personal narratives) as part of the process of sense-making during the sessions.

At this point, multiple hermeneutics came into play. At each stage of the study, we exposed the participants to evidence taken from studies of social stratification and databanks relevant to social difference and inequality, the beliefs about inequality expressed by different groups in the study, and narratives used to classify hierarchies and social boundaries. We also asked them to explain how they

justified the moral meanings they attached to their own classifications. This process enabled us to reflect on our own normative stance and to scrutinize our suspicions, by putting them on hold and opening a space for our informants' alternative readings.

Had we stopped at this stage of the study, these findings might have reinforced our suspicion that Mizrahim exist in a state of denial or even false consciousness. Would their confrontation with such dissonance during the focus groups lead to a burst of consciousness raising? Would they be able to reconcile their awareness of marginalization by the state with their loyalty to the same state? How would they maintain their sense of self-worth in light of these presumably painful realizations? We placed our Mizrahi informants in a vulnerable position, where they were exposed to undeniable facts and a powerful critical reading of those facts' political meanings.

Shadow Cases: Arab Palestinian Citizens of Israel and Ashkenazi Jews

While this study focuses on Mizrahim, we have not lost sight of the other groups, without which the picture of the Mizrahim as described here would not be complete. Two groups are especially critical for an understanding of the context within which rooted Mizrahi subjects provide meaning to their lives and their surroundings: Ashkenazim and Palestinian Arabs. Therefore, while Mizrahim are at the center of our analysis, the two other groups serve as shadow cases; that is, they provide brief points of comparison with the Mizrahim who are our primary interest (Gerring and Cojocaru, 2016).

We were able to see how Palestinian citizens of Israel perceive the intra-Jewish ethnic divide and how they understand their own position with regard to that divide. Among the questions their responses allow us to pose are: Does the intra-Jewish ethnic division between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim matter to Palestinian citizens of Israel? Do they attach political meaning to that divide? Do they feel any bond with the hundreds of thousands of Arabic-speaking Jews in the first generation of immigrants who came from Arab countries? The point of view of the Palestinian citizens of Israel is intended to expand our understanding of the context in which Mizrahim make sense of social hierarchy and their own group's position. These voices can be fully heard in chapter 5, where the possibility of a Jewish-Arab identity is discussed. Other texts appear in appendix 1 and are cited throughout the book in the context of a specific question as it comes up.

Ashkenazi Jewish Israelis, our second shadow case, are unequivocally recognized by all groups in the study as the hegemonic elite, and they are the target of Israeli liberal critique. This is the group from which Israel's founders came, those who construed the narrative of Mizrahi rootedness in terms of modern nationalism. Critical sociology has been demonstratively suspicious of the Zionist "melting pot" narrative, especially given the exclusion, stigmatization, and disenfranchisement of Mizrahim. The ways average Ashkenazim make sense of issues

of inequality, the exclusion of Mizrahim, and so forth casts additional light on the inter-ethnic relationships in which the rooted Mizrahi subject lives, acts, and makes meaning of the dual experience of fully belonging to the national story while recognizing the persistence of inequality and discrimination.

I have chosen to discuss these two groups (Arabs and Ashkenazim) at the end of the main text in order to avoid losing focus and maintain a clear, coherent argument throughout.

LOOKING AHEAD

In chapter 2, I seek to uncover the meaning of an intriguing empirical finding that seemed to hint at a group consciousness among the group of Mizrahim. The survey findings indicated that Mizrahim knew significantly better than the other groups that their educational opportunities in the 1970s had been inferior to those of Ashkenazim and Arabs. That is, they recognized ethnic inequality and their own marginalization. In the course of the focus groups, the Mizrahi respondents collectively reached the same conclusion. Yet, this realization was not accompanied by resentment of the state, a sense of injustice, or even personal grievance.

Rootedness appeared here as the organizing principle of their indifference as well as their discomfort at the comparison between Jews and Muslims, which completely erases the differences between the separate “wholes” to which, in their view, each of the groups belongs. In contrast to the liberal notion of the autonomous individual who is entitled to free and equal fulfillment at all times, the rooted Mizrahi subjects viewed themselves as part of a whole (“the People of Israel”) and as participants in the story of Israel’s nation-building, which takes place in Zionist time. From this rooted ontological stance, any comparison between them and the Palestinian other—based on socioeconomic perceptions or the view of the two minority groups as the universal citizens of a neutral state—is a category error. It is from this grammar of rootedness that we can understand the Mizrahi subjects’ view of the other and of fairness versus equality.

