

It's Only a Matter of Time

*When the "Subaltern" Embraces
the "History of the Victorious"*

TIME AND TEMPORALITY

The concept of time and temporality is at the center of this chapter. We will see that the dimension of time plays a vital role in the way participants weave personal and public narratives (Somers, 1994) into their telling of past experiences of inequality. We will ask, how does the subjects' sense of history affect their perception of inequality? Do they view inequality as stable, or, alternatively, do they believe it changes? What is the mechanism for social change and how do they experience change? Finally, we will examine whether the subjects' sense of social change over time has any basis in reality. That is, is it supported by independent empirical findings that point to changes in inequality over time?

Critical Approaches and the Meaning of Time

By examining the subjects' notions of time and history, we also re-examine the critical-progressive conception of temporality, which is saturated with pessimism and excessively suspicious of any optimistic reading of history. This gloomy attitude is well known from the sociology of domination and oppression and from dark anthropology and draws nourishment from the assumption that structures of oppression are sustained and reproduced across time.

In the Israeli context, Swirski and Bernstein's (1981) work offers a salient example of an approach that provides a coherent theoretical explanation of how an oppressive structure is replicated across time. Swirski, considered to be one of the founders of critical sociology in Israel, addresses this question in terms of his theory of dependency. He developed this approach in response to theories of modernization and the functional-structural paradigm that dominated Israeli sociology until the

end of the 1970s. In contrast to these earlier approaches, according to which the premodern group (Mizrahim) would join the modernization processes through the narrowing divisions of ethno-class structures in Israel, Swirski views modernization as the source of the problem, not as the solution. Stated briefly, he believes that modernization creates economic and class relationships of dependency between the nations of the third world and the first world, and, within Western nations, between the dominant group and those who are classified as “premodern.” Modern society must invest in the development of “premodern” groups if they are to become participants in society. In Swirski’s view, Mizrahim are a class, and the key to change is the development of a Mizrahi class consciousness that would disrupt the oppressive structures that maintain the dependent relationships across time.

While many of the critical approaches in Israel do not necessarily adopt Swirski’s class-based approach, most share his meta-theoretical assumptions regarding the meaning of time and the conditions necessary to effect social change and develop a Mizrahi political consciousness. In other words, critical discourse, including its post-colonial, multi-cultural and class versions, views inequality as an ongoing injustice that is replicated across time. The imagined change requires subversive activity against the system and the structural mechanisms that perpetuate the oppression, but before they can join the struggle against oppression, Mizrahi victims must be aware of their “true” story and internalize critical thinking.

Revealing Other Stories

This chapter opens with a confrontation between the subjects and the “true” story of the past. As the data unfolds, we see that on the basis of their lived experience, the subjects have come to see time as a positive factor in social change, in contrast to the pessimistic view of history. As we will see, their positive assessment is realistic and supported by independent empirical data.

At this point, however, it is important to make it clear that the purpose of this empirical investigation was not to determine which story is “true” and which is “false.” As Walter Benjamin (1940) reminds us, the past cannot be fully grasped by a single narrative. No narrative can freeze a moment in the flow of time forever, despite the claims of the historical materialists. Out of the infinite number of possible narratives, the most commonly recognized version of history is the progressive development of modernity. In fact, Benjamin claims that among the infinite number of possibilities, the most recognized is the “history of the victorious.” This story conceals other stories, such as those of the defeated, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

In the context of Benjamin’s observation, which epitomizes the current critical discourse, I want to raise a question. For some, this question may be practically heretical: Is it possible for the subaltern to embrace the history of the victorious? I am not referring here to an adoption of the “discourse of the victors” as an

unconscious, self-defeating act or simply as a variation of false consciousness. I want to suggest the possibility that this does not merely conceal the so-called real story about oppression, but reveals another, a story which can be heard only if we open the interpretive space to rooted subjects whose experience of time and history is linked to a greater whole. This is what I attempt to do in this chapter.

The chapter is based on three focus groups. We open with the group of Mizrahi women without a college education, whom I will introduce below. We then return to the Mizrahi men without a college education whom we met in the previous chapter. Finally, we move on to a group of college-educated Mizrahi men.

THE ENCOUNTER

Mizrahi Women without a College Education

This encounter began with a group of mostly middle-aged Mizrahi women without a college education. The group included Hannah, a mid-50s former secretary in an industrial plant, married with three adult children; Ahuva, a retired nurse in her early 70s with two adult children; Leah, a retired blue-collar worker in her late 50s; and Riki, a single 22-year-old, who is about to begin law school.¹ Riki's invitation to join the group was the result of a methodological error that ultimately proved to be most fortunate.

Similar to the men without a college education whom we met in the previous chapter, most of the women did not resent the state or Ashkenazi elite for past inequality. However, unlike the men, the group included a representative of critical discourse, Riki, who confronted the others with her scathing insights regarding the deliberate, institutionalized discrimination against Mizrahim and inequality as an unforgivable injustice.

This session started like the others. Facilitator A, a middle-aged Ashkenazi man with a clearly Ashkenazi name and appearance, opened with a round of introductions.

Facilitator A: I am [gives his name] and I am a professional group facilitator. I'm a consultant to organizations, and I also conduct some research myself. I live in [an upscale suburban area outside of Jerusalem]. I am married. I have a son and a daughter. I have a dog and a cat.

Hannah: Do they get along?

Facilitator A: The dog and the cat, yes. The kids, it depends. That's a whole other story. A boy and a girl, it's pretty noisy there. That's what I know to say about myself right now. Do you want to continue?

Hannah: Sure, why not. My name is Hannah. I live in Hadera [a small city on Israel's coastal plain]. I see that there's someone else from Hadera here, too. I'm married and I have three adult children.

