

“It Doesn’t Matter Who the Majority Is”

Representation, Recognition, and Rootedness

We concluded the previous chapter on an optimistic note. The Mizrahim described improvement in their situation over time, and independent empirical data showed that their optimism was justified.

WHAT IS THE SALIENT QUESTION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE?

Dimensions of Analysis

This data was largely based on measures of distributive justice that showed that the gaps between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in terms of income and education were diminishing and that the Mizrahi middle class was growing (U. Cohen et al., 2011; U. Cohen and Leon, 2008). However, distributive justice is just one of the overarching moral categories intrinsic to liberal thought; the politics of recognition is another (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).¹ To these two categories, Fraser (2008) has added a third dimension that is closely related to the other two but had been missing from analysis. She refers to this as the dimension of representation. Fraser argues that distributive justice and the politics of recognition are bounded in state categories and are therefore not adequate in and of themselves in the current post-Keynesian-Westphalian reality of global markets and flows of immigration. While distribution and recognition belong to the economic and cultural realms, respectively, the dimension of representation, she suggests, belongs to the political realm. From this new transnational political perspective, the salient question for social justice is not whether citizens receive their share

of distribution and recognition but rather who deserves to be included in the relevant political community.

Representation, Recognition, and Polity

In this chapter, I focus on issues of representation in the Mizrahi context. But in this case, representation does not precisely align with Fraser's observations and definitions. This is because there is no doubt that Mizrahim are members of the Jewish polity or that they fully belong to the Jewish political community. Rather, questions of representation within the echelons of political leadership are at stake here, from which issues of representation and recognition appear to be, as I will demonstrate, inextricable.² Since their membership in the political community is guaranteed, their underrepresentation within that community is closely related to what Michele Lamont (2018) refers to as the "recognition gap," which she defines as "disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society" (p. 421–22). This is even more salient when the Mizrahi subjects are challenged to confront the reality of their underrepresentation and misrecognition in the central institutions of the right-wing camp, which they fervently support.³

In fact, as I noted in the introduction, critical approaches have suggested that Mizrahim reject the left and support the right because the left has failed to reach out to them and/or has acted hypocritically toward them. Underlying this analysis is the covert (and occasionally overt) assumption that "had the Mizrahim, like other groups rejecting the liberal discourse, been fully and fairly accepted as equal members within the liberal camp, they would have readily joined its ranks and identified with its messages" (Mizrachi, 2016b).

Loyalty in the Face of Underrepresentation

Yet empirical data show that Mizrahim are underrepresented in the right-wing political parties that they support. We confronted the Mizrahi informants with this presumably upsetting reality and once again put the emancipatory power of critical sociology to the test with our informants—time under conditions favorable for consciousness-raising.

When they saw the data, we wondered, would the Mizrahi subjects at least begin to question their loyalty to the "false" ethno-national ideology, as the critical-progressive discourse would predict? Does exposure to data showing underrepresentation on the right have the power to disrupt the bond between the rooted Mizrahi subject and the "Jewish whole" in which they are embedded? Would we see signs that they were taking on a distinct Mizrahi identity? Could awareness of marginalization in the right-wing camp lead to an affinity with other minorities—for example, Palestinians?

Or instead, would viewing underrepresentation through the lens of rootedness teach us something new? And would this once again enable us to identify the limits and the conditions of possibility of liberal-progressive notions of representation and recognition and the limits of its emancipatory power?

I will open this chapter by illustrating the ways misrepresentation and recognition are inseparable by reflecting on my own experience, from my childhood through the early years of my career as a scholar. This short “sketch for self-analysis”⁴ is intended to show the power of the critical-progressive discourse of recognition and representation to turn recognition of underrepresentation from the degrading, frustrating, and painful experience that it had been when I was young into an empowering experience and a valuable cultural and political resource for me and other Mizrahi academics and activists.

From this personal place, I will broaden the discussion into the political sphere, in which the critical Mizrahi discourse made its first appearance in civil society and academia during the 1990s. As part of the broader process that I described above, in which the progressive agenda was integrated into the liberal grammar of critical sociology, I will show how this form of the politics of representation and recognition has become the prevailing prism through which Mizrahi representation has been viewed in theory and research. Finally, before presenting the processes of the research and the data, I will briefly review forms of Mizrahi demands for recognition and representation that have been presented by both the progressive and right-wing camps.

A MOMENT OF SELF-REFLECTION

From a young age, and well before I had the words to express it, I felt a dissonance between my parents’ message that “the sky is the limit” and the real limits that separated me and those who were like me from the seemingly more “deserving.” Mizrahim were absent from everything we learned about culture and national history. The Zionist thinkers who were the founding fathers of modern Jewish history, the poets and novelists that we studied—almost all were Ashkenazim.

It was the same everywhere. Watching Israel’s single television station, I never saw children who looked like me. On current events shows, the news anchors, journalists, correspondents, academics, publicists, artists, scientists, and jurists on the screen were almost all Ashkenazim. None of the leading politicians looked anything like the people in my family.

As a child, I was mesmerized by stories of the Holocaust. Israel’s educational and socio-political systems inculcate the story “From Holocaust to Rebirth” as a foundational to the national narrative.⁵ They employ a variety of memorialization practices, including physical memorials, study sessions, meetings with survivors, museums, and movies (see Goodman and Mizrahi, 2008). I felt this viscerally. At times, I was even angry and frustrated that no one from my family had had any part in this horrific, yet crucial, part of Jewish history.

Issues of representation and recognition weren’t absent from my parents’ home, either. I remember watching the broadcast of the Israel Prize Awards on television.⁶ When my father would hear the names of the judges and the winners, he

would sarcastically say to my mother in his broken Arabic,⁷ "Doreen, come see how the Shiknaz⁸ give prizes to the Shiknaz."

I was even uncomfortable with my own name. From a young age, I was fully aware of the importance of ethnic signifiers in public space and processes of stigmatization and de-stigmatization (Lamont et al., 2016; Lamont and Mizrahi, 2012; Mizrahi and Herzog, 2012). My first name, Nissim, is almost always a Mizrahi name, and my family name, Mizrahi, leaves absolutely no doubt. My parents were sympathetic when I complained to them about the names they had given me. They tried to explain the family politics that had led to the choice of name (I am named for my grandfather), and my mother, drawing on well-known media personalities, would try to encourage me by telling me that there are many successful Nissims in the world.

But counting successful Nissims doesn't change the impact of signifiers. When I returned from my doctoral and postdoctoral training at the University of Michigan and Harvard, I was invited to teach a course in medical sociology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. To get my parking sticker, I had to go to the offices of campus security. The secretary asked for my name, then checked her computer printouts and informed me that my name "wasn't on the list of employees." After she checked some more, and then called the supervisor, the problem was solved. She had been looking for my name on the printouts of the janitorial and maintenance staff, not on the list of academic personnel.

My experiences were no different from those of many Mizrahim. Even as I was growing up, I would often wonder why my friends from our working-class neighborhood were not as troubled—if they were troubled at all—by these issues. They seemed to accept the limits that society imposed on them. This autobiographical and political sketch would suggest that it was perhaps the painful dissonance between the horizon of possibilities that my parents expressed and the bitter reality I faced that made me more sensitive.

