

# Time for Theory

## *Critical Notes on Lissak and Sternhell*

**Michael Shalev<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Moshe Lissak's response to his critics fails to grapple seriously with the principal theoretical claims of critical studies of Israeli society from the political economy and colonization perspectives. Lissak's defense is based on naive epistemological claims and allegations of "anti-Zionism" that are inaccurate and appeal to political correctness. I reject his argument that the Israeli case is *sui generis* and point out that he is yet to respond to both the overall and the specific claims made by authors like myself. Ironically, Zeev Sternhell's provocative new book on labor Zionism shares key premises with conservative scholars like Lissak. Sternhell's analysis fearlessly confronts entrenched myths and effectively employs comparative analysis. But Sternhell faithfully reproduces the voluntarist and Judeo-centric biases of Israeli social science that critics like myself find so problematic. Both Lissak's project of preserving sacred cows and Sternhell's of slaughtering them are unwilling or unable to give the theoretical claims of political economy and other "realist" approaches an adequate hearing.

### **Author**

Michael Shalev ([shalev@vms.huji.ac.il](mailto:shalev@vms.huji.ac.il)) is a member of the Department of Sociology and the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel* (Oxford, 1992).

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During the last few years the rivalry between conservative and critical understandings of Israeli society has reached new heights, as critical approaches acquired greater currency and influence and their principal targets, Shmuel Eisenstadt and his colleagues Moshe Lissak and Dan Horowitz at the Hebrew University, approached retirement.<sup>2</sup> With the publication in this issue of Moshe Lissak's defense cum counterattack, the debate has finally reached maturity. Instead of having to content ourselves with ritual staged confrontations within the halls of academe, or vituperative exchanges in the mass media, it is now possible to engage in a two-sided scholarly debate. The disinterested reader—if there are any left—can form his or her own opinion, and the interested parties—myself included—can use the discourse we know best to justify our positions and try to confront our opponents.

Despite the diversity of its practitioners' approaches and beliefs, critical scholarship has called into question taken-for-granted assertions and assumptions which have been central to the legitimacy of Zionism and the authority of Israeli elites. It is clear from Lissak's current article, as well as his earlier comments in public appearances and the media, that this is what he finds most objectionable about critical scholarship. Yet the debate is not just about the credibility of historic myths. It is also about analytical choices—above all, how students of Israeli society should define both their dependent and independent variables.<sup>3</sup> Faithful to in-house accounts of Zionist history, traditional scholarship concentrates on *intentions* rather actions; it sees these intentions as the outcome of *ideological choices* tempered by "reality", paying little attention to how material and other contextual forces shape both action and ideals; and it treats the Yishuv (and later Israel) largely as a *self-contained* unit. Critical scholars like Gershon Shafir, Lev

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<sup>2</sup> The "conservative" label is intended to highlight the implications of the type of analysis favored by Shmuel Eisenstadt, Dan Horowitz, Moshe Lissak and their followers which, because of its consistency with conventional assumptions and prevailing social arrangements, wittingly or unwittingly contributes to their preservation.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed exposition of the contending schools of Israeli sociology see Uri Ram, *The Changing Agenda of Israeli Sociology: Theory, Ideology, and Identity* (Albany NY, 1995). In addition to Ram's work, the most important statements by critical sociologists are Shlomo Swirski, "Remarks on the Historical Sociology of the Yishuv Period" (in Hebrew), *Machbarot Lemechkar Ulebikoret* (Feb. 1979), 5-41; and Baruch Kimmerling, "Sociology, Ideology, and Nation-Building: The Palestinians and Their Meaning in Israeli Sociology," *American Sociological Review*, 57 (Aug. 1992), 446-60.

Grinberg and myself, working from a political economy perspective,<sup>4</sup> have presented Labor Zionist ideology more as consequence than cause, and have emphasized the contingent role of the Jewish settlers' economic and political conflicts with the indigenous Arab population in shaping Zionist strategy and Yishuv society.

For reasons that will be explicated below, I find that Lissak's article fails to really grapple with the theses of the political economists. But paradoxically, this is also true of some of the work that has been done under the banner of critique. Zeev Sternhell's recent book, *Nation Building or a New Society?*, discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Israel Studies*, exemplifies the point: fiercely iconoclastic in tone and thoroughly objectionable to conservative scholars like Lissak, Sternhell's volume faithfully reproduces the voluntarist and Judeo-centric biases of Israeli social science that critics like myself find so problematic.<sup>5</sup> Both Lissak's project of preserving sacred cows and Sternhell's of slaughtering them are unwilling or unable to give the theoretical claims of political economy an adequate hearing.<sup>6</sup>

## I

Intellectual curiosity is rarely unbounded. Rather, the social context in which social research is carried out and the social biography of researchers has an obvious impact on the questions we ask, and the type of answers we look for. Yet Lissak insists on denying this self-evident truth. He poses a rigid distinction between defenders of science, like himself, and those who would