I work as a secretary in a metal factory. That's it, more or less.
 Dogs and cats—that's not our thing.
 (The group members laugh)

The light-hearted introductions continued, but it is worth noting that Hannah had already singled out Facilitator A as belonging to the out-group in relation to the women in the group. In Mizrahi slang, the phrase “cats and dogs” symbolizes wealthy Ashkenazim who allegedly prefer pets to children.² Hannah's remark may therefore have been a hint at her sense of social distinction.

In this atmosphere, Ahuva felt sufficiently comfortable to single out Riki on the basis of the young woman's age and class: “And she [Riki] has a boyfriend in Ramat Aviv,” a typical upper-middle class, predominantly Ashkenazi neighborhood in north Tel Aviv.

Once again, the participants laughed, prompting Facilitator A to comment, “The rumors are flying.” Facilitator A referred the women back to the question regarding Shavit's research, about which they had been asked in the telephone survey. He asked them to come to an agreement about which group, among all children born in the 1950s, was most likely to move on from high school to college. As noted, the respondents were asked to choose their answer from among the following options: Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and women.

Facilitator A: I want to ask you to talk about the question among yourselves. I'll remain an observer throughout the discussion—it's your discussion. Try to reach some agreement. What I mean to say is that the discussion is designed to reach a mutual decision. In ten minutes, I'll ask you to tell me which group had the lowest chances. You can start now.

Leah: I think that it is all the women who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s, every family coming with ten children. [. . .] Women had a very hard time because every woman had a whole bunch of children, and she invested her entire being in her children.

Ahuva: But it's impossible to decide that it was only women or only [another group]. I'm telling you there are three groups: women, Arabs, and Mizrahim.

Leah: On the contrary, I believe that the Arabs . . . [Leah's remarks are cut off.]

Ahuva: Not in the 1950s.

Leah: I believe that they [the Arabs] were more likely to neglect the family; if they had one son, they would give everything so that he could enter the university.

[. . .]

Hannah: Well, I think. . . [She is cut off.]

Ahuva: I think it's Arabs.

Hannah: I think [. . .] it's simply people from economically weaker populations, not necessarily women, and not necessarily Ashkenazim, Arabs, or Mizrahim. I think that whoever came from any population that was more . . . that had a harder time paying or getting to the university, like she [Leah] said, those who had to make a living. I believe it is those people who made it to the university after high school or the army less than others did.

Up to this point, the women's responses were in complete harmony with the men we met in the previous chapter. And like the men, they calmly recognized their relatively inferior position as Mizrahim. Indeed, they made no connection between inequality and the political power structure. Hannah even emphasized this by contending that the economic factor affects Mizrahim, Arabs, and even Ashkenazim equally.

The group of educated Ashkenazi men expressed a similar view without any feelings of guilt (see appendix 1). Their position even accords with the position of the educated Palestinian men (see appendix 1). Until now, their apolitical position had not been sharply challenged from the direction of the critical discourse. Until, that is, Riki began to thicken the plot. She had obviously been exposed to progressive critiques and confronted the women in the group with her version of the bitter historical truth.

Riki: I think history points to a lot of discrimination during the 1960s and 1970s. [. . .] That's exactly the time my parents lived through, and there was really a great deal of discrimination between the Ashkenazim and the Mizrahim, and there was almost no chance for Mizrahim to be admitted to the university.

Hannah: Why? Because they were Mizrahim they were not admitted?

Riki: That's right, they weren't even given a chance to be admitted to the university. I can tell you about my own family, for example, who went to school. So, during those years, there was total discrimination. The Ashkenazim would study, they would go to academic tracks, more prestigious programs, and Mizrahim were sent to be laborers, to vocational studies, to become technicians or bookkeepers, auto mechanics, things like that. That's why I think [it was Mizrahim].

Hannah: The question is whether it was because they were Mizrahim.

Riki: Because they were Mizrahim, it's a fact! Like, I know this from my parents, I know it. That's why there were all those riots by the Black Panthers [a Mizrahi protest group] at the time. That was during the 1970s.

As this first round of discussion concluded, it seemed that the women's group confirmed the two central findings from the men's group. First, the Mizrahi women without a college education recognized their relatively inferior position, at least with regard to the Ashkenazim. Only Hannah disagreed. She tried to sidestep the identity issue by adding Ashkenazim to the list of options, but no one picked up on it. The competing groups were clearly Arabs and Mizrahi women; the participants were aware of women's intersectionality, that they were both Mizrahim and women. Second, the declaration regarding Mizrahi inferiority did not lead to any anger, criticism of the state, or personal discomfort. That is, until Riki pressed her point.

Forcefully, Riki continued to describe a history of injustice and deliberate discrimination. Hannah and Leah attempted to avoid this alternative and continued to stress economic factors as the only determinants of access to higher education. Passionately, Riki continued to promote the causal validity of institutional discrimination and described her personal but second-hand family experience in support of her critical arguments. Hannah continued to disparage her position.

In this atmosphere of growing tension, a new phase of the discussion began.

Leah: They [Mizrahim] didn't study; they didn't have . . .

Riki: That's not true, I know that . . . [she is cut off].

Ahuva: I want to tell you that I immigrated to Israel as part of the Youth Aliyah.³ [We] would deliberately get lower-quality teachers. You could see the differences in the schools. So [Mizrahim] couldn't get admitted [to the university], they didn't have good enough matriculation scores and no motivation.

Riki: No, it's not just because of that. I know this for a fact! I studied at the Boyer High School, which is one of the country's best high schools today. It already existed in the 1970s, and it was made up—we also learned about it in the school—it was made up of a population that was almost purely Ashkenazi. I have a friend whose mother studied at this school. She came from Tripoli and she told me that she and another girl were the only ones in their age group who were Mizrahi. They wouldn't admit Mizrahim to the school. They would reject them at the entrance exam stage.

Ahuva: Look at what's happening with the Ethiopians in Petah Tikva.

