

Political Cultures in Development towns: characters,  
causes and outcomes

Thesis submitted for the degree of "Doctor of  
Philosophy"

By  
Yitzhak Dahan

Submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University,  
Jerusalem  
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This work was carried out under the supervision of  
Prof. Shlomo Hasson

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## Abstract

Shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel, there was a large influx of Jewish immigrants, mostly from the Arab states. In order to accommodate them, the Israeli government constructed approximately 35 new towns in the frontier areas of the new state (later called "Development Towns"). Researchers have found that in the ensuing years, most of these towns continued to exhibit shared characteristics of underdevelopment: they concentrated inhabitants mainly from the low socio-economic class; they experienced high rates of unemployment; and they tended toward negative and selective absorption of immigrants. Their economies were characterized by instability, relatively low wage rates, and a prevalence of traditional industries.

The current research discusses these towns, but focuses on another important aspect – the political culture of urban life.

In the Israeli academic field, this aspect had always been discussed and investigated through the prism of social theories, mainly: Functionalism, Marxism and Post-Colonialism. Scholars who have such a theoretical base share a common perception. They emphasize the structure of power as the primary (and sometimes even the only) element in shaping local culture. Methodologically, they use macro-political data, presupposing that it defines local interpretation. Most of these scholars define the structure of power at the national level as a force external to local actors and local groups. They deny the importance of local and personal factors as autonomous variables by which social and geographical systems are constructed.

In contrast to such a theoretical and methodological base, the current research seeks to shed light and to focus on local data and to analyze particular structures of meaning given by periphery groups to objective reality. This focus stems from a theoretical base that sees the local level as an autonomous, dynamic and pro-active system. Within this context, I investigate various aspects of local political life in development towns, such as: conceptions of local politicians; local norms; local networks; local models for behavior; local determinants of status and prestige; local communications channels and the specifics of local geography.

The aim of this research is to answer the following questions:

- (1) What characterizes the political culture (or cultures) in development towns in the last quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century?
- (2) What are the political, geographical and sociological expressions of these political cultures?
- (3) What are the mechanisms by which these cultures are being constructed?

These questions are answered by applying the Case Study method: I typify and explain political cultures by identifying the cultural bias attached to decisions made by decision makers (elected representatives and civic actors or NGO activists) in a wide range of events that occurred in the Israeli periphery during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The theoretical framework that guides this research follows the political culture paradigm. In essence, it claims that there is no way to understand political structure (as well as other aspects of objective reality, such as geography, economy and social structure) without taking into account the cultural structure, i.e. values, beliefs, ideologies etc. Political culture is the "system of preferences" through which the social and political situation passes and which in turn reconstitutes the objective reality. According to this theoretical base, there is a mutualistic relationship between the objective and subjective (or between structure and culture).



To analyze this relationship (i.e. to answer questions no.2 and 3), I use Anthony Giddens' seminal study, known as the Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). In general, this theory integrates humanistic-interpretative approaches with structuralistic approaches. As opposed to some "orthodox approaches" in social science, Giddens defines the relationship between the structure and the human agent in a mutualistic way. Human agents, says Giddens, are not dictated by the structure; rather, they are forced to interpret the structure. In the interpretation process, agents use the rules (general guidelines) and resources (material and political) that the structures provides. Thus, structures are not only systems of constraints, but also enabling systems. Such an interaction between "structure" and agent is not the whole story. While structures are in fact abstract entities, individuals interact primarily in concrete situations at the micro level: the community, family, school, workplace and social networks. Thus, the micro level is an important input for analyzing political culture. In these interactions, people do not behave passively: they are conducting a dialog, exchanging ideals, beliefs and conceptions that are embodied in the social, political and geographical environment. Through such dialog, agents shape the political culture: they decide, choose aims and strategies, and project them to the public sphere. This reconstitution (reorganizing of the political and social order) is done by giving a **particular meaning** to social, political and geographical institutions. In a wider perspective, by such building of institutions, actors reconstitute history and geography.