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<sup>4</sup> Political economy models and the related colonization approach identified with Kimmerling and Shafir have both been criticized for placing insufficient weight on the "military sphere", a third "realist" explanation for the making of Israeli society and politics. See Yagil Levy, and Yoav Peled, "The Break That Never Was: Israeli Sociology in the Mirror of the Six Day War" (in Hebrew), *Teoria U'Bikoret* (Winter 1993), 115-28; Yagil Levy, *Trial and Error: Israel's Route From War to De-escalation* (Albany NY, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Zeev Sternhell, *Nation-Building or Social Reform? Nationalism and Socialism in the Israeli Labor Movement 1904-1940* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1995). Sternhell is by no means the only dissenting scholar whose arguments reproduce traditional assumptions. Two other examples are Amir Ben-Porat, *Between Class and Nation: The Formation of the Jewish Working Class in the Period before Israel's Statehood* (New York, 1986); and Mitchell Cohen, *Zion and State: Nation, Class and the Shaping of Modern Israel* (Oxford, 1987). For a critique of the latter see Michael Shalev, "Review of Mitchell Cohen, *Zion and State: Nation, Class and the Shaping of Modern Israel*," pp. 389-92 in Jonathan Frankel (ed.), *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era: Studies in Contemporary Jewry Vol. 7* (New York, 1991).

prostitute it to their political agenda. This position is so absurd that it cannot be taken seriously. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the provocative nature of some of the arguments made by critical sociologists may be partly to blame for the degeneration of the debate to this level.

It has certainly been necessary, and important, to uncompromisingly expose the implications of the functionalist legacy of conservative sociology in Israel. These implications are well known. Functionalism privileges questions having to do with order rather than disorder; in focusing on consensus and integration, it has camouflaged marginality, inequality and repression; and the functionalists' view of history, impregnated with a massive dose of voluntarism, has had the effect of elevating the self-serving discourse of the founding fathers to the status of scientific truth. This does not mean that the functionalist paradigm is useless or illegitimate. The question is whether the central puzzles of Israeli society (and prior to that, Jewish society in Palestine) constitute a favorable "home domain" for this type of theory.<sup>7</sup> Given that we are dealing with a context shot through with inequality and conflict, functionalism is on the face of it an odd paradigmatic choice for Israeli sociology. Why, then, did Eisenstadt and his associates embrace this paradigm?

In a pioneering attempt to date to confront this question seriously in the framework of the sociology of knowledge, Uri Ram has argued that the determining factor was the *political context* in which the first generation of Israeli sociologists operated (although additional roles were played by prevailing theoretical trends at the formative stage of their careers, and by the hierarchical and monopolistic organization of academic sociology in Israel).<sup>8</sup> However, in the abridged version of his work that Ram prepared for Hebrew-speaking audiences,<sup>9</sup> on which Lissak relies, an additional argument is made which effectively charges conservative

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<sup>6</sup> Both Lissak (this issue, note 104) and Sternhell (*Nation-Building or Social Reform?*, note 3, p. 444) are kind enough to favorably mention my own work but do not address its analytical or empirical claims, which are quite different from their own.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Robert Alford and Roger Friedland, *Powers of Theory: Capitalism, The State, and Democracy* (Cambridge, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Ram, *The Changing Agenda of Israeli Sociology*.

<sup>9</sup> Uri Ram, "Society and the Science of Society: Establishment Sociology and Critical Sociology in Israel" (in Hebrew), pp. 7-39 in Uri Ram (ed.), *Israeli Society: Critical Perspectives* (Tel Aviv, 1993).

sociologists with hypocrisy. According to Ram, Eisenstadt and his followers were professed believers in the social-democratic ideology of the labor movement establishment, while their work glossed over class and other inequalities and offered reassuring but false confirmation of the official mythology. Critical sociologists, on the other hand, are presented as being genuinely and uncompromisingly committed to the battle against social injustice. Baruch Kimmerling steers clear of this kind of attempt to judge the contenders by their personal politics, yet his charge that old-guard sociologists were *miguyassim* ("mobilized")—the loyal conscripts of the state—is hardly less provocative, since it was directed against Kimmerling's own mentors and was raised not only in local discourse but also appeared in the leading journal of the discipline.<sup>10</sup>

The judgmental and personal overtones of such commentary should have been avoided—not because sociology is an apolitical calling, but because the predictable result of a debate over personal culpability was to divert attention from the merits of the contending analytical arguments.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Lissak responds to Ram's critique by pointing out that he and his intellectual cohort, far from exhibiting unflinching compliance with the Mapai elite, sometimes questioned its good judgment. Lissak's example—the debate over how best to "absorb" the culturally alien Mizrahi immigrations—demonstrates only too well the difference between criticism and critique; between an argument over means, conducted within the discourse of the powerful and privileged, and the untried alternative of disputing their very definition of the problem.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kimmerling, "Sociology, Ideology, and Nation-Building. See also Baruch Kimmerling, "Al Da'at Hamakom: On Social History and Self-Mobilized Anthropology in Israel" (in Hebrew), *Alpayim*, (No. 6, 1992), 57-68; and "Academic History Caught in the Cross-Fire: The Case of Israeli-Jewish Historiography," *History and Memory*, 7 (Spring/Summer 1995), 41-54.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in a debate with Zeev Sternhell, Uri Ram and Lev Grinberg at the annual conference of the Israeli Sociological association in February 1996, Lissak stated several times, with anger as well as irony, that if what his critics say is true then he, Moshe Lissak, is the victim of colossal conspiracy (*knuniya*) and deceit (*hona'a*) and even worse, is himself a "militarist", a "colonialist" and a "racist".