THE BIRTH OF A NEW MIZRAHI IDENTITY

It was not until the heady 1990s that my early unarticulated emotions found the expression that turned the personal into the political for me, in the words of the well-worn slogan. This could only happen when I became part of a community of other young Mizrahi scholars who had "made it," climbed up the academic ladder, and acquired the powerful progressive language of multiculturalism and identity politics. It was also at this time that I encountered the work of artist Meir Gal, which captured the new Mizrahi zeitgeist. In presenting his work, pictured in figure 3, Gal (1997) wrote:

The book shown in the photograph is the official textbook of the history of the Jewish people in recent generations that was used by high school students (including myself)



FIGURE 3. *Nine Out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest)* by Meir Gal, a visual rendering of the state’s discrimination against Mizrahi Jews.

in the 1970s. The nine pages I’m holding are the only pages in the book that discuss non-European Jewish history. Hence the title: *Nine Out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest)*. My intention is to put an end to the speculative character of the argument whether or not Mizrahim have been discriminated [against] in Israel. Today the Ministry of Education continues to erase the history of its non-European Jews despite the fact that they comprise more than half of the Israeli population. This is only one example of how the State of Israel continues to minoritize its non-European majority.

Recognition and Empowerment

For critical Mizrahim like myself, this iconic photograph provided a visible, almost tangible, expression of our marginalized place in the great Zionist epic. Gal’s piercing gaze into those nine pages, as the rest of the pages of history fell loosely to the side, enabled us, too, to view the national narrative for the first time from the outside, unflinchingly and unapologetically. From our newly liberated position, it seemed to us that the story itself was the source of all evil.

For me, this act of removing myself signified the disconnect of my Mizrahi identity from the Jewish whole, as presented in the ethno-national narrative. In other words, recognition of the experience of misrepresentation became a constitutive force for the formation of a new identity. Capturing the prevailing zeitgeist in liberal-progressive circles, with its emphasis on recognition and the formation of modern identity, Charles Taylor (1994, p. 25) writes:

The demand for recognition [of individuals and groups] is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being. The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

An Inspirational Network

Taylor's description of the politics of recognition and the demands for representation of the "subaltern" and the "marginalized" resounded strongly in Israel in the 1990s. Indeed, the developing Mizrahi discourse was deeply connected to the birth of a new and subversive Mizrahi identity extracted from the general Zionist narrative. This new Mizrahiness allied itself with the larger, international story of other minorities' struggles for recognition and representation in liberal democracies, especially in the United States. Removing themselves from the ethno-national story and joining the magnetic international network that epitomized the enlightened Western world provided critical Mizrahi activists and academics with a rare source for empowerment. As they repositioned themselves, Ashkenazi hegemony suddenly seemed local, provincial, and chauvinist. Adopting the framework of universal citizenship and a neutral state, the new Mizrahi critical-progressive discourse demanded appropriate representation and full equality for all Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel and all other marginalized groups as well (women, LGBTQ, Ethiopians, and others).

Indeed, within the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow, which by the 1990s had become the leading Mizrahi organization in Israel, a majority wanted to articulate the Mizrahi demand for recognition in civic-universalist, multicultural terms, free of the constraints of the Zionist-national discourse. In the introduction to their book *What is Multiculturalism? The Politics of Difference in Israel* (Yonah 2005), two of the founders of the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow, Yossi Yonah, professor of the philosophy of education at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, and Yehouda Shenav, professor of sociology at Tel Aviv University and a leading voice in the critical discourse in Israel, presented the key points of this position.

In our view, the agenda of the Mizrahi left is composed of three complementary topics. First, the effort to articulate a universalistically-oriented, assertive Mizrahi identity that rejects ethno-national and ethno-cultural particularism. In the framework of this effort, we highlight the tremendous political potential inherent in multicultural ideology, which allows for cultural diversity that is neither policed by national ideology nor bound to the logic of the Israeli [i.e., Jewish] 'melting pot.' Second,

activities to reduce social inequality and promote ongoing class struggle against the socio-ethnic interests of capital and the market mechanisms encouraged by the state. This activity is deeply connected to the first struggle, if only because we view cultural and economic oppression as allied with each other and feeding off of each other. [. . .] We view [this] as a necessary condition for the fulfillment of the civil, political and social rights of various groups as well as a necessary part of the rights that a democratic regime must accord to its citizens and residents. Third, the promotion of cultural identities and the class struggle are, ipso facto, allied with the struggle against the colonialist occupation in the territories; at the same time, the development of political frameworks in these areas will enable the Palestinian citizens of Israel to live as citizens with equal rights, including their collective rights as a national minority (p. 7–8).

As noted, in the 1990s the winds of “liberation” blew through academic circles within Israel, as they had throughout the world. These views have held sway there ever since. Over the past three decades, the problem of the representation of Mizrahim in critical sociology has been articulated primarily through the overarching logics of distributive justice and the politics of recognition.

The structural position of the Mizrahi subject as a victim stems directly from these two sets of logic. According to the first, the Mizrahi subject is the victim of the inequitable distribution of resources. According to the second, the Mizrahi subject suffers from underrepresentation, misrecognition, and identity erasure.

RECOGNITION AND REPRESENTATION: BEYOND POLITICAL BARRICADES

Thus far, the interplay among recognition, representation, and identity resonates perfectly with Taylor’s (1994) diagnosis. However, Taylor describes these processes in diachronic terms, as phenomena that characterize all of modern society. In contrast, I view them as particular phenomena that, while very powerful, are culturally specific and socially bound. While this model appears in its purist form in progressive circles, it is denied by some and partially embraced by others. Viewing the politics of recognition from below reveals a more complex picture than the one that Taylor paints.

It should come as no surprise that Mizrahi critical positions were welcomed by the Ashkenazi left-wing camp in both academia and civil society. Yet progressives were not the only ones demanding recognition. Over the years, voices from across the political spectrum, from the progressive left to the right and religious Orthodox, also made themselves heard. In fact, the first public demand for proper representation of Mizrahim in the national narrative and recognition of their contribution to the Zionist project occurred in 1981 when Dr. Vicki Shiran petitioned the High Court of Justice to forbid the screening of a television series, “The Pillar of Fire.”⁹ That series told the story of Zionism, but, Shiran argued, paid only

minuscule attention to the contribution of Eastern Jews to the Zionist project and the establishment of the state. The court rejected the petition, yet the case is still considered a milestone in the history of Mizrahi activism.

Another striking example is the public debate in 2006 about the lack of Mizrahim commemorated on Israeli currency. In an article published in the Hebrew news site *Ynet* (Faylar, 2013), Aryeh Deri, the leader of the Shas political party, was quoted as saying, "The exclusion of Mizrahim exists in the Supreme Court, higher education, the media, the Israel Prize, the current government, and now it's come to our currency. I will fight this discrimination with all the tools that I have at my disposal, for the good of the entire Mizrahi public. . . ." In the same article, economist Shlomo Maoz, a secularist who has strongly identified himself with the Likud, was quoted as saying, "This unwanted phenomenon persists even now, 65 years after the founding of the State. It is unfortunate that in the State of Israel, only certain ethnic groups appear on our currency. The printing of currency should be stopped. While it is true that the choices have been legally legitimate, they have been morally invalid."