Following several studies in social science, I integrate with the Structuration theory another important humanistic element that takes part in the interpretative process and eventually in the reconstitution of the social system, known as the "Biographical interpretative method". In essence, this method claims that when analyzing interpretation, we should concentrate also on individual experience and personal memories of agents, and connect them to the collective by seeing how it shapes and builds institutions (creating collective entities and collective data).

Within this framework, researchers of political culture should follow individual life stories. They have to take interest in questions like: "Did you like your neighborhood?" "What was the image of your parents in your eyes (a model for action or anti-model)? Is there any specific memory (from childhood, or adolescence) that later affects your political orientation? Integrating biographical data with Structuration theory thus implies analysis of the interpretation process as shaped in an intimate, personal context. Accordingly, social structures are also expressions of biographies, and collective knowledge is also a product of personal knowledge.

## Findings

In total there were 27 actors who took part in case studies. In terms of location in the map of power (structure), almost all of them were living in peripheral areas. But that common characteristic was not sufficient to explain the mechanisms of political culture; therefore these actors were differentiated into six categories of political culture dominant in the Israeli periphery: (1) Hierarchists; (2) Egalitarians; (3) Radical-Egalitarians (5) Ethnocentric-Factionalists; (4) Radical-Factionalists and (5) Fatalistic-Factionalists.

The Hierarchists are characterized by a high degree of solidarity with society, relying on a primordial base: nation, specific ethnic group, family. At the same time, they are characterized by a low degree of criticism towards the current social and political order. Operatively, this is identified by a common orientation to see a given "problem" in an empirical way, i.e. to see it as it appears on the surface. Because of that perception, Hierarchists tend to solve problems practically, by using the tools that establishment offers. Additionally, they do not recognize or encourage civic involvement. This type of political culture largely reconstitutes a hierarchic reality: The Hierarchists preserve a centralistic structure built upon traditional patterns of class and ethnic division. Additionally, they create and preserve a hierarchic geography in which

the mechanisms of control prevail (for example, shaping and preserving spatial segregation between Jews and Arabs).

Like Hierarchists, Egalitarians also hold positive attitudes towards the nation and the state. But in contrast with the former, Egalitarians are characterized by a high degree of criticism towards the system. Operatively, they tend to have a structural perspective towards a given problem, i.e. they see local problems as an outcome of a deeper structure. Because of that, egalitarians seek substantial reforms in policy. Activists from this category shape the public sphere by building institutions such as egalitarian language ("Reforms") and egalitarian geography (building a new urban environment that would integrate members of the lower class with those of the middle class).

The Radical-Egalitarians share with the Egalitarians a structural perspective on a given problem; additionally they, too, accept and identify with the core values of the nation group. However, their strongest defining element is a dualistic and ambivalent orientation. Radical-Egalitarian activists are characterized by a particular and apparently contradictory value system: they criticize the establishment while cooperating with it; they have a strong social relationship with Radical-Factionalists while neither accepting their political theory nor fully cooperating with them.

The Radical-Factionalists also criticize the political order in a structural manner. But that criticism is more fundamental: radicals deeply oppose and reject the traditional values of nation and state. They see the whole society as built on a bad ideological structure. They also deny the current political orientation of peripheries (minorities and low socio-economic groups), claiming that those orientations are "false consciousness" reflecting the power of hegemony. Following that view, radicals reject the tools suggested by the establishment. Instead, they act and encourage political involvement through alternative political means, mainly Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Through such organizations they

use strategies such as empowerment, in which they encourage the less powerful groups to be aware of the system and to fight it by collective action. In their internal social relationship, Radical Factionalists tend to behave as a sectarian group.