<sup>12</sup> Still apparently untouched by the debate triggered by Deborah Bernstein and Shlomo Swirski long ago, Lissak (this issue, H-11) continues to insist that researchers of the period were quite right to insist that the newcomers would have to adapt themselves to "modern" Israeli society. See Deborah Bernstein, "Immigrants and Society - A Critical View of the Dominant School of Israeli Sociology," *British Journal of Sociology*, 31 (June 1980), 246-64; Deborah Bernstein and Shlomo Swirski, "The Rapid Economic Development of Israel and the Emergence of the Ethnic Division of Labour," *British Journal of*

Just as intentionality is of limited usefulness in demystifying the core puzzles of Israeli society, I believe it is also unhelpful for explaining the equally over-determined scholarly conservatism that reigned during the first two or three decades of Israel's existence. Precisely because radical challenges of this kind were so rare in Israeli scholarly circles until the late 1970s, it makes little sense to explain them in terms of moral impropriety. On the other hand, the theoretical arrow in Ram's bow is very well aimed. It was indeed sea changes in the political context—the Yom Kippur War and the political upheaval of 1977—that unleashed the potential for critical sociology in Israel. As always in such circumstances, those who resisted this radicalizing potential were able to mount their defense in the "neutral" terms of scientific propriety, while the challengers could easily be besmirched as "political". This is not at all to deny that critical sociologists in Israel have a political agenda. My point is, rather, that I agree with Ram that defense of the sociological status quo is equally political. It only appears not to be so because what Kimmerling calls the "framework decisions" of conservative scholars coincide with the hegemonic image of society that most people regard as self-evident.

Unlike Ram, Lissak offers no sociological insight into the emergence of the debate between conservative and critical approaches to Israeli society. He makes no attempt to address the context which gave rise to critical sociology in Israel, just as he refuses to concede the extent to which his own brand of sociology is the product of its place and time. Instead, Lissak limits himself to the argument that since the debate is not between adherents to competing grand theories, it must logically be about methodology. On this basis, he tries to instigate a veritable moral panic by charging the critical school with vulgar post-modern tendencies that place the entire scientific enterprise at risk. If this were the case, one would be hard put to explain why not a single one of the critical sociologists surveyed in Ram's *The Changing Agenda of Israeli Sociology* has either expressly or by implication taken a post-modern position; or why every

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*Sociology*, 33 (March 1982), 64-85. But the crux of the critique originally articulated in the radical journal *Machbarot* was that "having to adapt to modern Israel" hid from view the true nature of the processes involved: not just cynical manipulation of the Mizrachim for political purposes (which Lissak has long recognized), but deep conflicts of interest between olim and vatikim, the privileged power position of the latter in the working out of these conflicts, and the role of the Oriental immigrants in the dirty work of constructing a modern economy in Israel for the benefit of its "state-made" capitalists and salariat.

one of them—Ram included—has based their work on traditional scientific practices of analytical reasoning and the marshaling of empirical evidence.<sup>13</sup> As others have pointed out, the real terms of the debate are located elsewhere: in how scholars define the boundaries of "Israeli society", and in the theoretical and comparative reference-points which they see as relevant to the Israeli case. These issues are not ignored by Lissak, and I shall come back to them in a moment.

While critical writers do respect the rules of logic and evidence, their research questions and choice of theories—like those of any scholar—are filtered by political convictions. In a transparent attempt to delegitimize the critical school, Lissak and other "critics of the critics" have portrayed these convictions as fervently anti-Zionist.<sup>14</sup> A moment's consideration of the *dramatis personae* involved would make it clear to any insider that this is not in fact the case. The common denominator of the members of the critical community is not rejection of Zionist premises (some do, others don't). Instead, it can best be described as what I referred to in my own case as the "disappointment" that ensued when myths were shattered.<sup>15</sup>

Individual critics have drawn different conclusions from such contradictions, but two elements unite them all. The first is their tendency to pick fights with researchers whose agenda for sociology in Israel left the myths intact! The second, and more important, is their assumption that *the contemporary ills of Israeli society can be traced to back to the founding era*. This view is the mirror image of that projected in Lissak's work, which has dwelt mostly on the heroic aspects of the Yishuv and attributes later "troubles in utopia" to what economists would call

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<sup>13</sup> The critical scholars whose work is surveyed in Ram's volume include Yonathan Shapiro, Sammy Smooha, Henry Rosenfeld, Shulamith Carmi, Shlomo Swirski, Deborah Bernstein, Gershon Shafir and Baruch Kimmerling.

<sup>14</sup> For a less muted version of Lissak's anti-Zionist charge, see Yisrael Landers, "On the Sin That Was Committed in the Establishment of the State" (in Hebrew), *Davar Hashavua*, April 8 1994, 8, 10, 27. My discussion of this accusation should not be construed as an attempt at moral defense; I have no intention of playing this game by McCarthyist rules. However, if the political agenda of critical scholars is to be clarified then the issue of anti-Zionism must be addressed, but in general and not personal terms.

<sup>15</sup> See the Preface to Michael Shalev, *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel* (Oxford, 1992). An even more explicit articulation of the *angst* of the critics was offered by Hebrew University anthropologist Dan Rabinowitz in a public debate with Lissak in the fall of 1994. Rabinowitz attributed his own radicalization to the realization, as an adult, that the educators and authority figures responsible for his socialization had distorted and lied about the essential features of Israeli society and its history.

"exogenous shocks" in the period since 1948: the hostile actions of Arab states, the mass Oriental immigration, and the Pandora's Box opened up by the results of the June 1967 war.<sup>16</sup> These differences in perspective are hardly accidental. In most cases, conservative and critical scholars are members of two different "sociological generations": *dor tashach*, the generation which grew to maturity when the state was established, versus those like myself who have no personal memories of the heroic period, and for whom Israel has always been a regional power with far greater strength than the competing claimants to this land.