From the other end of the political spectrum, legal scholar Dr. Yifat Biton, who is identified with the critical Mizrahi camp and who founded and led the *Tmura Center for the Prevention of Discrimination*, was also quoted in the same article. According to Biton:

The problem with the Mizrahi struggle for equality is that when it is spoken about in general terms, it is considered to be an 'ethnic genie' and we are warned not to allow it to be released from its bottle; but when we deal with specific examples of lack of representation and discrimination—such as public allocations to culture, or the percentages of students eligible for matriculation certificates, or the lack of streets named for Mizrahim, or the representation of Mizrahim in the Supreme Court or on currency bills—the response is, 'these are merely specific instances, and why are we making a big deal about them.'

Additional struggles have included a focus on underrepresentation in spheres such as television, accompanied by critical academic literature on the underrepresentation of Mizrahim in the media (Avraham, 2003); a series of petitions calling for the appointment of Mizrahi judges to the Supreme Court (Zarhin, 2012); efforts to change street names in order to commemorate outstanding Mizrahim; and position papers on the representation of Mizrahim in history textbooks following the 1997 exhibit by Gal referenced above.¹⁰

Nearly two decades later, in 2013, then-Minister of Education Naftali Bennett established the Biton Commission to Increase the Presence of the Legacy of Jews from Sefarad and the East in the Educational System, headed by poet Erez Biton.¹¹ It is important to emphasize that this initiative was taken by a minister from the right-wing nationalist end of the political spectrum. In establishing the committee,

the minister was agreeing with Mizrahi demands for a more balanced presentation of Mizrahim within the framework of the ethno-national narrative and not as part of a multicultural progressive-universalist program. The establishment of the commission and its conclusion were enthusiastically received by Mizrahim from the progressive left (see, for example, Y. Dahan, 2018) as well as from the right.¹² Yossi Dahan (2018), professor of law and philosophy and one of the founders of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow, viewed the establishment of this commission as “an attempt to correct the injustice of the lack of recognition of Mizrahi Jews.” The commission concluded, as previous studies had already shown, that the educational program in Israeli schools was Euro-centric and paid the culture and history of the Mizrahim only negligible attention (p. 135).

Ars Poetica, a new coterie of Mizrahi poets that appeared in 2013, provided another aggressively defiant expression of the Mizrahi demand for inclusion and recognition. “The coterie’s name is a brilliant pun on the highbrow term *ars poetica* (the art of poetry), which is spelled with a guttural ‘eyin,’ associated with a Mizrahi accent, instead of an ‘aleph,’ thus reclaiming the pejorative “ars.” Derived from the Arabic word for “pimp,” the Hebrew usage of the word serves as a derogative for young, unruly Mizrahi men” (Gluzman, 2022, p. 496).

The group, founded by poet/performer Adi Keissar, revolutionized the traditional highbrow poetry reading, usually held in select bookstores or lecture halls in front of minuscule crowds. By contrast, *Ars Poetica* events were held in nightclubs and described as “*chaflot poetiot*” (poetic parties). This Mizrahi group of poets, which included Shlomi Hatuka, Roy Hasan Tehlia Hakimi, Israel Dadon, and Mati Shmuelof, enjoyed extensive public recognition, although it was also controversial. It disappeared from public consciousness toward the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century (Gluzman, 2022).

As I have shown, demands for representation and recognition have come in various forms and from both sides of the political divide. The demands from the right came from within the ethno-national framework, while claims from the left sought to extricate the Mizrahi identity from the confines of this national narrative, to recognize that the narrative itself is a source of oppression, and to seek liberation through the progressive, multicultural model and the discourse of identity politics. The Israeli public has been exposed to this discourse in both its progressive and ethno-national forms, but their responses have never been investigated.

The turn that I have taken in my research is emotionally laden for me. For many years, as a critical sociologist and activist, I was deeply invested in confronting disadvantaged Mizrahim in the field, in civil society, and even in my own family. I sought to “enlighten” them; I tried with all my might to emancipate and liberate them by channeling them toward the liberal-progressive notion of representation and recognition. Many years later, I finally turned to Mizrahi

subjects and put my earlier progressive form of the politics of representation and recognition to the test.

THE ENCOUNTER

As in the previous chapters, the first part of this process was based on statistical findings on the differences between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim with regard to their knowledge of the relative representation of Mizrahim in public and political institutions. Both groups demonstrated an awareness of certain common knowledge: for example, that there had never been a Mizrahi prime minister, that a majority of Supreme Court judges are Ashkenazim, and so forth. Mizrahim, as we saw in chapter 2, were slightly more aware than Ashkenazim that there are fewer Mizrahi doctors, but Ashkenazim knew better than Mizrahim that Ashkenazim make up the overwhelming majority of university faculty. With regard to the Israel Prize, the difference between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim was statistically significant: 40.6 percent of Mizrahim knew the correct answer, in contrast to only 28.4 percent of the Ashkenazim. Thus we see that, in general, Mizrahim are aware that they are underrepresented relative to Ashkenazim in numerous arenas.

From among the various arenas that we could have selected for the question on representation, we chose to focus on the political area. This is because, although right-leaning marginalized Mizrahim identified their underrepresentation in different spheres of life, and even protested against it, they identified the phenomenon primarily with the Ashkenazi establishment, which is largely regarded as left-wing. For many of them, the political right, and certainly the Likud party, represent their political home. Ethnic inequality between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim is thought of as an internal Jewish issue, and, as we have seen, rooted Mizrahim do not tend to view themselves as an ethnic minority competing alongside Arabs and others for a place in a stratified universal-civil order. But how would the rooted Mizrahim relate to inferiority within the right? I chose to focus on data that would confront them with their inferior position on both the ideological left and right, which, in the critical Mizrahi discourse, has always been viewed as evidence for the development of a separate Mizrahi politics. The two political organizations I chose, Peace Now¹³ and the Yesha Council,¹⁴ are iconic in Israeli history. Although Peace Now’s agenda is no longer visible on the public stage, it is still widely identified with initiatives that are divisive in Israeli public opinion and it is the best known of the Israeli NGOs and peace and human-rights organizations.

We now turn to the finding that will be at the center of the focus group discussion. The respondents were asked two questions. First: “To the best of your knowledge, what is the proportion of Mizrahim to Ashkenazim among the Peace Now leadership?” Second: “To the best of your knowledge, what is the proportion of Mizrahim to Ashkenazim on the Yesha Council leadership?” These two groups,

TABLE 1 Proportion of Mizrahim to Ashkenazim among Peace Now and Yesha Council leadership, according to survey respondents

Answer	Ashkenazi Respondents	Mizrahi Respondents
	Peace Now	
Ashkenazi Majority 50%/50%	✓	✓
	Yesha Council	
Ashkenazi Majority 50%/50%	✓	✓

NOTE: See appendix 2 for more detailed survey results.

both founded solely by Ashkenazim, are considered to represent the polar ends of the Zionist political spectrum. To both questions, the possible answers were:

1. A significant Mizrahi majority
2. 50%/ 50%
3. A significant Ashkenazi majority
4. Don't know

We used the findings as the trigger, showing that the differences in the responses between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim to these two questions were statistically significant. As table 1 shows, Ashkenazim pointed to an Ashkenazi majority in both groups, while Mizrahim thought there was an Ashkenazi majority in the left-wing movement (Peace Now) and that the ethnic division on the right (the Yesha Council) would be balanced. This time, the Mizrahi optimism was unwarranted. This table, which provides a schematic illustration of their responses, was presented to the informants.

Mizrahi Women without a College Education

We will begin with the focus group of Mizrahi women without a college education; continue with the focus group of men without a college education; and finally move on to the group of men with a college education.