Another type of political culture that has a sectarian orientation is the Ethnocentric Factionalists. In the Israeli political system, this group is identified with the well known Sephardic ultra-orthodox party – Sha's. In this category, activists see themselves as striving for the rehabilitation of oriental Jewish tradition, helping and protecting poor oriental Jews from the dangers of secular society. Similar to Radical Factionalists, Ethnocentric Factionalists see the state of Israel as built upon a problematic superstructure, particularly viewing Democracy and Zionism as undesirable ideals. They consider that structure to be led by a specific elite group, identified with secular Ashkenazim, generally alienated to oriental traditional Jews. In contrast to the Radicals, Ethnocentric Factionalists do not act only through NGOs. In order to widen their control, they also play an active part in central and municipal government. Additionally, in contrast with radicals (who do not tend to establish internal relationships and division of authority) Ethnocentric have a clear hierarchic order (in which the primordial base and its representatives are in the center and the mass of the people is subjected to them). This type of political culture is expressed by creating an alternative social, political and geographical environment, like a different system of education, living and acting in separate enclaves.

There is yet another type of Factionalists: Fatalists. Like the two former type, this type feels alienation and estrangement from the Israeli mainstream and its central symbols. But in contrast to the two former types, fatalists do not offer an alternative. They share a common feeling of hopelessness and a pessimistic view of the current political order. They are apathetic regarding the allocation and reallocation of resources and to the political environment (although they criticize it). They affect the

public sphere by using fatalistic language. Here is a representative of a fatalist:

“Nothing could change this town. We are a little settlement, far away from the center and suffer from negative stigma. Making Change? Maybe, if there is a huge push from the central government. Here everything follows interests: Everyone worries only about himself. I have had enough. I detest this country.

What shapes these political cultures?

As mentioned above, there are four variables that contribute to shaping political culture and to its analysis: (1) structure, (2) local interactions, (3) interpretation and (4) biographies.

Looking at the micro-sociological characteristics, we can get closer to an explanation: local data shows that the Israeli periphery is rich and heterogeneous. Actors were thus positioned in particular environment, in terms of local hierarchies, particular histories and local geography. Some actors were linked to a hierarchic history, others rooted in revolutionary history; some grew up in poor families, others grew up in local elite and were well-connected socially. Data shows that these micro-environments clearly affected actors' political orientations. Hence, it is not possible to explain political cultures only by using 'universal' models, like the "Core – periphery" paradigm. Rather, we have to look at the micro level data.

However, even this data base cannot be sufficient for an in-depth analysis. In fact, analyzing political culture by relating it to social characters at the micro level only works a-posteriori; i.e. we can explain it only after taking personal and biographical data. Empirically, there were actors who shared micro political and sociological environments and yet diverged culturally. This difference occurs due to variation in individual interpretations and personal biographies. To address this variable, I collected personal data – life stories combined with actors'

interpretations – and connected it to collective data, i.e. to structures. While join this, I tried to elucidate how structural reality affects personal interpretation and experience, and, in turn, how these shape structures.

From an examination of life stories, it was found that all actors were involved in a critical dialog with their environment. Thus, they were influenced by structures (historical, geographical and political), but at the same time affected them. In particular, they built institutions by giving particular significance to social, geographical and political reality. Here are some examples of this dualistic relationship.

Among the 'Radical-Egalitarians' there was one young activist who was born in a poor family and poor neighborhood. But in that social milieu he grew up in a unique cultural enclave: his father was a local anti-establishment leader. In his youth he began to see his father as a model for political behavior. This position was rooted in personal memory and experience. Among many interactions and memories, the son retraces one specific event that he remembers from his childhood:

“I remember my father speaking in front of the neighborhood people. After several sentences in Hebrew, in which he spoke about deprivation, he turned suddenly to Arabic. At that stage he spoke like he was going to tell them ‘the secret’, the heart of the problem. He said: ‘Ma Ihabu Nas’ (‘they don’t like us’, which meant that the Ashkenazi Jews have racist attitudes towards oriental Jews). Then, I saw this mass of people repeating this sentence, saying loudly: ‘Ma Ihabu Nas! Ma Ihabu Nas!’ It was impressive. I admired my father”

This event led to a reorganization of interpretation: the son internalized strongly the image of his father. The particular meaning given to the event by the actor generated a particular dynamic: the son accepted the narrative and the political agenda of his father, i.e. his critical position towards establishment. This interpretation (together with other events, in which the son took part in a proactive fashion), contributed to shaping

this radical-egalitarian point of view. Later, that view spread to the public sphere: the son established a civic organization which negotiated with the political establishment. Additionally, he used deconstructionist and radical language while negotiating with the establishment and the underprivileged people.