Chapter 3 focuses on notions of time, history, and temporality. We explored the ways in which our informants maintained their optimistic view of social change over time and embraced the “history of the victorious” despite their marginalized role in the Zionist grand narrative. Their connection to Zionist time organizes the manner in which they create meaning for past events, including cases of discrimination against them; understand the present; and imagine the future.

We further confronted their optimistic view of history with a critical reading of the nation-building narrative. The informants firmly rebuffed notions of social reproduction and pessimistic views of history. They shed new light on critical assumptions about stability and the reproduction of oppressive structures over time. The informants’ optimism appeared to be supported by independent empirical evidence.

Chapter 4 investigates Mizrahi views on the liberal notion of recognition and representation. Here we exposed our subjects to evidence of presumably unforgivable under-representation not only in the leadership of the progressive left-wing camp (political parties and civil society organizations) that they vilified, but even in the parties and organizations of their own right-wing camp. To our astonishment, the Mizrahi informants did not express even the slightest sense of indignation. Once again, they perceived ethnic equality and representation as of lesser importance than the good of the state and the Jewish whole; hence, they did not consider their under-representation at a given moment in history to be an irredeemable injustice.

At the same time, Mizrahim from the right and the religious side of the map clearly identify and protest against exclusionary and discriminatory language when directed toward them. However, they formulate their response to issues of exclusion and representation only within a politics that upholds the Jewish whole rather than dissolving it in the name of universalism.

In the discussion of right-wing nationalism and populism, we see the explanatory power of rootedness. Right-wing Mizrahim recognize the power and status of the left-wing Ashkenazi elite; however their resentment is not primarily directed towards socioeconomic inequality, but rather towards the use that the elite makes of its advantages and its willingness to undermine the Jewish whole. It is the rootless approach of the liberal Ashkenazi elite, challenging the identity and existence of the Jewish state as the epitome of the Jewish whole, that they resent. Nevertheless, they maintained their optimistic view that the arc of social change points toward a future with equal ethnic representation.

Chapter 5 touches upon a “forbidden link” in the Jewish Israeli discourse: the political possibility for an Arab-Jewish identity. In line with critical Mizrahi scholars, I exposed my Mizrahi informants to the idea of decoupling religion and nationality in their identity as Mizrahi Jews. Mizrahi rootedness, in the face of this question, is revealed to fuse mythical Jewish time and Zionist time, creating an unbreakable tie between religiosity and nationalism. The vehement rejection of this hypothetical identity revealed, once again, the impotence of critical efforts to untie the Gordian knot of religion and nationality that is deeply embedded in the nuclear identity of Mizrahim.

In this chapter, I also examine the reaction of Palestinian Arabs to this question. These informants likewise reinforced the entrenched Arab-Jewish divide. From their rooted position, the internal Jewish ethnic division between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim seemed empty of political meaning, and they did not feel any kinship with Mizrahi Jews despite the cultural proximity that some Arab Palestinians recognize.

Chapter 6 is based on the informants’ rejection of the ideal of defying the social and political order in the name of universal reason or social change. We created vignettes based on fictitious individuals with diverse characteristics, backgrounds,

and life trajectories, to which the informants were asked to relate. They objected most strongly to those who represented *defiance*. Defiance has been central to the modern political imagination since the French Revolution, but the rooted Mizrahi subjects viewed social change as growing out of relationships in a given society rather than resulting from an externally imposed, universal moral imperative. Middle-class Mizrahi informants were divided into secular middle-class Mizrahim, whose rootedness is articulated primarily in Israeli civic terms, and traditionalist, religious middle-class Mizrahim, whose rootedness is articulated in religious-Zionist terms. Both groups tended to resent any form of defiance in the name of Mizrahiness. We further discussed the use of defiance within the boundaries of the Jewish whole.

In chapter 7 I zoom out by placing Mizrahi rootedness within a matrix of a broader typology alongside other forms of rootedness, among them the progressive rootless position of the liberal grammar. I examine rootedness in its various forms and its relationship to codes of collective identity and types of temporality, which are two of the building blocks of rootedness. I then return them to our initial conundrum—the relationship between power and meaning. I discuss my view of these systems of meaning in two well-known forms, power over and power everywhere, arguing that meaning is analytically distinct from power. In the last part of this concluding chapter, I discuss a number of empirical works exploring the meaning of rootedness and its potential to open new avenues for thinking and acting in the face of the great paradox when viewed as a global political crisis.