Riki, the younger women who was about to begin law school and whose participation in the group without a college education was a fortuitous mistake, opened the discussion:

Riki: I think that Peace Now members are mostly Ashkenazim.

Leah: Peace Now are extreme, because many of them are from kibbutzim and they are the majority there—Ashkenazim in Peace Now. I think it’s true.

Riki: I think it’s mostly Ashkenazim in both.

Ahuva: Ashkenazim, that’s right.

Riki: Yes, I also think it’s Ashkenazim, you’re right. They are the majority.

Leah: Also in Yesha Council?

Riki: Yes.

Hannah: I think just like the Mizrahim, that it’s mostly Ashkenazim and fifty-fifty.

Ahuva: You mean Yesha Council?

Hannah: Yes, there is a lot of variety. I mean, you have people from all ethnic origins in Yesha Council the way I see it.

Riki: True.

Ahuva: Wait a sec . . .

Hannah: This is no objective information.

Leah: He says “majority,” not fifty-fifty. I didn’t count them. We’re talking facts here. The majority are Ashkenazim, yes. In Yesha Council.

Riki: In Peace Now there is clearly an Ashkenazi majority.

Ahuva: Obviously.

Hannah: The focus group should also have been somehow ethnically based?

Facilitator A: We have focus groups of both Mizrahim and Ashkenazim.

Ahuva: Yes, sure they have.

Facilitator A: Why do you ask?

Hannah: Just curious.

Hannah’s question marked the first instance of group identification, which, as we will see, also occurred in the group of Mizrahi men with a college education, although in a slightly different manner. The call for a distinction between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim raised questions about the identity of their own group.

Facilitator A: [. . .] I’m asking you now, do you agree that in Peace Now the majority are Ashkenazim?

Riki: Yes.

Ahuva: Yes.

Facilitator A: Why? How does that happen?

Leah: I see in the media, all the people there, I don’t know any Mizrahi person in the representative groups. They’re all Ashkenazim.

Ahuva: A professor, who used to be Minister of Education [. . .] Yuli Tamir, we know [these people], we don’t really know any Mizrahi person in Peace Now.

Riki: But he’s asking you *why*.

Ahuva: I’ll tell you why. The Mizrahim have this trait, like a stigma, they love Eretz Israel.¹⁵

From Ahuva’s sarcasm, we can infer that she has created a moral hierarchy between Mizrahim, who are loyal to the State of Israel, and the left-wing Ashkenazim, who are disloyal and are willing to compromise the needs of the state.

Facilitator A: What makes Ashkenazim, those Ashkenazim who are Peace Now members, so willing to compromise?

Ahuva: They’re a bunch of bleeding hearts, they want to be nice, let them . . .

Facilitator A: But what is behind this idiocy?

Ahuva: I think they are just bubbleheads.

Facilitator A: But where does this come from?

Hannah: I don’t think they’re bubbleheads. I think it’s people believing that you can make peace that way.

Ahuva: No, belief will give them no peace because if we’ve already given over Gush Katif¹⁶ and there was no peace . . .

Facilitator A: We want to get into their heads.

Ahuva: Then count me out.

Riki: It’s becoming a political discussion.

Facilitator A: Ahuva, it’s not about who’s right. We’re trying to make sense.

Ahuva: I can’t do it—get into their head.

Ahuva’s refusal reinforces the moral distinction she has already drawn between the worthy Mizrahim and the left-wing Ashkenazim, who are bad subjects unworthy of her understanding. This is a reversal of the progressive position, which, for example, is unwilling to understand the white male “oppressor” in rural America.

Leah: All the groups in the Ashkenazi immigrations who worked for the country and built the country and took care . . .

Ahuva: What do you mean built the country? What are you talking about?

Leah: It wasn’t the Moroccans or the Sephardic Jews . . .

Hannah: They [the Ashkenazim] had been here before, there’s no getting away from it.

Ahuva: You don’t say?

Leah: I think it’s the Ashkenazim who played the major role.

Ahuva: I’m sorry, you’re mistaken. You got it all wrong.

Facilitator A: I’ll let Leah finish what she was saying.

Leah: No. The 1950s were . . .

Ahuva: They [Moroccans] were in Shomera and Avivim¹⁷—these people built the country and protected it. What are you talking about? I take offense at what you’re saying, that the Ashkenazim built this country! Wrong! Took over the country? Yes. But they didn’t build this country.

Hannah: All the first immigration waves . . .

Leah: All the Palmachniks¹⁸ and all the kibbutzim, all those who were in the kibbutzim.

Ahuva: Were there no Moroccans in the 1950s?

Hannah: Sure, but before statehood, when they immigrated . . .

Ahuva was denying the facts, while the others accepted that the Ashkenazim played an earlier part in the Zionist story. This denial attests to the importance she attached to her position that the Mizrahim have played an equal role in the republican ethos of the state. This seems to serve as a means for her to cope with the exclusion of Mizrahim from the Zionist ethos and the ensuing discrimination.

Facilitator A: Wait a sec. There is disagreement here. I’d like to frame it. Who really established the state? There’s disagreement about it.

Ahuva: Everyone together.

Facilitator A: Ahuva says, everyone together.

Ahuva: Yes.

Facilitator A: But the Ashkenazim managed to take over the state apparatus?

Ahuva: Why do you keep calling them Ashkenazim? Those who were in the country were the first. Let’s put it this way—the First Immigration are those who came from Russia and all that? What do you mean?

Leah: From Europe.

Ahuva: Because there was a certain situation, they didn’t come here because they loved the country. There was the Holocaust, have you forgotten?

Ahuva passionately defended the equal, or perhaps even superior, role of Mizrahim in the building of the nation—even at the cost of contradicting herself. Initially she said that the Ashkenazim were not here first; now she acknowledged that they were. Yet she continued to rebuff any attempts by other participants to undermine her version of the narrative. Their role in the national epic is the ultimate measure of the worth of the Mizrahim. For this reason, and for the first time, she also questioned the distinctions between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim.

She confused the historical chronology. In addition, although her argument regarding the external factors that influenced the decisions by Ashkenazim to come to Israel was factually correct, it was used in this instance to diminish their virtue.

Hannah: We haven’t forgotten anything.

Ahuva: It’s the Holocaust that forced them to come here [. . .]

Riki: No matter why. They built it, they were here before. They established the state.

Ahuva: They didn’t. There was no choice. [. . .]

Leah: [The Ashkenazim were here] before all the Mizrahim.

Ahuva: There were Sephardic Jews, there were Mizrahi people.

Leah: Very few, yes, but the majority were Ashkenazim.

Ahuva: You’re wrong. That’s where you got it wrong, in Jerusalem the majority were Sephardic.

Hannah: In Jerusalem, Safed, Tiberias—¹⁹
[. . .]

Facilitator A: I want us to understand where Ahuva’s coming from. You are all entitled to express your views. I want to understand Ahuva’s view. It’s Ahuva’s turn to speak. Ahuva says the Ashkenazim weren’t the majority [among the Jews in pre-statehood Israel], so what happened?

Ahuva: They were more power-hungry, perhaps more intelligent, let’s say that the first Jews were really of this origin, but these were large families who lived here. Families, even from Uzbek origin, we know about Safra,²⁰ and we know a lot of things about them—these weren’t power-hungry people. This creates the impression as though the Ashkenazim established the state.

Facilitator A: What do you mean power-hungry?