Riki: So, no one would say [that because they were] Mizrahim they wouldn't admit them. But it was a fact! [. . .] Otherwise, my mother's friends at the time, who were excellent students [would have been admitted]. My mother didn't even want to try. [. . .] She said, [she] wouldn't try something where they would fail [her]. But my mother's friends tried to get admitted to private

schools, and they wouldn't get admitted. They had excellent matriculation diplomas, but they weren't admitted to any high school. So I'm sure that they wouldn't have had any chance at the universities. Educational institutions refused to admit them at the time. At that time, educational institutions deliberately made that population fail.

The other participants continued to dismiss Riki's position.

Leah: That's not true. I disagree with you, Riki. . . . I'm saying that families at that time were very large. A mother couldn't provide an education to all her children so that they could reach the university. Anyone who managed to get to the university had to have had the best grades and be the right type to be accepted.

Hannah: So, in the end it's all about money.

Leah: But these [poor Mizrahi] families didn't have the possibility to give them . . . [their children] an education.

Ahuva: Lots of Mizrahim used to live in the periphery, such as faraway *moshavim*;⁴ how could they think about the university? What kinds of teachers went to teach there? What was the level?

Leah: On the other hand, the Ashkenazim then had only two children, "two kids and a dog" they used to say. So they could invest more in their children and give them more opportunities to go and study.

Riki: I think that it's a combination of both things.

Leah: But it's not because they didn't get admitted, it's because they didn't have the means.

The group rejected Riki's reasoning. Leah offered an economic explanation, while Ahuva offered a structural-geographic explanation. Ahuva's story was supported by personal experience, but Hannah's arguments were accepted. The overall tone remained apolitical, although one could detect some traces of political consciousness, especially in Ahuva's remark about the Ethiopians in the present, which echoed Riki's story about past discrimination against Mizrahim. This enabled Ahuva to distance this narrative from her own personal experience. But Riki would not give up, and she used every device in her critical arsenal to reinforce her argument.

Riki: So I think that it's also that they didn't get admitted, and there are facts that confirm it! The fact is that an entire population was embittered. So, I think that, first, it's also because of that. And second, it's also because they really did have an economic problem that prevented them from even thinking about it.

Ahuva: They didn't have tutoring; people didn't have the opportunity to earn a high school matriculation diploma; there's nothing more to say.

Leah: Take me for example. I finished elementary school, and all my brothers worked to put food on the table. When I was twelve, I would get up and go to work picking apples, and I made up my mind to save all the money, and then I went and registered for high school because I knew that my parents couldn't give this to me. I went and bought books and went to school, and I wasn't even registered. And my teacher, it was the principal [actually], asked me how come [I] had arrived without registering or anything. I said I have everything, I just didn't know you had to register. He let me in, and I studied. I made [this opportunity] myself.

Facilitator A: I want to ask whether you're approaching agreement? [. . .] Which group had the lowest chances?

Leah: No, the decision here is maybe not women; maybe more likely the Mizrahim had it harder.

Ahuva: Women are part of the Mizrahim, included. It's simply about narrowing it down to the women. Because look, if we're talking about the economic aspect, like you said, we're twelve children, my father was the only breadwinner, and we have brothers and sisters. One is a psychologist, I'm a nurse, one is a pilot,⁵ you wouldn't believe me, but it's true.

Hannah: Why shouldn't we believe you?

Ahuva: No, because they were smart-like, and when they were given the opportunity, they jumped ahead. But this business of money and awareness and where you lived [. . .] If you lived in Jerusalem, you certainly heard about schools and stuff, and it made you want to study. But if you lived in the sticks [like the] Mizrahi immigrant, you didn't really stand a chance.

Facilitator A: Who doesn't agree that the group with the least chances are the Mizrahim?

Hannah: Me.

Facilitator A: What do you think?

Hannah: I think that it's a matter of economic strength. [. . .] It just turned out that at that time, there were more Mizrahim who had it harder economically because those who were from Ashkenazi ethnic groups, most of them received reparations from Germany, so they had a bit more money. They were also in

Israel for a longer time, so, of course, they were better placed. And this created a certain situation, but I think it doesn't matter if somebody comes from the East or West or anything, it matters in that specific context, it's economic and it also depends on the person's ambition. I believe that a person who wants something can achieve almost—I wouldn't say everything—but almost everything. It depends on your willpower and how much you're ready to invest.

It was hard for me to avoid the impression that the three older women without a college education, especially Leah and Ahuva, were making conscious efforts to perpetuate and reinforce personal and familial “success stories.” I could not avoid reading these “idealization” strategies, in Erving Goffman's (1959) terms, as part of their attempt at impression management.

Leah told the story of who she is:⁶ an individual who chose to take her fate into her own hands despite economic constraints. Hers wasn't a story about the system's or the state's wrongdoing, nor about any evil done to her. Even more poignantly, when we shifted the temporality of the narrative from the little girl in the past to the adult in the present—a working-class, middle-aged woman sitting in a focus group of working-class women without a college education—the dissonance between her “success story” and her current situation was glaring.

Unlike the men we met in the previous chapter, these women were directly confronted by a determined critical voice. Yet like the men, not one of them expressed frustration or condemnation of the state, the Zionist ideology of the Jewish melting pot, or Ashkenazi hegemony. The participants did not try to explain why they were uneducated, nor did they recognize themselves as a group in either ethnic or class terms.

In fact, Leah used her personal story to counter Riki's story. While Riki talked about outstanding Mizrahi women students who were rejected by an elite school, Leah spoke about herself as a poor Mizrahi student who convinced a school principal to accept her despite the regulations. Riki's explanation clashed with Leah's personal narrative. It seemed that Leah accepted her “victimhood” as a natural result of her life circumstances, and she strictly avoided any recognition of the demeaning possibility that she had been a victim of institutional discrimination in the Jewish state, in the land where she sees herself as belonging (Mizrachi and Herzog, 2012).