## II

Lissak's constructive answer to the critics is his four-factor scheme for interpreting the Yishuv, a scheme which accepts in principle the necessity of broadening the boundaries of the analysis to include the "Arab world", the British mandate and global influences, as well as the characteristics of Jewish immigrants. All these factors have their place, according to Lissak, and assigning weights to them is essentially an empirical matter. But such an exercise is crucially dependent on the nature of the research question. It is abundantly clear from his article that what interests Lissak is the socially constructed experience of the Yishuv, *its* definition of collective identity and solidarity. Any other definition would involve pandering to "the dreams of those who are *alien* to Israeli society".<sup>17</sup>

At one point Lissak actually concedes that an objective "colonial situation" might have existed in Palestine that contradicted the self-image of the Yishuv. But he hastens to add that it would be wrong to understand the behavior of the Jewish settlers in colonial terms, as they had "unique motives" for coming to Palestine and never saw themselves as "ordinary colonists".<sup>18</sup> If Labor Zionism did not intend to wipe out or throw out the natives, and if it had no desire to exploit them economically, then according to Lissak there is no basis for comparison to other

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<sup>16</sup> Dan Horowitz, and Moshe Lissak, *Origins of the Israeli Polity: Palestine under the Mandate* (Chicago and London, 1978); Dan Horowitz, and Moshe Lissak, *Trouble in Utopia: The Overburdened Polity of Israel* (New York, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Lissak, this issue, E-48; emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup> Lissak, this issue, H-24,25.



colonization movements, *even if Jewish settlement in Palestine is structurally similar to colonialism or one of its forms*.<sup>19</sup> One would be hard-put to find a more blatant instance than this of ideological blinkers closing off intellectual curiosity!<sup>20</sup> Instead of focusing on the actions of the settlers and comparing them to other settler societies, Lissak resorts to well-worn rhetoric to demonstrate the purity of Zionist intentions. Obsessed with “colonialism” as an epithet, he is simply unable to conceive of “colonization” as a theoretical concept and an empirical variable.<sup>21</sup> In a transparent appeal to political correctness, Lissak singles out historian Benny Morris from the rest of what he refers to as the critical “gang” (*chavura*), because Morris is said to have rejected the colonial metaphor and recognized Zionism as “a national liberation movement that is positive, legitimate and unique”.<sup>22</sup>

Rather than trying to discredit Shafir's argument by offering an alternative to the colonization model that would better explain the empirical puzzles that he posed, Lissak completely ignores the central question raised in Shafir's article: how are we to understand Israel's creeping annexation of the territories occupied in 1967? For Lissak, the only possible answer to this question would have to be that after 1967 the old (good) Zionist intentions of the labor movement were superseded by the new (bad) Zionist intentions of the Likud and Gush Emunim. For obvious reasons, this is a problematic argument: why was it that elements inside

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<sup>19</sup> Lissak, this issue, H-27.

<sup>20</sup> The political character of Lissak's response to the analytical use of uncomplimentary “foreign” models is evident not only in relation to the colonial model. He also rails against the use of theories and comparative models of militarism for analyzing the Israeli case, ignoring the fact that Kimmerling for example went to great lengths to specify the similarities and differences between militarism in Israel and elsewhere. See B. Kimmerling, “Patterns of Militarism in Israel,” *Archives Europeennes De Sociologie*, 34 (1993), 196-223. Apparently, in reference to the Palmach it is permissible to speak of an “offensive ethos” (Anita Shapira's homegrown terminology) but not of “militarism” (Lissak, this issue, H-30).

<sup>21</sup> In seeming contrast to Lissak, Shmuel Eisenstadt's recent work grasps the bull by the horns and explicitly addresses the Israeli case through a comparative analysis of settler societies. See S. N. Eisenstadt, “The Transformation of Israeli Society: The Challenges of Modernization and Pluralism” (Willem Drees Lecture of 1994), unpublished manuscript, Jerusalem, 1994. However, Eisenstadt carefully avoids the unsavory implications of adopting the settler-society model. He invents a new terminology (“colonizatory societies”) that signifies his distance from “colonialism”, and he ignores the existing comparative literature on colonization and its application to Israel by Kimmerling and Shafir. Eisenstadt argues that the most comparable settler society to Israel is the United States, and in support of this remarkable claim he contends that both countries were founded by revolutionary ideologues and both share a commitment to “constitutional democracy”. When he turns to the central issue of his paper—contemporary social change in Israel—Eisenstadt ignores these comparative and theoretical foundations almost completely, an apparent indication of their true irrelevance to his project.

<sup>22</sup> Lissak, this issue, H-4, 3

the labor movement were among the first to demand a “Greater Israel”, and why did post-1967 Labor governments make decisions or non-decisions that instigated the colonization process and the economic ties that institutionalized the occupation? In contrast, in a fine illustration of the power of parsimonious theories and pointed comparisons, Shafir demonstrates precisely how the “normal” conditions of Zionist colonization after 1967, compared with the unique constraints under which it labored before 1948, can explain *both* the rise of “new Zionist” ideology and Israel’s engagement in territorial expansion.