Ahuva: Their ability.

Facilitator A: What ability?

Ahuva: Their education, maybe also financial.

Facilitator A: They had more resources, which gave them an advantage?

Ahuva: Resources, yes. Advantage, yes.

Facilitator A: If I have more resources, I become more power-hungry?

Ahuva: Certainly.

Facilitator A: Yes?

Ahuva: Yes, you’re in a society, I don’t mean power in the sense of physical strength. In the sense of media power, in the sense that in a certain society, you rank higher. Don’t you think?

Ahuva was ready to acknowledge the advantages that the Ashkenazim have with regard to resources, capabilities, education, and drive. This acknowledgment appears to be yet another attempt to disparage their morality, as part of her attempt to defend the place of Mizrahim in the national narrative.

Facilitator A: I don’t know, I’m trying to understand. Another perspective is represented by Hannah and Leah. And Riki, I believe you have a slightly different take on how the story began, right?

Leah: Yes. I think that like all the groups of the Palmach and Nili²¹ and all those groups—these were all immigrants from Europe, Holocaust survivors. They fought very hard for this country.

Riki: It’s a fact. They were here before. They built the country. The Mizrahi immigration waves came later.

Leah: It was hard for them, they were afraid to lose the country and they would fight.

Riki: Afterward there were Mizrahi immigrations and they helped build the country.

Leah: That’s right.

Riki: It’s not like they came and the state was already fully established.

At this point, the others also found it important to include the Mizrahim in the story of the establishment of the state, but they were willing to acknowledge that they were not part of the early history and to “give the Ashkenazim their due.”

Facilitator A: Now I’m interested in hearing what effect did growing up in an Arab country or living next to other Arabs, not from this country, and then coming here—what effect did coming from an Arab country have?

Leah: Of course, you feel like it’s your home and you don’t want the Arabs to be with you.

Ahuva: I don’t feel. . . . We have a history, it’s our country, God promised it to us, the Bible. [. . .] It’s either I have faith or I don’t [that’s what matters]. If I believe, I’ll fight for it to the day I die. If I don’t . . . [. . .] Every Saturday, Peace Now goes and demonstrates in Bil’in²² and all that, and go . . .

Facilitator A: Because they don’t have faith? I go back to what you said before. You’re saying that Mizrahim have faith.

Ahuva: I can’t get into their heads.

Ahuva dramatically raised her sense of belonging to the Jewish whole, presenting it as a position of faith.

Facilitator A: Let’s move on to the next group. Yesha Council. Who is more represented there, Ashkenazim or Mizrahim or fifty-fifty?

Riki: Fifty-fifty.

Ahuva: I think it’s fifty-fifty.

Facilitator A: Why fifty-fifty?

Ahuva: Because they [Mizrahim] went to the settlements [in the West Bank]. First of all, don’t forget to add the word “religious.” Why?

Facilitator A: Yeah, why?

Ahuva: They believe that the land is holy and that we are its rightful owners, they have greater faith.

Facilitator A: In other words, if I’m Mizrahi this means I have faith and this makes me more attached to the land?

Ahuva: Exactly . . .

Facilitator A: So I’m more willing to fight for it?

Ahuva: Yes.

Riki: But that’s not true, there are also highly religious Ashkenazim.

Ahuva: Fifty-fifty, I didn’t tell you there weren’t any.

Riki: The Ashkenazi religion is more extreme.

Facilitator A: You mean that the decisive factor is my religious identity. If I’m a Mizrahi religious Jew, then I would also be on Yesha Council. If I’m an Ashkenazi religious Jew, I would also . . .

Ahuva: Be there.

Riki: Can also be on the Yesha Council.

Ahuva: Most of them are Mizrahim.

Facilitator A: If I’m a Mizrahi secular Jew—is there such a thing? Or isn’t there?

Ahuva: Secular Mizrahi?

Facilitator A: Yes.

Ahuva: That’s me, I’m a secular Mizrahi. I have the faith.

Facilitator A: You mean it’s not about religion, but faith.

Ahuva: Faith is not religion.

Hannah: “Traditional,” let’s put it this way.

Ahuva created a link between being traditional and being right-wing. She correctly argued that there are fewer secular Mizrahim, entirely removed from tradition, as compared to Ashkenazim.²³

Facilitator A: I have a surprise for you now. The figures will come as a surprise to you.

Ahuva: Surprise us. I told you we don’t have the figures.

[. . .]

Facilitator A: According to the statistics, what we find is an Ashkenazi majority in the Yesha Council.

Ahuva: Definitely? Not fifty-fifty?

Facilitator A: No.

Ahuva: Why did I tell you at first that there was, and you told me . . . [. . .]
You made me lose my faith.
[. . .]

Facilitator A: Why do the Mizrahim we've asked think, like here—here it's really the same—why do they think that in Yesha Council, it's fifty-fifty? [. . .]

Ahuva: I thought the majority are Ashkenazim, but I was afraid, I answered the way I . . .

Facilitator A: Really? You were afraid? [. . .] Why did you think there was an Ashkenazi majority in Yesha Council?

Ahuva: I didn't believe there wouldn't be Mizrahim as well. You mean to tell me that in the settlements . . .

Facilitator A: I'm talking about Yesha Council . . .

Hannah: About the formal institution.

Facilitator A: About the formal institution, not about the settlers.

Ahuva: Sorry, so you didn't explain this. I thought about the people living there.

Facilitator A: No, I'm asking about institutions

Ahuva: Sure, we know who Emuna Elon²⁴ and her husband are. [Her tone is disparaging].

Once again, Ahuva was correct: the percentage of Mizrahim among the settlers is much higher than their negligible representation in the leadership, making the lack of representation even worse.²⁵

Facilitator A: Why is it so, Ahuva? We're no longer in the 1940s–50s?

Ahuva: Good for them, I don't mind. [. . .] If they are honest and if they safeguard [Eretz Israel], that's just fine.

The apparent tension was resolved easily. Ahuva simply gave priority to the people of Israel as a whole over the particular representation of the Mizrahim in institutional bodies.

Facilitator A: But why are they in power? What happened? [. . .]

Leah: I'm saying, if we're talking about the religious Jews in Judea and Samaria, I'm looking at the Mizrahim, there are many Mizrahim in the synagogues and all that, there's lots of them, so the Mizrahim are represented.

Facilitator A: In the settlements.

Leah: In the settlements, yes, but also in the government.

Facilitator A: Yesha Council is actually like a [regional] council.

Leah: Yes, also in the big ones.

Facilitator A: Why in the local government . . .

Leah: But it’s not only Ashkenazim. Some of them are also Mizrahim.

Ahuva: But you have the statistics. He says no, he says most of them are Ashkenazim.

Hannah: In the end it’s probably the ambition and the motivation that also give the strength.

Ahuva: Maybe it’s heredity, maybe it’s hereditary, perhaps it’s genetic [laughs] . . .

Hannah and Ahuva attempted to make sense of the evident misrepresentation, responding with sarcasm and indifferent humor.

Mizrahi Men without a College Education

We will now turn to the reactions in the group of Mizrahi men without a college education to these same points.

Facilitator B: What do you make of the findings? [. . .]

Haim: Let me answer please. What did Yehezkel say, how did he describe the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews? The Sephardic are like heavier, they have honor for tradition. Now, in Peace Now you don’t have traditionals.

Facilitator B: Is that a fact?