At this point, Facilitator A tried to summarize the discussion.

Facilitator A: I think we've reached some agreement on this point. I want to see if there's also agreement on the next one. It seems that you agree that, in effect, those who had to confront the most difficulties, and were thus most disadvantaged, were the

Mizrahim because of the situation they found themselves in as penniless new immigrants.

Ahuva: Yes, that's right.

Facilitator A: And you want to add, and Ahuva wants to add . . .

But Riki interrupted and repeated her argument even more passionately.

Riki: Because they were discriminated against!

Facilitator A: Because there was discrimination.

Riki: They were faced with discrimination! It's a fact, a historical fact. It's not something we assume!

Leah: Those are two different things.

Riki: No, I say that it is both lack of ability and discrimination.

For the first time, Ahuva raised doubts about her own professed beliefs.

Ahuva: Look, I'm married to an Ashkenazi, from Romania, and I don't buy into the whole Ashkenazi thing; it bothers me. Because my kids know nothing about this business, but nevertheless I know that historically, Ben Gurion⁷ himself said that he was bringing in the Mizrahim to be laborers. [. . .] Are you familiar with this comment? That he brought them in to serve as . . .

Ahuva's doubts encouraged Riki to restate her argument even more forcefully.

Riki: But it's a historical fact! It's not just an opinion!

In Gieryn's (1999) terms, Riki was engaging in boundary work. According to Gieryn, boundary entails "the discursive attribution of selected qualities to scientists, scientific methods, and scientific claims for the purpose of drawing a rhetorical boundary between science and some less authoritative residual non-science" (p. 4-5). This enabled her to add a measure of authority, by "teaching" the others to separate "facts" from "opinions." And at that point, it seemed as if Ahuva had "learned" her lesson:

Ahuva: Yes, I say it's history, I didn't make it up.

Riki: Nor did I! I think that today, what you said regarding the possibility that every person can eventually make it, is true for today. It wasn't true for Israel of the 1970s, it really wasn't true.

Ahuva: So true!

Riki: It's inaccurate to say such a thing, because it's a historical fact that discrimination existed. It's not that it's somebody's opinion, it's not my opinion, it's a historical fact. There was discrimination and the reason that they didn't get admitted to the university also involved. . . . [cut off]

They reached a turning point when Ahuva began to move toward Riki's views (see her reference to manual laborers, above) but not before she "cleared" herself of any accusation of partisanship or hatred of Ashkenazim.

Facilitator A then reflected on the participants' process.

Facilitator A: What type of discrimination? That is, we've reached agreement here that we're not talking about something that differentiates between people in terms of ability, but that there are differences in the opportunities available to them. Now, I also get the impression that you are also saying that there was, in effect, systematic discrimination, that there was someone who did the discriminating.

Ahuva: I hope that it wasn't deliberate. Maybe history will teach us. I hope that it wasn't deliberate. I'm deluding myself a bit.

It was an unsettling moment. For the first time, Ahuva reflected on her emerging uncertainty and feelings of self-deception.

Facilitator A: So, I want to clarify [this point] because I hear from you that you identify [. . .]

Riki: I think that it was deliberate!

Facilitator A: What do you mean by "deliberate"?

Riki: That it was deliberate, like you said; it's not just a historical fact that the Ashkenazim were the group longer-established in Israel, that they arrived here long before the Mizrahim, and that their reception of the Mizrahim wasn't very welcoming.

Hannah: People from another place, with a different culture.

Hannah was trying to put out the flames of an emerging sense of injustice.

Riki: True, there were lots of reasons.

Hannah: That's natural.

But Riki refused to retreat.

Riki: I don't think there's any reason to justify it.

Ahuva: Who says that Mizrahi culture is inferior to Ashkenazi culture?

Hannah: The Mizrahim also didn't receive the Ashkenazim very nicely. They laughed at them.

Hannah tried to equalize the relationship between the two ethnic groups by raising the possibility of a role switch between the stigmatized and the stigmatizer. Riki did not allow it.

Riki: They [the Mizrahim] weren't in any situation to welcome them. They didn't get anything. The ones who got things were the Ashkenazim, because they controlled the establishment.

Hannah: True, true.

Riki: I saw a play about. . . . I forgot its name, at Tel Aviv's Cameri Theater, a play [. . .] that shows how the Ashkenazim were in control, both of the government and of the educational institutions.

Ahuva: Until 1977⁸ everything was on a partisan basis.

Riki: They're the ones who wanted [. . .]

Hannah: It was in their hands.

Riki: Exactly, they wanted the Ashkenazim to maintain [control], they also show that in the play.

Ahuva: And today it isn't [so]?!

Leah: Today as well.

Everyone began to talk at the same time; the conversation was bubbling with energy. While Riki zealously continued to push her argument, the other women also responded heatedly, as if protecting something close to their hearts. In what may seem to have been a revealing moment, Ahuva said, "I hope it wasn't deliberate." She then candidly shared her inner reasoning, driven by her wishful memories about "what really happened." Riki "authorized" her critical narrative with additional forceful boundary work (Gieryn, 1995). She thrust "history" at the rest of the group while seeking to draw a clear line between their "personal opinions" about "what happened" and her "authoritative" academic knowledge, based on "historical facts."

In this way, Riki managed to steer Ahuva in her own direction. "History" had now become the authoritative source of truth. This led Ahuva to state a new position—"Maybe history will teach us"—but her words were full of uncertainty.

Ahuva continued to talk about her growing concerns: "I hope that it wasn't deliberate," she commented. Her drawn-out submission to Riki's narrative appeared to be more of an inevitable surrender than a joyous embrace of liberation, yet Riki persisted. And then, a moment of confession arrived: "I'm deluding myself a bit," she admitted, which could be easily read as the beginning of the long process of consciousness raising.⁹ Yet her confession seemed to unsettle Hannah and Leah, who attempted to force the genie back into the bottle. Hannah's strategy was to neutralize what appeared to be the inevitable historical conclusion by returning to her cultural and evolutionary explanations—"different culture" and "natural process." Leah took a different tack, seeking to equalize Mizrahi-Ashkenazi relations by applying reverse discrimination.¹⁰

We now go back to the turning point in the discussion—the move from the past to the present. Following a pause, the facilitator continued.