True to his preference for an ideology-centered analysis of the cardinal features of the Yishuv, Lissak gives very little credence to the political-economy interpretation of labor movement ideology which is developed in Shafir’s work on the second aliya and my own study of the Histadrut between 1920 and 1985. However, at one point Lissak does acknowledge that the economic interest of Jewish workers in neutralizing the competitive advantage of Arab workers in the labor market was “among the reasons” why the labor movement opted for a strategy of Jewish exclusivism.<sup>23</sup> If even this modest assessment is true, then it constitutes a significant caveat to his insistence on the power and autonomy of intentionality in the formation of Israeli society. But there the matter of the economic relations between Arabs and Jews rests, only to be taken up again in the context that really interests Lissak: the defense of Zionism against the charge of colonialism. Here, finally, some facts are laid on the table. But alas, even if these facts are accurate (and according to Shafir [this issue] they are not), they miss the point. The political-economy thesis argues that the labor market dilemma encountered by the second aliya is what drove its leaders to found labor parties and institutions, develop an ideology of Jewish separatism and form an alliance with the world Zionist movement, and that in turn, the combined effects of these innovations can explain the labor movement’s political hegemony, its militant nationalism vis-à-vis the Palestinians, and yet its readiness for territorial compromise. Even if Lissak was correct to claim that as time passed the Jews of the Yishuv became less

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<sup>23</sup> Lissak, this issue, H-26.

exposed to Arab competition, that would hardly settle the issue of the significance of the labor market arena for the labor movement's fateful early innovations.

According to Lissak critical scholars are not only oblivious to the facts, they offer no theoretical alternative to the functionalism of conservative sociology—or else have favored theories focused on a limited number of explanatory variables, a practice that he describes as "reductionism".<sup>24</sup> An example from my own work will perhaps serve to demonstrate both the true nature of the alternative offered by political economy and the inadequacy of Lissak's response. In comparing labor relations in the Yishuv to contemporaneous developments in Europe, I was struck by the repeated failure of the leaders of the Yishuv to engineer a corporatist "peace agreement" between the Histadrut and Jewish employers.<sup>25</sup> Combining archival and secondary data with theories of labor, capital and the state, I concluded that the labor movement's organizational and political strength in the Yishuv concealed its comparative weakness in the market arena. The reasons for this weakness were traced to the split labor market, structural divisions within the capitalist class, the policies of the Mandatory government, and the limited state capacities of Jewish self-governing institutions. I concurred with Horowitz and Lissak's seminal argument that the Jewish political center in the Yishuv sought to attain "authority without sovereignty", but argued that they had exaggerated the success of this endeavor. I continued,

*This difference in judgment, moreover, goes together with an important divergence in analytical focus... [Horowitz and Lissak's] analysis and others like it overestimate the roles of ideology and voluntaristic political action as sources of cleavage and integration in Yishuv society... Rather than providing a demonstration of political culture, ideology, and political resource-allocation supplanting market forces, the chequered history of corporatism in the Yishuv therefore suggests the very opposite... Only sovereignty and its consequences were capable of fundamentally restructuring this balance of forces in the political economy...<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> Lissak, this issue, E-44.

<sup>25</sup> Shalev, *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel*, Chapter 4

<sup>26</sup> Shalev, *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel*, 175-6.

It is disappointing indeed that today, almost five years since the publication of this explicit challenge to Horowitz and Lissak's choice of *problemstellung*, theoretical framework and substantive conclusions, it remains unanswered.

### III

Zeev Sternhell's important new book offers a radical challenge to the conservative perspective on the legacy of the Zionist labor movement. His principal claim is a very simple one: the reason for the poverty of the labor movement's legacy from a socialist perspective is that from the outset the movement's commitment to socialism was weak and tangential to its primary goals, which were nationalistic in nature. In fact, many of the founding fathers of the second aliya were anti-socialist, while others (like Ben-Gurion) were socialist in name only. They came from a milieu in which the most influential world-view was not humane and universalistic (liberal or socialist), but the xenophobic, angry, and greedy versions of "organic" nationalism. The moment that *realpolitik* forced the founders to confront contradictions between their socialist and nationalist aspirations, for all practical purposes they abandoned their yearning for social justice and social change. Socialism did, however, prove politically useful to the labor movement elite, as a "mobilizing myth and sometimes a convenient alibi".<sup>27</sup>

Sternhell backs up these claims with analysis of the labor movement's key thinkers and canonical texts, and case studies of the birth and death of some of its most important institutions and reform initiatives. He spares no myths. Sternhell asserts that the phenomenon of a nation in search of a state was actually not uncommon in Europe at the time of Zionism's birth, and even the conscious revival of ethnic languages was unexceptional. He attacks the received view that the labor movement's founders were original thinkers obsessively ideological, accusing them of a lack of creativity and disrespect for intellectuals. The founders' commitment to egalitarianism was at best a cultural affectation, at worst a lie that concealed glaring disparities of an evolving capitalist economy. In the hands of the yishuv labor movement, socialism was a cynically-exploited rallying cry bearing little resemblance to either

the Marxist or social-democratic varieties. Indeed, Sternhell's most original and provocative conclusion is that the closest European analog to labor Zionism, and a direct influence upon it, was national socialism. The multi-ethnic empires to the East of the Rhine were the cradle of national socialist ideology, which—just like Zionist “constructivism”—argued that class cleavages should be subordinated to the national interest; that the nation had a responsibility to act justly towards its most productive element, the working class; and that the national interest was threatened by parasites and dissenters from within and aliens beyond.

With the exception of this comparative dimension, Sternhell's arguments all have clear antecedents in the existing literature.