Sasson: There aren’t any at all.

Haim: If anybody is even slightly traditional, it’s not Peace Now. If he’s only just a bit traditional, it’s not Peace Now anymore. A born Sephardic Jew, like Yehezkel says, his kids have already read [the scriptures] before kindergarten, the respect [for tradition] is deeply rooted in their home.

Haim refers to the issue of representation as an essential difference between the rooted Mizrahi identity and the Ashkenazi identity, which are distinguished from each other by traditionalism. The Mizrahi identity is associated with the notion of honor, Haim said, using the Hebrew word *kavod*, most often translated as “honor” although it shares a root with the word “heavy” and “liver,” thought to be the heaviest internal organ in the human body. He made an association between honor, a hierarchy of virtues in a particular community, and the bounded identity of the rooted Mizrahi subject, linking honor and Mizrahi/Sephardi traditionalism. As I have shown in previous work (Mizrachi, 2016b), honor is a particular form of

hierarchical human respect and is to be contrasted with the universal concept of dignity. We will further discuss the linkage between honor and the rooted Mizrahi identity below.

Facilitator B: Why do you think regarding Yesha Council that the Mizrahim say they think the leadership is evenly divided?

Haim: I think it's pretty even, I don't know if it's 50 percent, but the leadership is mixed. I don't know how close it is to 50 percent.

Facilitator B: Ashkenazim, why did they say it is an Ashkenazi majority?

Haim: Did the Ashkenazim say an Ashkenazi majority?

Facilitator B: Yes.

Haim: Because maybe you see them more in the media, or maybe they stick out more, or maybe they were in more leading positions because they are the typical religious Zionist Jews, and they are usually more like Bnei Akiva [the leading religious Zionist youth movement], which I'm a bit affiliated with. I'm Sephardic, I pray in a Sephardic synagogue. But I usually hear from them, and their leadership is more Ashkenazi. It's not fifty-fifty, it's more Ashkenazi.

Sasson: There can't be Sephardim in Peace Now.

Facilitator B: Are you sure?

Sasson: Absolutely. [. . .]

Facilitator B: And how would you explain the fact that Ashkenazim thought that there are more Ashkenazim in Yesha Council?

Sasson: That's beside the point.

Facilitator B: Beside the point?

Sasson: Yes, it doesn't matter who has the majority there, Ashkenazim or Sephardim. These are the people of the Greater Land of Israel. That's all. I'm not concerned with that, I'm concerned with Peace Now. I happen to know some of their members—these people are anti-Israeli, anti-Jewish, anti-State of Israel, anti-everything.

Here, Sasson's statement echoes Ahuva's. The question of representation or underrepresentation of Mizrahim is secondary to the question of who promotes what is best for the Jewish people.

Facilitator B: What do you all say? Let's hear more people.

Yehezkel: Peace Now [. . .] All their ideology is to give the Arabs what they want. We are occupiers, we have no special attachment to this country, to the land under our feet, so long as there's peace, and everything is nice and dandy. [. . .] The thing is that the

Mizrahim are more traditional, I think there are no Mizrahim there. [. . .] They are less connected to Jewish traditions. [. . .]

Facilitator B: Let’s hear the others. Eliran, we haven’t heard you today.

Eliran: Yes, I think the Mizrahim are, in my opinion, more realistic, more experienced in every aspect, and know that Peace Now is illegitimate for most Mizrahim—I don’t think there’s a single Mizrahi there. Peace Now is simply against everything that has to do with the State of Israel [. . .] in its culture. It’s like we’re an occupying nation. Take the IDF for instance. There are many people demonstrating every day in the central recruitment base against the draft and in favor of disobeying orders and things that make me very, very angry. I used to be in the Scouts, I love this country very much, I’m Mizrahi, my parents raised me to love this country. I come from a traditional home, my late grandfather was a rabbi, I consider myself part of this family. Peace Now, in my opinion, the way I see it, is a movement which represents some kind of delirious sector in Israeli society.

Facilitator B: What does this sector say?

Eliran: The entire Zionist project, everything we have paid for in blood, money and hard work—take everything, we don’t need that. You can shut the country down, throw away the keys, we don’t need that. Let’s give it back to the Arabs. “Peace”, they call it.

Facilitator B: I have a question for you. What you’re saying is interesting—before you said that those who built this country were the same Ashkenazim. I want to understand your line of thought. You said that these people, who had nothing to do with Jewish tradition, who were secular, these guys came and fought, right? Ariel Sharon, you spoke about the evacuation [of Gush Katif]—Sharon [who was responsible for it] fought for this country.

Haim: He’s not Peace Now.

Facilitator B: No, but you talked about those who wanted to give it to them, to make peace with them. [. . .]

Sasson: Sorry for intruding, I will tell you in two words. Everyone who touches Eretz Israel gets punished.²⁶ Period. I used to admire [former Prime Minister Yitzhak] Rabin, but the moment he considered giving some of the country back to the Arabs, he was assassinated.

Facilitator B: Why did he do that?

Sasson: It was a punishment.

Facilitator B: No, why did he do it?

Sasson: First, his naiveté and the one who incited him was his friend Shimon Peres. Now the other one was Ariel Sharon. Case in point: disengagement [from Gaza] and expulsion of Jews—he got what was coming to him. Olmert—same thing. He tried to do something [evacuate some settlements in the West Bank], and got kicked out of office and put on trial [for corruption]. [. . .]

And Now, the Moment of Confrontation

Facilitator B: Sasson, I want to go back a little. The Ashkenazim were right. [. . .] The majority in the leaderships of both Yesha Council and Peace Now is Ashkenazi. Where are the Mizrahim?

This statement by Facilitator B resonates not only with the statistical findings, but also with the position expressed by the educated Ashkenazi men, who recognized Ashkenazi superiority in both political camps, accepted it as natural, and were also aware of the growing balance in representation over time.

Sasson: The question is whether they were elected or maybe it doesn’t mean much just like he said. [. . .]

Haim: [. . .] There’s no problem in Peace Now.

Facilitator B: No. Forget about it, I’m asking you a question. You’re saying that the Mizrahim are more sentimental, they care more about the land, they’re more attached to it, they know what these Arabs are like. You’re saying all that. I’m asking you, why [are there no Mizrahim in the Yesha Council leadership]?

Herzl: No, in leadership position you need to be less sentimental. Whoever is less so can reach the top, he has a better chance, obviously. [. . .] Leadership requires intelligence and composure. That’s what it requires. What can we do?

Herzl’s statement seems to be very self-defeating and even essentialist, attributing superior intelligence and leadership qualities to the Ashkenazim. Some critical readers may object to his statements, which could be understandably framed as the “internalization of oppression,” especially in view of the fact that Ashkenazi educated men expressed a clear sense of Ashkenazi entitlement that would explain their position in the political leadership of both camps.

As challenging as this may be, at this point, I bracket these comments so that they will not overshadow my line of inquiry. Without evaluating the “truth value” of his argument, it is important to note that Herzl remained indifferent to the degrading meaning of his own statements as he relates to the importance of the “Jewish whole.”

Sasson: Mizrahim have no composure? What you’re saying is wrong. I disagree with you. [. . .]

Eliran: Perhaps the Mizrahim are too tired for all these contemplations.

Facilitator B: Tired of what? Let’s hear Eliran.

Eliran: Maybe it’s simply that the Mizrahim are tired of all that happened to them. They are tired of all these adventurous exploits, they just want to be left alone and they want peace, but not like Peace Now.