Facilitator A: I really want to ask you about nowadays.

Riki: I think it's less so today.

Facilitator A: Let's talk about the present; your generation, Riki's generation. Is what we've said here, that discrimination is directed primarily against the Mizrahim, still true?

Riki: No.

Ahuva: Not today.

Riki: Definitely not.

Ahuva: Today, it's economic power and intelligence. The ability to study, I hope it's not true today.

Riki: It isn't today.

Leah: Because there are, I think, a lot of Arabs in the universities, more than Jews, I think there is [discrimination].

Riki: I think that there's no discrimination today [in general]. There certainly is in some places, but just as it's directed toward Mizrahim, it's also directed toward Ashkenazim. It's two-way discrimination. There will always be [some] discrimination. It's not something that can ever disappear.

Hannah: Maybe in another two generations.

Riki: Exactly, in a few generations, when everyone will be mixed [together] already, and someone's kid will be 1/16 Romanian. That's when it'll change.

As they moved from the past to the present, the unanimity of opinion was surprising. Even Riki's position shifted dramatically. In response to the question "Is it still true?" and to Ahuva's declaration "Not today," Riki's views gradually but decisively moved from "I think it's less so today" to "No" and then "Definitely not."

It is unclear if Riki's optimistic and acquiescent position with regard to the present condition of Mizrahim stems from an only partial exposure to critical discourse or from her life experiences as a young, successful Mizrahi woman. In any case, Riki's critical-progressive agenda would come to the fore again, with regard to other minority groups.

Facilitator A responded to her change in attitude.

Facilitator A: I want to check it out. What you have described is based on your parents' story, reading of the literature, personal memory. You say we were in a situation where the Ashkenazim actually controlled the state's institutions.

Ahuva: That's [still] true today.

Facilitator A: They had the power and they used their power against us and, by the way, you said something, Ahuva, that may have been overlooked, that it was directed above all against the Mizrahim, but of all the Mizrahim, it hurt women the most.

Ahuva: That's right, it's always us [the women. But] not me, in my particular case not me. I can hurt men; they can't hurt me. But what is true, and obvious, is that a woman is in the house, raising the children and all that, and gives up a little so that the husband can study, or something like that.

Facilitator A nurtured a sense of groupness by using the collective term "us," a rhetorical reference that none of the other participants had yet employed. However, the meaning of "us" did not stay within the boundaries of Mizrahi identity; it shifted to the broader notion of gender identity. Ahuva felt that it was incumbent upon her to quickly withdraw herself from both disadvantaged groups (Mizrahim and women).

Facilitator A: Is it really true that things have changed today in the sense that Ashkenazim don't control [everything] and [that they don't] use their power against the Mizrahim?

Leah: There is some change but it's not 100 percent.

Hannah: We could say that the Mizrahim are in control and have taken over government institutions and made it difficult for Ashkenazim. Now it's mixed. Today, you could say that because we intermarried, my kids are already half this and a quarter that—it's the same for her kids—then it can't be [like it was] anymore.

Leah: Today you also have the Mizrahim who were really Mizrahim when they immigrated, and their children grew up and became more Israeli and maybe a bit more Ashkenazi and got mixed.

Ahuva: They're Israelis for all intents and purposes.

Leah: I think that it's not felt that much.

Facilitator A: Is that the feeling, yes?

Riki: I think that [. . .] if you asked that question today, the population that suffers today are the minority groups. It's Arabs, Ethiopians, Russians, new immigrants.

Riki's references to other minority groups, those who are truly discriminated against in current circumstances, may reflect an adherence to liberal justice and the politics of universalism. Although Riki did not hesitate to criticize the state about its institutional discrimination against Mizrahim in the previous round, at this point she broadened her gaze to include other minority groups, placing Mizrahim in the position of a majority group. In both rounds, her political stance seemed to remain rooted in the liberal grammar of social equality and distributive justice.

Hannah: It's not just a question of minorities. It's what I said before about the old-timers and newcomers.

Riki: That's right.

Hannah: Every time there was a new wave of immigration, they were the weak ones.

Riki: That's right.

Hannah: So the Ashkenazim came first, then the Mizrahi ethnic groups arrived, from Yemen, Morocco, so they were the weak; after them came the Russians. But whoever came [first] is simply stronger.

The meaning of discrimination is viewed as an integral part of the story of the nation building. Before and after the establishment of the state, waves of immigrants, each with its own character and ethnic make-up, came to settle the land. From a critical point of view, the tale of immigration depoliticizes discrimination because it obscures the hegemony of one group, the Ashkenazim, who dominated and oppressed the others. Yet the experiences of each new wave have become a cherished part of Israeli folklore, viewed not with rancor or disdain, but with humor and appreciation. As Hannah observed, "whoever came [first] is simply stronger." From a critical point of view, this is a story of domination and hegemony. But in the eyes of our subjects, the story of immigration is actually one of equalization. This is their folk narration of Zionist time.

Riki insisted on revisiting race and ethnicity, but this time from the opposite perspective. As a well-educated, successful Mizrahi woman, she views oppression against Mizrahim as an issue in the past and observes others in her position as members of the majority. From her progressive perspective, she pointed to other minority groups—Arabs, Russians and Ethiopians—who are now suffering from discrimination and exclusion.

Leah: There's a difference between the Ethiopians and the Russians.

Ahuva: What government benefits do these get and what benefits do those get?

Leah: They're below them, the Ethiopians compared to the Russians.

Hannah: Because they came from someplace else.