1. Mapam activists and scholars have long contended that Ben-Gurion and the Mapai mainstream were the enemies, rather than the advocates, of labor Zionism's socialist aspirations. The new element in Sternhell's version of this argument is that he believes Ben-Gurion and Co. had already scuttled the prospects for socialism by the twenties, whereas writers like Henry Rosenfeld and Gadi Yatziv insist that the left-wing Zionist alternative was eliminated only after statehood, in the era of *mamlachtiyut*.<sup>28</sup>
2. For years Yonathan Shapiro has been vigorously debunking the myth that idealism was the motive force driving the labor movement's historic creativity and hegemony. Shapiro brought to the fore the leaders' cynical drive to accumulate power, and their followers' taste for urban life and comfortable white-collar employment.<sup>29</sup>
3. It has always been the position of the radical left that the Zionist labor movement's socialist pretensions were a facade, nothing but a means to achieve its true nationalist ends. These were the grounds on which the Communists dissented from the Histadrut community after

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<sup>27</sup> Sternhell, *Nation-Building or Social Reform?*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Rosenfeld and Shulamit Carmi, “The Privatization of Public Means, the State-Made Middle Class, and the Realization of Family Value in Israel,” pp. 131-59 in J. G. Peristiany (ed.), *Kinship and Modernization in Mediterranean Society* (Rome, 1976).; Gadi Yatziv, *The Class Basis of Party Affiliation - The Israeli Case* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1979).

<sup>29</sup> Yonathan Shapiro, *Achdut Ha'avoda Ha'istorit* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv, 1975); *Democracy in Israel* (in Hebrew) (Ramat Gan, 1977); *An Elite Without Successors: Generations of Political Leaders in Israel* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv, 1984).

World War One, and they were later revived by the New Left.<sup>30</sup> The respectability of the “socialism-as-instrument” argument has meanwhile grown to the point that several years before Sternhell, Anita Shapira made it the cornerstone of her summary view of Labor Zionism.<sup>31</sup>

Almost twenty years ago Shlomo Swirski pointed to limitations that the revisionist literature on the labor movement shared with its predecessors. In effect, the critical issue in interpreting the Yishuv was not whether myths could be unveiled, but how to *explain* the gap between principle and practice. Theories of colonization and political economy offer a quite different perspective from the voluntarism embedded in Sternhell’s critique of Zionist labor. Sternhell accuses the founding fathers of having made a “conscious ideological choice” (*hachra’a idilogit muda’at*) to “sacrifice socialism on the altar of nationalism”<sup>32</sup>—and posits that having made this choice, they then allowed themselves to be “swept away” ever further to the right (*sachaf yemina*). It follows that in Sternhell’s view, political history is made on the basis of programmatic choices, and the task of critical research is to expose the true content of these choices. In contrast, critics like myself do not deny that ideological preferences may be historically consequential; indeed, the decision of the early Jewish immigrants to choose Palestine over alternative destinations is a fine example. Yet, to take this example further, while ideology played a crucial role in bringing the *chalutzim* to late Ottoman Palestine and committing them to Jewish independence, it is of little help in explaining the distinctive features of the Jewish settler society that developed there. One must look to the context and consequences of Jewish colonization in order to understand

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Arie Bober, *The Other Israel: The Radical Case Against Zionism* (Garden City NY, 1972); Maxime Rodinson, *Israel, A Colonial Settler State?* (Trans. from the French by David Thorstad) (New York, 1973); and the London-based journal *Khamsin*.

<sup>31</sup> Anita Shapira, “Socialist Means and Nationalist Aims,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 38 (1986), 14-27; available in Hebrew as the final chapter of Shapira’s book *Ha’halicha al kav ha’ofek* (Tel Aviv, 1993). It is another measure of the impact of political context on scholarly discourse that some ten years ago, when I first heard the “socialism as an instrument of Zionism” thesis in the halls of academe, it was voiced by two radicals (the late Avraham Zloczower and Avishai Ehrlich) and was severely criticized by senior members of the Hebrew University’s Department of Sociology with the help of a specially-invited guest, the historian Yisrael Kollat. The fact that Shapira is firmly located on the side of the conservative opposition in the debate with Sternhell and other revisionists, despite the similarity in their fundamental thesis, is also an indication of the essentially political character of the debate. The nub of the dispute is that unlike the critics, Shapira sees the founding fathers’ instrumental use of socialism as a sign of their imagination and vitality, not as hypocrisy and betrayal.

<sup>32</sup> Sternhell, *Nation-Building or Social Reform?*, 16, 31.

the processes of trial and error, of action and reaction, of construction and reconstruction of perceived reality which shaped the labor Zionist program.

At bottom, the cooperation that Jewish organized labor sought with the Jewish bourgeoisie in the world Zionist movement and inside Palestine was an expression of self-interest. The worker-settlers acted under circumstances “not of their own choosing” which allowed very few degrees of freedom for the operation of value-based choice.<sup>33</sup> Prior to Israeli sovereignty, access to both land and making a living could be gained only through the market. Yet the colonists of the second aliya lacked either the financial means to participate as purchasers in the land market, or the advantages enjoyed by indigenous workers in competing for jobs in the labor market.<sup>34</sup> The *ikarim* (independent farmers) of the first aliya had previously gained a foothold in Palestine using quite different means—ownership of land (by purchase or as a gift) and its exploitation by a form of agriculture that depended heavily on seasonal employment of cheap “native” labor. The political economy of the *moshava* form of Jewish settlement meant that Arab/Jewish relations were based on interdependence that could only be sustained under conditions of peaceful coexistence.