Facilitator B: No, but it sounds like you’re saying that maybe the Mizrahim can no longer handle the big stuff, meaning “let’s concern ourselves with what’s happening at home, with the family—let me mind my own business because I’m tired of the big stuff”—is that what you’re saying?

Gidi: It’s like giving up.

Eliran: I said it half-jokingly. But in principle you can’t say that a leader has to be this or that. A leader can be in any color, in any shape, there’s no single recipe for leadership. An Ashkenazi majority in Peace Now and the Yesha Council—I think there’s no real explanation for that.

Facilitator B: No explanation? It’s a coincidence?

Eliran: No explanation. [. . .]

Haim: I think that even if the majority in Yesha Council are still Ashkenazim, their position is deteriorating. The Sephardim are slowly—I remember the Yesha Council when they started out more or less, at that time they were really Ashkenazim.

Facilitator B: Only Ashkenazim?

Haim: As far as I can recall, you could hardly find any Sephardim there, certainly not in Yesha Council—at least the representatives that I saw. [. . .]

Facilitator A: And why is this change taking place?

Haim: I believe, because I know it from one side of my family who are religious Zionists, they have become more than just religious Zionists, they’ve studied in Orthodox high schools and colleges affiliated with the Yesha Council—in their establishments—and today they have reached positions that are not quite leadership positions, but they will get there.

Yehezkel: Besides, in the Yesha Council you have normal democratic elections where you elect based on regional councils. There are more Ashkenazi people there. [. . .] In Gush Katif, for example, there

used to be many Yemenites, so they elected their representative. In Elkana and Efrat [in the West Bank] you have immigrants from America and the United States.

Once again, the optimism of the rooted subject proves to be warranted. Yehezkel's acknowledgment of misrepresentation in the present is understood as part of a perception of advancement of Mizrahim over time in process of state-building. And indeed, in retrospect his optimism was well-founded, since Mizrahi representation in the Yesha Council has become more balanced over time.²⁷

The calm acceptance of underrepresentation within their own camp and optimism with regard to the future summon up a broad repertoire of critical readings. An initial, instinctive response would be "internalization of oppression," which refers to Mizrahi self-negation vis-à-vis the dominant Ashkenazim, the result of "false consciousness" in one or another of its versions. I know this response well from the critical Mizrahi stance in both academia and civil society. The optimistic view is seen as a naïve position that fails to recognize the persistence of power structures that have remained in place despite cosmetic changes. The critical Mizrahi tendency is to be suspicious even about the positive trends in representation that the subjects accurately identify.

However, the equanimity with which the subjects accepted underrepresentation in their own political camp contrasts sharply with their resentment of the left-wing Ashkenazi elite, and this sheds additional light on the meaning of representation from a rooted point of view, as Sasson commented.

Sasson: It doesn't matter who has the majority there, Ashkenazim or Sephardim. These are the people of the Greater Land of Israel. That's all. I'm not concerned with that, I'm concerned with Peace Now. I happen to know some of their members—these people are anti-Israeli, anti-Jewish, anti-State of Israel, anti-everything.

His resentment towards the left-wing elites did not stem from a sense of injustice due to the socioeconomic exclusion of Mizrahim, and the organizing principle was not ethnicity per se (Ashkenazi elites, whether on the right or on the left), but rather against left-wing Ashkenazim. That is, his resentment stemmed from the idea that the left undermines the Jewish whole. Here, we see the explicatory power of the principle of rootedness and its contribution to the discussion on the relationship between right-wing nationalism and populism. To these Mizrahim, the left-wing Ashkenazi elite represented vertical power, but the resentment was focused on their disruption of the collective boundary along the national-horizontal dimension, between "us" as a bounded community epitomizing the Jewish whole and the external enemy. The left-wing Ashkenazi elite is rootless, cosmopolitan, and promotes the politics of universalism, and is therefore willing to undermine the Jewish whole. They are seen as disloyal to the Jewish people,

traitors who seek to undermine the identity and existence of the Jewish state. In other words, from a rooted position, we can shed light on what Brubaker (2020) views as the ambiguous empirical and analytical connection between the two dimensions—“the national-horizontal dimension,” i.e., the people (“us”) against the enemy (“them”), and the internal vertical dimension between “the people” and the “elites.”

However, observation of the ostensibly surprising attitude of these Mizrahi subjects toward representation and recognition enables us to reexamine the social boundaries of the liberal politics of recognition through the prism of the rooted ontology. If the politics of recognition in its current prevailing mode in the West is modern in nature, as Charles Taylor (1994) suggests, it may invite some modern essentialist claims. In other words, if we read the subjects’ “denial” of the politics of representation and recognition and unwillingness to identify underrepresentation as an injustice, it will lead us back to essentialist and stigmatizing explanations like those presented in the first wave of modernization theories. From this viewpoint, the response of the Mizrahim to underrepresentation in their own political camp may reflect a premodern position, one that has yet to internalize the politics of recognition and representation that are firmly implanted in the progressive-liberal vision and are an integral part of modernity (Taylor, 1994). Although Taylor is not usually regarded as a modernization theorist, we will see that for him the politics of recognition mark the transition from pre-modernity to modernity. The emergence of the politics of recognition is an expression of a deep change in the sources of the identity of the self and the collective. As I will argue below, this change is not all-encompassing, and both forms of recognition and identity can coincide. This simultaneous appearance is key to understanding the conflict between rooted and autonomous subjects.

THE CLASH BETWEEN DIFFERENT NETWORKS OF MEANING

Charles Taylor (1994) portrays the emergence of the politics of recognition and the related politics of representation in diachronic terms. For Taylor, the new politics of recognition takes place with the transition from premodern societies to modernity. In fact, the politics of recognition that Taylor describes as a unified historical transition appears to exist as a bounded social phenomenon that prevails in its “purest” form in progressive circles, while coexisting with other forms of identity that are deeply rooted in non-liberal worldviews. Hence, my investigation focuses on the conditions of possibility of the politics of recognition in a deeply divided society. Furthermore, the social negotiations regarding the politics of recognition and representation do not take place between premodern and modern communities, but rather in what S. N. Eisenstadt (2002) describes as multiple modernities. In our context, the objection to the politics of recognition in its pure form comes

not only from the rooted Mizrahi subject, but also from other segments of the population, for example, the national religious bloc, devout Muslim communities, and ultra-Orthodox Jews, none of whom are premodern and all of whom are deeply involved in and embrace modernity across many spheres of life. I suggest that this is because modern groups may belong to distinct and even contrasting networks of meaning. In our context, we address two such networks, the progressive-critical and the rooted.²⁸

Between Social Networks and Essentialism

Social networks of meaning envelop and surround us. They consist of the relevant people and figures in our life, alongside whom we live and with whom our moral experience as individuals takes shape. Within this social weave, our sense of morality is shaped and our feelings are molded. This is not about any well-reasoned ethical stance, but rather, as Arthur Kleinman (2006) argues, our immediate, basic, and intuitive ability to distinguish between "right" and "wrong" and between "good" and "bad." It is also here that our sense of otherness and our moral and cognitive intuition with regard to the social order, both as it exists and as it should exist, develop. Elsewhere, I have referred to this as a "world of meaning" (Mizrachi, 2017), which is not embedded in the subject at all (in this case, neither in the rooted nor in the progressive subject) and, in principle, nothing prevents an individual from changing their world of meaning.