Riki: But she's right.

Leah: They [the Russians] have a much higher culture, so they were admitted everywhere; it's not like that with the Ethiopians.

Facilitator A: What does that mean?

[. . .]

Hannah: OK. No, excuse me, [I mean] the second major wave of immigration from Russia [in the 1990s]. I remember people who were

doctors and highly educated sweeping the streets in all sorts of places. I mean, they were Ashkenazim and didn't shy away from working in any kind of job until they got settled. They deserve all of our respect!

In the process of sense-making, the participants inconsistently applied the various scripts available in their cultural tool kit (see Mizrahi et al., 2007; Swidler, 1986, 2003). Riki, who vehemently rejected the evolutionary melting pot script in the previous round, now embraced it. The previously mentioned institutional discrimination toward the Mizrahim in the early days of the state re-emerged in connection with the different treatment received by the Russians and the Ethiopians. However, the Russians' cultural capital appeared in some sense to justify their privileged position vis-à-vis the Ethiopians. Such a cultural distinction echoes with the logic used to justify the ethnic inequality (between Mizrahim and Ashkenazi) observed during Israel's early years. Hannah's attribution of deservingness to the Russians was reinforced by what she sees as their willingness to accept employment as manual laborers. Their lack of defiance against the state despite such injustices magnified the esteem in which Hannah held them.

This session evolved through two dramatic stages. The first stage was marked by the tension created by Riki's critical discourse, which focused on state discrimination during the first three decades in Israel's history. Riki's boundary work was successful, and she at least temporarily managed to sway the other group members. However, what might have been expected to be a lively drama of consciousness raising ended in "inevitable surrender" rather than an outburst of liberation.

Mizrahi Men without a College Education

We now shift back to the Mizrahi men without a college education whom we met in the previous chapter. The division between past and present we found among the group of Mizrahi working women without a college education re-emerged in this group. We will therefore turn to the next issue that was explored during the session: knowledge about factors determining students' success in school. To reiterate, this issue was raised following the discussion about the chances for members of the different groups to gain access to academic studies.

The motif of temporality first emerged here when Facilitator B provoked the group to face what he found to be a contradiction between their use of socioeconomic factors in the explanation of Mizrahi-Ashkenazi inequality and their embrace of a meritocratic approach (primarily motivation) when explaining student success. In other words, Facilitator B was wondering how group members could recognize structural inequality between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim and simultaneously believe that the only factors determining student success were individual—motivation and intelligence—and which might lead to the conclusion that the

Mizrahim were inherently inferior. As will become clear, the implications of this conclusion for their sense of self-worth were, indeed, lurking in the background, and time continued to be the crucial factor in their process of sense-making.

Facilitator B: I have a question. [. . .] Something doesn't quite make sense to me. In the last question you said that the Mizrahim had the least chances to be admitted to a university—why? Because they didn't have the means? That's what you said. [. . .] Now we're asking what [. . .] determines success, and suddenly the determining factor is personal motivation.

[. . .]

Haim: But we've changed the times . . .

Facilitator B: So what do you say about it?

Haim: Back then, the 1970s, that is, the kids who were already headed for the university in the 1970s. [. . .] The economic situation was important then.

Facilitator B: And it isn't today?

Haim: It's less today; today things look different.

Facilitator B: Please explain what you mean by different. Why is it so today?

Haim: Back then, the gap was very wide; the first concern back then was food.

Facilitator B: The gap between what and what was wide?

Haim: People cared above all about having food in the house; no one cared about education. They worried that there would be food at home. Parents saw food and the kids saw that their parents saw food; that was what interested them. I grew up in the same period, so I remember it; it suits me fine.

Yehezkel: Kids from Ashkenazi homes, their parents pushed them to go to after-school enrichment classes.

Haim: There were more extracurricular activities [that Ashkenazim could afford to pay for privately]. At that time, Mizrahi families had lots of kids while the Ashkenazim, after the troubles of World War II, had one or two. In any case, there were no dogs. Back then, I grew up in their [Ashkenazi] backyards; I had friends [they were my friends], I studied with them. [. . .]

Sasson: They also raised dogs.

Sasson and Haim's references to pets continued to serve as a symbolic marker, distinguishing between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in terms of family size, class and culture.

Facilitator B: The gap was wider than today?

Haim: Certainly, yes. In the family's economic situation; in every household, there was a wide gap between Ashkenazim and Sephardim.

Facilitator B: Wider than today?

Haim: I'm talking about then. If we go forward to the present, to these years, the economic gap, even if it didn't narrow—it did narrow at least with respect to the Sephardim's¹¹ demands [in terms of standards of living], or those of each child. First of all, the number of kids in each household is pretty similar, on average. The Sephardim and the Ashkenazim are very similar on average, two or three, so that this gap has already narrowed. The economic situation [. . .] at least for the generation growing up today, that today is in its twenties, they're very equal. In terms of learning ability, I think that everyone is treated equally [i.e., they're equally capable]; they're all capable of doing it [going to college]. A little bit of encouragement from their parents—I see no problem with the parents being uneducated. I think I don't because I see, again, that the parents don't have to be university professors in order to push their kids to study. Every parent can do it. But on the other hand, today's kids want to compare themselves. First of all, they see the environment, they live the situation. It really isn't so much about Ashkenazim or Sephardim today, in this generation.

Facilitator A: What's important to the kids, then?

Haim: They're very similar, they want to copy one another and don't really look at each other [in terms of ethnic origin].

Facilitator A: They want to be socially equal.

Haim: They want to be equal, and [they're] quite equal. In the past, they would look [around] more. How did someone [an Ashkenazi woman] we worked with once say? They [her parents] told her: 'If you marry him, that *Frenk* [derogatory term for Mizrahi], you're not part of the family, and you won't set foot in our house.' She said: 'I married him and didn't set foot in the house.' There was a rift, no more family.