The settlers of the second aliya, irrespective of their predispositions, had neither the independent means nor the sponsors to emulate the *moshava* model. Collective action proved essential to their survival, both as a means for cost-cutting and risk-sharing, and as a vehicle for offering political rewards and sanctions to the only benefactors capable of relieving their distress: the farmers (their potential employers) or the newly active World Zionist Organization (their potential sponsors). In both cases, Jewish separatism was indispensable. The *ikarim* could not be forced to employ Jews at a financial loss unless their access to Arab labor was cut

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<sup>33</sup> The most compelling evidence for this is the abandonment of Palestine by most of the second aliya, and the repeated failure of radical left initiatives in the Yishuv. The latter foundered not only because the radicals were repressed, coopted and delegitimized (which they were), but also because their program appeared irrelevant to the existential concerns of propertyless Jewish settlers in Palestine. See Michael Shalev, “The Political Economy of Labor Party Dominance and Decline in Israel,” pp. 83-127 in T. J. Pempel (ed.), *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes* (Ithaca, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> The interpretation offered here is developed in much greater detail in Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 1882-1914* (Cambridge, 1989); Lev Luis Grinberg, *Split Corporatism in Israel* (Albany NY, 1991); and Shalev, *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel*.

off, by drawing a rigid national boundary around Jewish workplaces and by capitalizing on the fear and enmity ready to erupt between the indigenous Arab population and the Jewish settlers. Hence, *avoda ivrit* (the demand that Jewish employers hire only Jewish workers) was most successful in the self-contained Tel Aviv community, and only became widespread in agricultural wage labor as a result of the 1936 Arab revolt and—no less importantly—the world war.

It was the convergent interests of the chalutzim and the Zionist movement that had the deepest impact on the labor movement's strategy. Labor Zionism developed in Palestine as *an alliance between a workers' movement without work and a settlement movement without settlers*. This alliance moved the political economy of Jewish penetration onto a very different footing from that of the first aliya: by virtue of the Zionist subsidies channeled through institutions later consolidated into the Histadrut, Jewish workers could ameliorate and even bypass unfavorable land and labor markets. Subsidized collectivism was the key operating principle, whether on the kibbutz/moshav, or (for most) in cities and villages where workers' kitchens, housing and health clinics, a workers' bank that bought tents and tools for Jewish road-building gangs, and workers' bureaucracies that offered sinecures to thousands all depended on the funds and the political clout of organized Zionism.

Concentrated settlement in autonomous Jewish enclaves satisfied the core interests of both the labor and the Zionist movements by offering practical answers to the barriers to Jewish colonization of Palestine—the Arabs' demographic majority, the Jews' lack of direct control over state power and resources, the high cost of land and the unfavorability of the labor market. It is these circumstances, and the response to them, which explain the most fateful and important ideological choice of the labor movement's founding fathers: their commitment to *separatism* as the guiding principle simultaneously of the economic and the national life of the Yishuv. It is no accident that the labor movement's demand for *avoda ivrit* and Jewish economic autonomy went hand in hand with its willing acceptance of responsibility for the tasks of self-defense, settlement of strategic but unprofitable territory, and the creation of a



demographically homogenous but territorially limited Jewish state. In short, as Shafir has stressed, the settlement models of the first and second aliyot were predicated on indispensable but contrasting connections between political economy and nation and state-building practices. The historically crucial crossroads in the Yishuv's evolution were reached not when the socialist and nationalist impulses of the second aliya competed for priority but when the second aliya, unable to emulate the first aliya's model of colonization, threw in its lot with organized Zionism and embraced the principle of national exclusivism.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV

At times Sternhell moves surprisingly close to a political-economy interpretation. For instance, in discussing the kibbutzim he argues that it is not surprising that they turned out to be more of a figleaf for Israeli capitalism than an alternative to it, given the origins of the kibbutz in the overlapping interests of the Zionist movement and the labor pioneers. It was the inability or unwillingness of the private farmers in the moshavot to employ Jewish workers that led the latter to cooperate with the WZO and take advantage of its "national" land and capital.<sup>36</sup> At one point in the introduction to his book Sternhell goes even further, arguing more generally that any attempt to realize the founding fathers' socialist goals in Palestine—a "third world" backwater pregnant with bitter confrontation between two national movements—was bound to fail.<sup>37</sup> This invitation to a "realist" analysis, had Sternhell taken it up, would surely have led him along the very same path trodden by Kimmerling, Shafir and others who have insisted that the conditions under which Jewish colonization of Palestine took place are the key to both the conceptions and the practices of labor Zionism.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Unlike the tension between Zionist and socialist principles, the conflict between strained separatism and interdependent coexistence was a clash between already existing practices. Note that the "interdependent coexistence" strategy which I have identified with the *ikarim* of the First Aliya was also supported by the owners of the Yishuv's few large industrial enterprises, who employed substantial numbers of Arab laborers. See Simha Flapan, *Zionism and the Palestinians* (London, 1979), 227-9.