To be sure, these stances do not derive from the essential traits of its members, as becomes obvious in our story of the deep divides among Mizrahim (progressive and rooted) who supposedly belong to the same ethnic origin. My use here of the term "social networks of meaning" is broad and still requires further development and research. However, it is important to emphasize that my choice in using this term enables me to differentiate between two moral communities (in this case, the progressive and the rooted Mizrahi), without making any essentialist assumptions about the members in either group. Furthermore, this term enables us to understand the dynamic character of these networks and that movement between the networks is possible, as my own life trajectory shows.

Yet, it is important to emphasize that people do not easily travel across network boundaries, because these networks are tied to relatively stable structures and practices. Switching networks often involves a dramatic change of the world of meaning and even of core identity and sense of self. We must not forget that social networks of meaning are also the source of the individual's cultural tool kits and repertoires (Swidler, 1986, 2001) that enable them to cope with changing social realities, to form effective lines of action, and to bring meaning to their lives. One can, for example, become "born again" or abandon religion, but in either case, the crossing between the two networks is far from easy. Indeed, the linkage between worlds of meaning and social networks is so strong that choosing to deviate from a

network’s accepted cultural repertoire can be traumatic and often involves leaving home and moving away.²⁹

Liberal Isomorphism and Identity Politics

It is thus not surprising that the emergence of the new critical Mizrahi movement in the 1990s became possible only as young Mizrahim began to enter powerful academic centers in the United States. In previous works, I have described these new patterns of thinking and acting as “liberal isomorphism” (Lamont et al., 2016; Mizrahi, 2014; see also Mizrahi, 2012). “Iso” means “equal, identical”; “morpho” means “structure.” I have adapted the sociological meaning of this concept from Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983), who refer to the link between a group’s mirroring of forms and practices and its acquisition of social legitimacy. In my adaptation, I focus on mimetic patterns of thinking and acting adopted by Western social movements in the last third of the twentieth century, particularly within the Mizrahi discourse in Israel.

These movements sprang up in response to the first wave of liberalism. Flourishing in North America, first-wave liberalism had been predicated on the assumption that equal opportunity would be realized in a political context of neutral citizens (without regard to color, gender, or otherwise disparaged identity). In contrast to this liberal blindness to differences, liberal isomorphism is based on the surprising assumption that true equality can be achieved only through recognition of difference.³⁰

This new form of identity politics was born out of changes in Western modernism’s understanding of the nature of individual. Group identity was no longer perceived as derivative of the premodern individual’s position in relation to prevailing social and institutional orders, but rather as an inherent part of the individual that stems from internal, authentic sources whose discovery is tied to introspection. Modernism’s demand for recognition of each individual’s and each group’s distinct authentic identity (Taylor, 1994) is a foundational concept of the new identity politics.

This identity-focused perspective channels isomorphism across five dimensions. First is a demand for group recognition based on a previously stigmatized or discredited identity (e.g., women, gays, people of color, people with disabilities, and so forth). Second is the use of previously stigmatized identity as the cornerstone for authentic group and individual identity. Third is a stress on the right to equal participation as different, in contrast to inclusion despite difference. The fourth common move is debunking hegemonic society’s presumed neutrality by exposing its parochial roots (which privilege the white, male, straight, able-bodied and so forth) as the spearhead for social change. The final shared dimension is acceptance of the universal right to recognition and equality for all minority groups.

Throughout the 1990s, Mizrahi activists and academics in Israel had good reason to adopt the logic of liberal discourse. In accordance with the argument made by DiMaggio and Powell in the context of organizational sociology, the application of successful and accepted imitative patterns of action is a source of widespread legitimation for "new actors" (e.g., organizations and movements) in the social environment where they operate.³¹ Mizrahi alignment with global ethnic space and adoption of modes of protest recognized by the international liberal academic elite served as a powerful political resource. From this position, Mizrahi intellectuals and activists could formulate their arguments in universalist terms that drew their validity from theories of justice and norms commonly accepted in the progressive West. And, of course, this is the same world that the local progressive Ashkenazi elite strives to emulate. Even more significantly, by means of this universal position, Mizrahi critical intellectuals were able to expose the ruling Ashkenazi elite's provincial roots. By using progressive moral grammar, the new Mizrahi discourse extended beyond the boundaries of civil and academic society and held sway in some leftist radical liberal circles in social and electronic media and in the public discourse.³² Within the framework of the neutral state and universal citizenship, they could imagine and hope for a union between Palestinians and Mizrahim based in the shared struggle of minority groups against state tyranny and Ashkenazi hegemony.

The "Local Mizrahi" and the "Universal Ashkenazi"

However, while this process, which presents Mizrahi identity as an analytic category (that is, as a "group"), gained significant success in activist and academic realms and left-wing critical circles, it simultaneously distanced its supporters from the broader experiences of "Mizrahiness" and especially from the experience of the rooted Mizrahi subject. Liberal isomorphism demands breaking the Mizrahi individual and/or group free from the Jewish whole in which their core identity is embedded. It positions them as a minority group together with other minority groups, including Palestinian citizens of Israel and even Palestinians from the West Bank. It acknowledges that their right to representation and recognition is similar to that of these other groups, and it offers the possibility to create an alliance with them. This may shed some light on why the isomorphic space poses such a severe threat to the rooted Mizrahi core identity.

The divide between these two networks of meaning cuts even deeper. While isomorphism requires directing a great deal of social energy inward in order to refine and purify the critical position and prove its membership in the avant-garde of the liberal camp, its purified progressive position distances it even further from the organic target population it seeks to represent.³³ In other words, joining the liberal isomorphic camp often entails a "closing of the ranks" and alienation from

those members of the “minority group” who feel alienated and even threatened by this very camp.³⁴

ROOTED MEANINGS

We now return to the rooted Mizrahi subjects. It is only by locating the critical stance within its own social networks of meaning and acknowledging its own parochialism that we can recognize the informants’ response as a valid ontology that is an alternative to the ontology of the autonomous individual.

Because the progressive position is not aware of its own parochialism, its adherents harbor the expectation that Mizrahim, when confronted with the reality of their underrepresentation in the right-wing camp, will accept the politics of recognition and representation. But as I have shown, even when the rooted Mizrahi informants identify their underrepresentation in right-wing organizations, the progressive notion of identity politics has no ability to disconnect them from the broad Jewish whole or to enter into the liberal isomorphic space and embrace its forms of thinking and behaving.

Their resentment toward left-wing Ashkenazi elites does not stem from the underrepresentation of Mizrahim—as Sasson vigorously argued, “that’s not important”—but rather from the elites’ alienation from the Jewish whole and their activities that appear to hurt and threaten the well-being and Jewish identity of the state. The secular-left Ashkenazi elite is seen as rootless and culturally deracinated, and the politics of universalism that they promote threatens the nuclear identity of the subjects, which is deeply embedded in the Jewish whole. This insight can shed light on the analytical and theoretical relationship between the two dimensions in the ongoing debate on populism and right-wing nationalism.

In the next chapter, we will confront the Mizrahi subjects with yet another weapon from the critical arsenal. This time, we will turn to another cultural dimension of their experience, that is, their “Arabness.” We will introduce the subjects to the subversive concept of the Arab-Jew. As we will see, this threatens to complicate or even to unravel the religious-national Gordian knot of their identity.