Haim's sociological observations can be summed up as follows. First, time has brought about the narrowing of economic gaps between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. Second, the force of stigma has weakened. Third, as a result, mixed marriages are more common and demographic gaps have narrowed. Finally, the younger generations are more likely to share a common identity (as Israelis rather than Ashkenazim or Mizrahim) because they share similar educational

backgrounds, residential locations, and social environments. Haim had no problem discussing the gaps that existed in the past but did not think they were still relevant.

Haim then added the dimension of intergenerational shifts in Mizrahi lived experience to the overall social transformation mentioned above.

Haim: I think there's one more thing. The second and third generation, these youngsters, my children are already less [so]. They grew up with the same mentality, they were born in the same country, they breathed the same air in the same school. They're more integrated. I feel it every day.

His comment implied a rift between Haim's lived experience and that of his children, a function of both time and place of birth. Haim belongs to the first, foreign-born generation, and his children to the second, native-born generation. Haim views himself as having experienced the initial phase of inequality, but his children, as native-born Israelis, live in a different world.

Facilitator A asked if this difference bred any identity conflict or distance between the generations.

Facilitator A: But what you say makes you a foreigner. It's as if our kids have become Israelis. So, if I'm not an Israeli from birth, then there's distance between me and my kids. Isn't that what you actually mean?

Haim: There's no distance between me and my kids—my generation and the kids' generation. The children live [their own lives], they don't experience it [ethnic inequality]. I don't feel there's anything like that with my kids. I recognize it [that inequality] because I come from a different place. I go forward together with them. They started out in this situation. I have a past. From where they started out, they started out with others.

Haim experiences the flow of time as a cross-generational continuum. He feels part of the present through his children's experiences, and he bears no resentment toward the past.

Facilitator A: It's too good to be true.

Haim: Not that there isn't any [. . .]

Facilitator A: There's still discrimination.

Haim: It's fuzzier, more low key. It's not so extreme.

Haim's experience of injustice did not progress from past to present; rather, it lessened with the flow of life, diluting within the Israeli Jewish melting pot. He refused to look backward. His sense of progress continued to reverberate in the

comments made by the Mizrahi males with a college education who formed the next group that we will discuss.

Mizrahi Men with a College Education

While Haim, a Mizrahi man without a college education, described the changes from past to present by means of his children's experiences, Amos, a member of the Mizrahi middle class with a college education, in his 60s, described the same changes in terms of his own personal history as one of the few Mizrahim to attend university in the 1970s. A religiously observant father of six, Amos is a professional accountant and chair of an NGO dedicated to the rehabilitation of former prisoners. He immigrated to Israel from Morocco by way of France at 18 years of age.

Amos: I think that in the 1950s it's more . . . we're talking about those born in the 1950s, studying in the early 1970s. I tend more toward [survey response four] because back then, the Mizrahim, even if they had the same level of knowledge and were just as motivated to advance and so forth, they were discriminated against. [. . .] The 1970s was exactly the period when I went to university. [. . .] Perhaps this was the time when the surge of Mizrahi students began. Especially among the people I knew who, like me, came from abroad. It could be that I'm a little biased, but I wouldn't be too wrong if I said that I . . . [the way I see it is response no.] 4. [. . .]

Facilitator B: So how would the discrimination against the Mizrahim [. . .] work?

Amos: I believe that it was quite straightforward. You see the origin of [. . .] where the person was born. [. . .] If you're talking about someone with the same qualifications, as in the case of women [vs. men] and Ashkenazim [vs. Mizrahim], I think the person would have been discriminated against and someone else would be selected in those years. Everything's different today.

Facilitator B: Like they'd say, this is "Schwartz" and the other [name] does not sound so good?

Amos: [. . .] Had it been Ilouz [a Mizrahi/North African name] they'd have preferred Schwartz. There were also jokes there they would say, if you want to Hebraize your name, you have to do it twice so that there would be no paper trace of the previous name either. [Bureaucrats] check your previous name and if you also wrote it down they'd identify your ethnic origin. [. . .]

Amos: [. . .] First of all, like I explained [. . .] this issue has disappeared. [. . .] What I mean to say is that the drive, the desire

to study and integrate better, to go on to higher education, it exists today. Afterward, I think there are no more Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, that is if we're talking about the last fifteen years, I have no doubt that it is becoming totally blurred.

Facilitator A: Because of [inter]marriage?

Amos: No, not just marriage, it's also marriage, it's also intermarriage, that we don't know already—there are several generations where it's already the second or third generation of intermarriage. But I think, you no longer have what I always called discrimination. The discrimination that existed during all those years, after the establishment of the state, that historically everyone has admitted that discrimination did exist. I believe that [. . .] this kind of discrimination has stopped.

Facilitator A: But wait a minute. This recent change is the outcome of the fact that the Ashkenazim have put an end to systematic discrimination or of the fact that the Mizrahim . . .

Amos: Both—the two trends in the same direction. That is, two trends that push Mizrahi progress [forward]. One trend is that they want to start studying as well as the awareness among all sectors in the population that you have to study and, also [. . .] that the Ashkenazim, or you might say the establishment, want what the state authorities have already realized that you can also do something with the Mizrahim, you can promote [them]. Now we are left with the Arabs, perhaps.
[. . .]

Facilitator A: What is the reason that the Arabs are not joining

Amos: I think it is also getting less clear there, too.

Facilitator A: There too?

Amos: They are going out more and more. I have no doubt that the Arabs existed twenty years ago, but I never saw them on the streets. We didn't see them on the streets, we didn't see them in the malls, we didn't see them at the movies or the municipal cultural centers. Today, they are going out, they feel more secure, they know that we don't hate them and want to give them their full rights, and so forth. And they get support from all the elites and the left [. . .] and even the right-wingers give their approval to the Arabs. And so it's becoming less clear.

