



**Orit Rozin.** *The Rise of the Individual in 1950s Israel: A Challenge to Collectivism.* Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011. xxi + 254 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-892-4; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61168-081-2; ISBN 978-1-61168-082-9.

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## Revisiting Early Israeli Collectivism in the Age of Privatization

“A father, a mother, relatives and family, is all good and fine as long as it doesn’t get in the way,” said Uri Kahana impatiently, shortly before his heroic death in a Palmach military operation. While hurrying back to his waiting comrades, with these words he cut short a conversation with his love and future mother of his son. She, a new immigrant from “there,” had to learn that “here” family and personal considerations are always subsidiary to the national ones, embodied by the military operation in which Uri would lose his life that fateful night. In what became his last words to her, he scolded: “Thirty men are waiting from me in the Wadi, and they are more important than you and me both. Goodbye!” [1] This laconic quote from the iconic *sabra* in Moshe Shamir’s *He Walked through the Fields* summarized early Israeli collectivism, or at least its myth. And it is precisely this collectivist ethos, and the manner in which it was replaced by a more individualist one, that stands at the heart of this new and exciting book by Orit Rozin of Tel Aviv University.

The transition from Zionist Yishuv to a Jewish state, Rozin shows, was also a shift from voluntary collectivism (embodied by the *halutz* [the pioneer]) to centralized collectivism (“personified by David Ben Gurion,” p. xvi). This later type of collectivism, however, was collectivism from above, made possible by the establishment of the state and arguably rendered necessary by the immense challenges of mass immigration. Israel’s austerity program, for example, though intended to achieve concrete, practical economic goals rather than ideological ones,

could be seen by the uncritical eye as a natural continuation of the Yishuv’s collectivist ethos, especially due to what Israelis initially made of it once it was put into practice: “According to the rhetoric of the political Left and part of the Right, austerity was a way not only of lowering the cost of living but also of constructing the collective identity based on the principle that the strong should sacrifice some of their pleasure to help the weak” (p. 6).

But, as Rozin convincingly shows, this collectivist conceptualization may have manifested a break with more than a continuation of the Yishuv’s collectivism. As a matter of fact—and this is probably the book’s main argument—the seminal moment of the early Israeli “individualization process” was in response to such paternalistic policies: a reaction to this type of state-centralized collectivism in Ben Gurion’s Israel, with its ostensible disregard for the individual Israeli citizen and his or her rights. Increasingly, both ordinary Israeli citizens and the political opposition spoke in defense of individual civil rights of Israelis. Rozin understands this trend as part of Israel’s embrace of Western liberal values (p. 197). Interestingly, however, she does not locate this transformation in the distinctive worldviews and political traditions of the newcomers, but rather she focuses on the changes in the veteran society. And even when examining veteran Israeli society Rozin does not look for these new trends primarily among the “bourgeois” and conservative opposition. Indeed, she stresses that “[t]he most

important of these [trends], the weakening of voluntary collectivism and the strengthening of individualism, took place within the labor movement” (p. 194). Even though the book’s drama is clearly set in early statehood, I wish it made greater effort to locate the discourses of collectivism and of individual rights (and even the discourse of hygiene) also in Jewish history beyond 1950s Israel.

*The Rise of the Individual in 1950s Israel* is a work of a cultural, social, and to an extent, political history, which shines methodologically in its critical discourse analysis. The book is divided into three parts. Part 1, “At Home and on the Street,” focuses on the dilemma of urban Israeli housewives, who (whether they worked or not) had to manage a household under the radically limited, often impossible conditions of the austerity program. They, more than other members of the Israeli family, had to decide whether or not to break the law, and the collectivist imperative, and buy goods on the black market. Eventually they were also the ones to organize—primarily in the Israeli Women’s Consumer Protection Organization—and to speak out against the policy and practices of austerity. Rozin quotes a state document from the time which stated: “A war is raging between Israel’s mothers and the Minister of Rationing and Supply, and ... it has a profound effect on our economy.... [M]others have made the first breach in rationing’s defensive line” (p. 27). By aptly focusing on the unsung heroes, on these Israeli “desperate housewives,” Rozin expands our understanding not only of the realities of Israel’s austerity policy, but also of the relations between government and public during the period of early statehood.