Here is another example which demonstrates the importance of individual interpretation and personal experience in shaping political views and political culture. Among investigated actors there was an activist identified as a 'Radical Factionalist'. This actor grew up on an Israeli Kibbutz during the fifties and sixties. That is to say, structurally, he was under the socialization of a radical-socialist, but also nationalistic environment. Due to some personal events, that structure was interpreted in unique way. Here is one example reflecting that. When this activist was a teenager, the Israeli authorities arrested his older brother and accused him of espionage. At that point in his life he was stormy. He tells his particular impressions at his brother's trial:

I was in the court room. Suddenly I saw a group of young people sitting on a bench – Jews and Arabs! One of them was my brother. I liked them and their actions; you know the idea of following your ideals until the end. In front of them there were policemen and judges. I saw a strong establishment fighting against a weak youth group. I saw that the judges did not take this trial seriously. Eventually the decision came to convict these young men. My brother was to be imprisoned for seventeen years! We appealed to the Supreme Court, as we were sure that this was a place of justice. But they also convicted him. I was shocked. I said to myself: 'this is not a place of justice'. I have reached the conclusion that the whole establishment stood on a problematic base. I became anti-establishment.

In terms of cultural structures, this event reflects an intersection of ideals and perceptions. The actors' interpretation, i.e. the particular meaning given by the actor in that intersection, produces a reorganization of political culture. In this case it affected his political strategy; from now on

he acted outside the establishment (through NGOs funded by European money). Through that strategy he assists poor Bedouins and helps them to fight the establishment (which tends to solve problems in pragmatic ways).

This dynamic demonstrates how local environment, personal experience and individual interpretation shape political culture. It shows how the human agent, or individual knowledge, shapes collective knowledge or the macro-political order. It agrees with Giddens' theory showing that the character of a social system is an outcome of both structural qualities and of personal interpretation and experience. Agents are not detached from their environment, they are influenced by it, but at the same time they shape their environment. Giddens calls this relationship "The Dualism of structure".

These findings place the traditional studies of the Israeli periphery in a problematic position. As mentioned above, most Israeli scholars analyze the social and political systems of development towns (as well as other peripheries) as an outcome of macro social and political characteristics (planning of these towns during the 1950's, the process of nation building, the policy of the central government during the last sixty years, Globalization and so on). At first sight, this theoretical base may seem reasonable, as there is a certain correlation between the objective and the cultural structures. However, upon in-depth analysis of the inner dynamics (the local interactions, the process of making decisions by individuals), this theoretical base appears inconclusive. By using only the Core-Periphery model, thus ignoring local reality and local actors, those studies failed to elucidate their topic. In fact, they reversed the relation between cause and effect and by doing that denied geography and history. As shown, the story of the development towns should be told differently. While the dynamic of Israeli geography and politics reflects certain constrains, it also reflects cultural orientations and individual life stories. Accordingly, Economic and Geographic principles should be redefined. For example, many scholars, especially positivist



geographers, use the expression 'Natural selection of human resources' in order to explain the mechanism of immigration between strong and weak settlements. This principle ignores cultural orientations and human interpretations. Thus, it misses obvious inputs in explaining the whole mechanism. Immigration does not reflect only constraints and 'supply and demands' considerations but also systems of preferences, individual conceptions and preconceptions, local meaning, local efforts to mobilize resources (i.e. the identity of a place). These elements also affect objective characteristics, such as prices. Hence exchange value reflects use value. Therefore, the Israeli urban system does not reflect only a 'power asymmetry' or class division; rather it also reflects a cultural mosaic.