<sup>36</sup> Sternhell, *Nation-Building or Social Reform?*, 46

<sup>37</sup> Sternhell, *Nation-Building or Social Reform?*, 29

<sup>38</sup> Kimmerling's writings are conspicuously absent from Sternhell's bibliography. My own work and that of Shafir are cited as an "important corrective", but only in a footnote that appears 150 pages after our

However, a realist interpretation would be incompatible with Sternhell's main causal assumption that ideologies make history and that they are the product of "conscious choice". It is also incompatible with his explanation of why the labor movement's founders chose nationalism over socialism as their master program. For Sternhell, this was a capitulation explicable by the combined effects of the national-socialist world view that predated the founders' arrival in Palestine, and the opportunity they found there to accumulate power by allying with middle class elements in a tradeoff of socialism for nationalism.<sup>39</sup> But despite the importance of what I have conceptualized as "political exchange" between the labor movement and the political center, the alliance between Zionism and organized labor is attributable to much more than elite opportunism. The existential dilemmas of rank and file Jewish workers, settlers with limited access to land and employment, and their resultant conflicts with the Arab population of Palestine, are the deeper causes of the triumph of constructivism.

Ironically enough, therefore, Sternhell's critique of the labor movement, while incomparably sharper than any previously penned by a scholar of such standing, is posed in precisely the same terms as the conventional view which it attacks: the primacy of ideology and the Great Men responsible for its formulation. Indeed, whereas traditional historians like Gorni argue that "pragmatism" obliged the founders to dispense with some of their national aspirations and a great deal of their socialist ones,<sup>40</sup> Sternhell's analysis implies that their choices were actually far more open, that things could have been otherwise had Berl and Ben-Gurion been truer idealists. In terms of the dispute between critical and conservative perspectives on the legacy of the Yishuv, Sternhell's contribution must therefore be deemed contradictory. On the one hand, his book exemplifies several of the most prominent attributes of the critical school: rather than extolling the founding fathers Sternhell questions the authenticity of their self-image and

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arguments surface in the Introduction. See Sternhell, *Nation-Building or Social Reform?*, note 31 on p. 180, the text of which appears on p. 438.

<sup>39</sup> See especially Sternhell, *Nation-Building or Social Reform?*, 402. The thesis that the labor leaders' alliance with middle-class elements in the Zionist movement and the Yishuv was based on their yearning for power and accorded with the political culture they internalized before immigrating to Palestine is identical to the central argument made by Yonathan Shapiro twenty years ago in his book *Achdut Ha'avoda Ha'istorit* (Am Oved, 1975); in English, *The Formative Years of the Israeli Labour Party* (London and Beverly Hills, 1976).

exposes their negative legacies; rather than implying that the outcome of Zionist history was predetermined he seeks to show why a different and better road was not taken; and rather than taking comfort in the alleged uniqueness of Labor Zionism and analyzing its development in insular terms, he boldly seeks to compare it with a precedent that is enlightening but unflattering.

Yet in other respects, including his treatment of the intentions of Great Men as the motor of history, Sternhell's approach is a faithful replica of the conservative school. Despite passing references to the role of material interests, Sternhell fails to flesh out their substance and they are treated as a background factor with no theoretical standing. And despite references to the national conflict, he seeks answers to the puzzles of Israeli history by probing the internals of Jewish society, not relations between Arabs and Jews. In this, Sternhell reproduces the very same understanding of the socialist element in Labor Zionism which has always been dear to its mainstream: not the ideal of proletarian solidarity across national boundaries, but the aspiration for equality *among Jews*. This is indeed ironic, since the power of Sternhell's most innovative claim—the influence of European national socialism on Labor Zionism—is precisely in shedding light on the origins of national exclusivism, the labor movement's most flagrant violation of socialist principle.

## V

Lissak has accused critical sociologists of crassly using social science as a Trojan Horse in their quest to delegitimize Zionism. I find this charge inaccurate and counterproductive.

Commitment, relativism and truthfulness coexist in the social sciences under a variety of formulas; they are not competing ideals. Instead of wasting time our time on barren arguments about the philosophy of science or the personal virtue of scholars, the protagonists should be doing sociology, trying to clarify the links between their biographies, the historical context in which they work, and their scholarly production. Until now, they have either denied the existence of such connections (as Lissak essentially does), or, in the case of critical scholars,

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph Gorni, *Achdut Avoda 1919-1930* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1973).

have paid insufficient attention to their own motives and milieu. Lissak may genuinely aspire to a value-free social science but this is not the basis for his defense of the conservative view of Israeli society, which depends heavily on an appeal to political correctness.

Interpretations of Israeli society (or any society) are inherently political, but that should not blind us to the need to justify and debate competing perspectives on theoretical and empirical grounds. In this respect, my most important claim is that the argument between Lissak and Sternhell is a debate that, however intense, takes place within the parameters of the traditional theoretical consensus. Both agree that the intentions of the founding fathers were the motor of social and political development in the Yishuv and the source of its legacy for later Israeli society, and the boundaries which both of them assume cannot recognize the crucial role of relations between Arabs and Jews in the formation of Jewish society. Their respective positions are but the most recent manifestation of a split which I characterized in my book as pitting the "quasi-official view" against a "debunking revisionism".<sup>41</sup> Above all, both views pay inadequate attention to the instrumental origins—both material and political—of the labor movement's internalization of Zionist priorities. The theoretical challenge posed by a political-economy analysis to traditional Israeli scholarship—a challenge which neither Lissak nor Sternhell have taken up—is summed up by one of my principal conclusions.

*The Zionism in 'labour Zionism' cannot be separated from the pressing need of the original propertyless settlers to combat their economic vulnerability and, at a subsequent stage, from the labour movement's desire to advance its organizational and political interests. The ideology which the pioneers brought with them is therefore most appropriately viewed as a repertoire which predisposed rather than predetermined action.*<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Shalev, *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel*, 67.

<sup>42</sup> Shalev, *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel*, 68.