Part 2, “In the City Square,” explores the cracks in Israel’s collectivist ethos as further manifested in two election campaigns: the municipal elections of 1950 and the second general (Knesset) elections of 1951. Though Mapai’s hegemony was confirmed, these elections—with the remarkable success of the General Zionists, who almost tripled the numbers of seats in parliament and became Israel’s second-largest party—must be understood in the context the opposition’s “well-planned ... campaign, which played off citizens’ anger, frustration, and resentment at the austerity regime” (p. 119). Indeed, in Ben Gurion’s age of *Mamlachtiut* (statism), the General Zionist platform stood out for its foremost commitment to individual civil rights (“We view individual freedom as a fundamental condition for the development and prosperity of nations” [p. 101]). The shift, then, was not only in voting patterns, but in generating “a discourse of rights” which transcended party lines, and as result “Mapai had to change in order to adjust to the harsh state of

the economy, as well as to the demands of ... the middle class” (p. 130). Rozin concludes that “In the face of the difficulties of daily life at the time [Israeli] citizens felt that they were not free to live their lives as they wished. The balance between solidarity with other Jews in Israel ... and the desire to express one’s personal uniqueness was thrown out of kilter when solidarity was both imposed and expressed a hierarchical system in which some were more equal than others” (p. 135).

Collectivism, of course, assumes that all the individual parts belong equally. Hence the book’s third part, “Somewhere in the Transit Camp,” engages the thorny issue of veteran (predominantly Ashkenazi) Israelis’ attitude to the newcomers from the Arab world. This was an attitude, the book suggests, motivated by “duty, not love” (p. 180). This part of the book is about Israeli policy toward, treatment of, and stereotypes about Mizrahi immigrants. But more than that, it is about how all these elements fed one another and the evolution of Israeli discourse concerning Mizrahi Jews. Particularly, she analyzes the discourse of hygiene in Ben Gurion’s Israel, and the excruciatingly graphic and lengthy depictions in the Israeli media of off-putting sights and smells from the immigrant camps. These disturbing mental images, she persuasively demonstrates, did not generate empathy among the veterans for the newcomers and their plight, as much as disgust, and with it, estrangement. In describing the living conditions as subhuman the media made recognizable insinuations about the new arrivals. The newcomers’ parenting in particular raised concern on the part of the Israeli establishment: “Supply and Rationing Minister Dov Yosef ... charged that some immigrants deliberately starved their children” (p. 165), and “given these suspicions, the authorities at the Rosh Ha-Aiyn immigrant camp ... did not give parents their children’s food. Children up to the age of twelve were fed separately” (p. 166).

It may be tempting nowadays to see such allegations merely as a way for Ashkenazi veterans to claim superiority, and for the state to justify even greater interference in the most private areas of the citizen’s life. It is also tempting to put moral blame on the state agencies, and to brush off all dysfunction within the immigrants’ society as merely an outcome of the harsh living conditions. But Rozin does not do this. Her book makes a fascinating, confusing, and occasionally chilling read precisely because—with her painfully critical view of the veterans—she never loses sight of the real issues (such as bigamy and child marriage) in which the state had to interfere, and which indicate a cultural collision that cannot be

explained away by the hardship of migration. Though state agencies were often bigoted and misguided, Rozin reminds us that they were indeed committed to the care and welfare of the new arrivals.

This book also cuts no corners regarding collectivism and “the rise of the individual”: though her study of early Israeli collectivism is revisionist and demystifying, it does not serve a presentist agenda, claiming that no early Israeli collectivism worthy of the name ever existed. As much as it is a book about the rise of the individual in 1950s Israel, it is also a revisionist study of an era commonly remembered (and arguably mystified) by Israelis as extremely collectivist in ethos. The 1950s stand out as a collectivist era in juxtaposition to present-day Israel in the age of privatization. In this regard, and against the backdrop of Israel’s social justice protest, Rozin’s book is extremely timely. The social justice protest began rather abruptly in 2011 in reaction to the growing burden on Israeli lower and middle classes and a widening sense of social injustice. Whereas Rozin’s book describes the cracks in and reaction against Israel’s collectivist ethos in

the 1950s, the protest movement, sixty years later, may very well constitute the back-swing of the pendulum: the cracks in and reaction against Israel’s privatization ethos, articulated in unmistakably collectivist rhetoric.[2] Much like the moment described by Rozin, the shift transcends party lines, and it impossible to state when exactly it came about, and how formative its long-term impact will be. Just like Rozin and her historical protagonists, we may have to wait for a forthcoming election to know.

#### Notes

[1]. The quote is from the 1967 film *He Walked through the Fields*, directed by Yosef Millo. The same notion, though in different words, is conveyed in Moshe Shamir’s novel of the same name, upon which the film is based: *Hu halakh ba-śadot* (Merḥavyah: Sifriyat po’alim, 1947).

[2]. Michael Walzer, “Why the Protests in Israel Are Cause for Hope,” *The New Republic*, August 8, 2011, [http://www.tnr.com/article/world/93318/protests-israel-tel-aviv#.UBN\\_F0ndrkQ.link](http://www.tnr.com/article/world/93318/protests-israel-tel-aviv#.UBN_F0ndrkQ.link).

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