Amos views the changes in terms of both culture and historical institutional discrimination. The absolute divide between past and present came up once again, and injustice was relegated to the past. He described a sense of a natural melding of

various groups into one nation; westernization of the Mizrahim; and the cessation of institutional discrimination against minorities in general, including the Arabs.

Thus far, we have seen the salience of a very strong belief in progress, shared by all the Mizrahi groups. From a critical stance, this observation may reflect the naiveté of the politically unconscious Mizrahi victim, detached empirical reality. But does their indomitable optimism, at least with regard to the Mizrahim, have any basis in reality?

The passage of time appeared to be the participants' remedy for any sense of past injustice. The sarcastic comment made by Facilitator B reflects a skeptical view—it's "too good to be true"—and appeared aimed at amplifying the muted voices of the oppressed. And yet these voices remained unheard. Even more blatant was the participants' lack of defiance against any sense of injustice, even in the present, which was met with acceptance or even indifference. Nadav is the father of three children, lives in a *moshav* near Jerusalem, and works in Tel Aviv as a construction engineer.

Nadav: I agree with him. Today you see, at the bottom line, you see who graduates today. Mizrahim and Ashkenazim it's no longer . . .

Facilitator A then attempted to summarize the preceding arguments regarding the decline of institutional discrimination and the Mizrahi adoption of Ashkenazi views of education as a core value. Nadav continued.

Nadav: It wasn't something official but, you know, our jokes [in Israel] are [all] about Kurds, Moroccans—today it's Russians and Ethiopians, the Mizrahim of the 2000s. But I think that discrimination no longer exists at all, and I don't think there is any, and you also don't see it in numerical terms, in my opinion. Maybe I'm wrong, I'm no expert in statistics.

THE ROOTED MEANING OF TIME

Nadav's account sounded a bit glib, as if he hadn't thought about the topic very much, and his offhanded tone added to the impression that the question at hand was of little concern to him. He seemed to reduce the issue to "statistics," a reference to professional expertise.

Warranted Optimism

Nevertheless, Nadav's impressions of reality do line up with statistics presented by experts. According to a report issued by the Adva Center for Information on Equality and Social Justice in Israel (Swirski et al., 2014), Israeli Mizrahim constituted the group with the greatest household upward mobility during the period between 1990 and 2010. The most prominent change observed was a doubling of

the number of Mizrahi households that entered the upper income deciles. This rate of change greatly exceeded that observed among immigrants from the former Soviet Union or Arabs, indicating a narrowing of the gap between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in absolute terms. For instance, Adva found that the presence of Mizrahim in the top income level among suppliers of services not requiring academic education rose dramatically between 1992 (20.8 percent) and 2010 (30.6 percent), whereas the presence of Ashkenazim in the same income group in the same sector declined between 1990 (48.1 percent) and 2010 (37.2 percent). During the period between 1992 and 2010, the rate of second-generation Mizrahim who hold academic degrees and belong to the upper classes rose from 51.0 percent to 67.1 percent, an increase of 31 percent. In contrast, a moderate decline was observed among second-generation Ashkenazim,¹² from 74 percent in 1992 to 70.2 percent in 2010.¹³

These data are striking. As noted, the Adva Center was founded and is still directed by Swirski, who is often considered the “father” of Israel’s critical sociology, attesting to the rigorous and unbiased methods of data collection. Nonetheless, these findings did not bring Swirski to any reconsideration of his general theoretical framework regarding temporality and social change.

The rate of change indicates a narrowing of the gap between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in absolute terms. Likewise, Yinon Cohen et al. (2021, p. 2) report that “ethnic gaps in rates of obtaining an academic degree are smaller among younger birth cohorts, suggesting that the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi gap may have narrowed over time” (see also Ayalon and Yogev, 2006; Feniger et al., 2015).

The strong belief in “progress” held by the Mizrahi men with a college education seems to echo Cohen and Leon’s (2008) study indicating a constant movement of Mizrahim from the working class into the middle class. They identify two dimensions of this process, the geographic and the educational, and contend that the binary division between Mizrahim, residing in lower-income neighborhoods or development towns, and Ashkenazim, residing in better-off kibbutzim and central cities, has faded away. Well-assimilated Mizrahim have moved into mixed, class-oriented new and established suburbs, cities, and neighborhoods, where they refrain from any distinct ethnic identification. Although they find that Mizrahim are still underrepresented in the universities, they find a leap in the overall percentage of Mizrahi academics thanks to the establishment of numerous colleges, whose degree-granting programs compete with those of the universities.¹⁴

The Rooted Mizrahi Subject and the Open Horizon

According to Cohen and Leon (2008), these positive trends reinforce the Mizrahi sense of a “status horizon” that many critical researchers overlook. The authors go on to state that the formation of the Mizrahi middle class plays a significant role in bridging social cleavages and promoting cohesion within Jewish Israeli society. In sum, unlike the pessimistic predictions made by the critical-progressive

approach, the Mizrahi sense of harmonious progress is not a form of denial and resonates with Adva's statistical findings.

Furthermore, in contrast to the critical view of Mizrahim as a discriminated minority, subject to an oppressive structure that is reproduced over time, the subjects do not view the structures of inequality as a stable, intergenerational reality, but rather as a temporary and changing situation. The positive change in their own personal and intergenerational experiences is inextricably connected to the development of the state and Israeli society, and they feel themselves to be part of the Israeli Jewish whole within which they are rooted. They are actively and fully connected to the state, and they experience their lives as an open horizon. As we have seen, their positive stance is not detached from reality, as confirmed by independent studies of social stratification.

In the next chapter, we will continue to challenge the Mizrahi subjects' optimistic position as well as their unconditional loyalty to the state and support for the political right. Furthermore, we will confront these rooted Mizrahi subjects with their inferior position even within the camp of the political right that they hold so dear. We will examine the meaning that they attach to the politics of recognition and representation in light of their underrepresentation in their own camp.