Introduction

Throughout this paper I intend to expand on my Ph.D. dissertation, which has been published by Routledge in the form of a book entitled *Women, Reconciliation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Road Not Yet Taken*. In detail, I look at the heterogeneities mostly related to ethnic, national, gender and class differences existing within Israeli grassroots activism, by tackling the predominant narrative that addresses such a context in terms of a single and homogeneous platform. In this direction, I aim at discussing the role played by women involved in the Israeli peace-oriented movement and in other types of socio-political activism, with a specific focus on those rising to prominence in Summer 2011 characterising what has been defined as the “Tent Protest”, and in Summer 2014 during the Israeli military operation “Protective Edge”. I believe it may be particularly useful in dealing with internal divisions of ethnicity, nationality, and class that have taken place within several women’s and feminist initiatives as well. By recognizing asymmetries of power and privileges among the different components and the backgrounds of the protagonists, I attempt to overcome the one-dimensional agenda promoted mostly by leading Ashkenazi middle class activists.

In pursuing this line of research and using a multidisciplinary approach, I seek to give voice directly to the heterogeneity of women activists who have been involved in the foremost initiatives in the more recent years, by means of gathering activists’ documentation (especially that emerging from conferences, meetings and demonstrations), and conducting open-ended semi-structured interviews, as I started acquiring data in the field (mainly in the cities of Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem) in November and December 2014.
From social mobilizations to anti-occupation struggles: a heterogeneous frame

Following on from the popular uprisings that have taken place in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa in the past few years, Israeli society has also witnessed diverse types of social and political mobilizations. These have in the main taken on two forms: in the Summer of 2011, and again through a minor wave of protests in Summer 2012, when what became known as the “Tent Protest Movement” called specifically for socio-economic rights; and in Summer 2014, when a number of activists and grassroots organizations from the radical left-wing raised their voices against operation “Protective Edge”, the most recent Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip. Although they represented two rather different situations in relation to the contemporary general turmoil in the Middle East region and to the peculiarity of the Israeli state, these protests have been characterized by an increasing public awareness of the need for radical changes at the social, economic and political level, and have included substantial transformations of diverse forms of women’s and feminist activism.

Consistent with the content and objectives of this contribution, my starting point rejects the notion of essentialism and instead attempts to give voice directly to social and political women activists who have been involved in such protests, and are mostly based in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. By bringing to light their diverse backgrounds, perspectives, practices and challenges, experienced mainly at the margins of society, the use of the “intersectionality” approach, both as a political perspective and as a methodology, has led my analysis towards the heterogeneity of such types of activism.

From contrastive perspectives in opposition to the mainstream, I argue that what happened in particular in 2011 and in 2014 has, by means of different and almost opposite approaches, revealed a controversial reality of narrative identities, in which minority communities have continued to be excluded by the hegemonic discourse. The current panorama is the stage for a very fragmented socio-political scene that has arisen among Israeli activists, whilst, at the same time, further asymmetries of power and privileges have also been developing within such mobilizations. Mostly due to the lack of communication and mutual cooperation, along with the disparities existing among the different protagonists, the majority of political and social protests have collapsed without finding a unified approach able to link their theoretical perspectives with the reality in which social, economic and political challenges have taken place. In other words, neither common politics nor common tools have been adopted to address the main challenging issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to the internal situation of the state of Israel.

As for those Israeli political activists who have been involved in groups or parties supporting Left Zionism, also defined in terms of the “peace camp” in which the feminist peace-oriented movement has traditionally assumed a central role, their historic goal has been the struggle to end the military occupation of the Palestinian territories. Although they have tried to connect peace-oriented
paradigms with Israeli public opinion, their political agenda has collapsed in parallel with the demise of the Oslo “peace process” in the beginning of 2000s, creating a vacuum both at the grassroots and political party levels. The subsequent impasse can also be explained by the fact that most of these activists have not taken a clear position towards the meaning of the Zionist project at present, as “the wide support for the Oslo process did not indicate any real change in the hegemonic Zionist consensus, or the approach of Israeli society toward Palestinian rights” (Honig-Parnass 2011: 172). Specifically, they have failed to tackle the main problematic issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict such as the one regarding the Right of Return of Palestinian refugees as a priority step towards a feasible resolution of the conflict. By looking at the Israeli internal discourse, they have not dealt with the removal of socio-economic power asymmetries in order to reach a just state existing for the welfare of all.

On the one hand Ashkenazi middle class feminists have been considered as an integral part of the Zionist political mainstream by radical left-wing and non-Zionist activists, whilst on the other hand they have been accused by Mizrahi feminists of calling for Palestinians’ rights and not for the resolution of Israeli internal problems. Overall, Left Zionism has sought to build up forms of solidarity with and mutual recognition towards the Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but has not admitted the existence of increasing power asymmetry between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim inside the state of Israel. This position has represented one of the most demanding questions to be discussed not only among Zionist leftists, but also in relation to the wide-range of political identities and practices adopted in new ways of social and political mobilization.

As stressed both at the academic level and throughout grassroots protests, the current impasse has produced an urgent need to rethink and redefine the most demanding issues addressing the heterogeneity of Israeli women’s and feminist activism, particularly by taking account of the most marginalized actors. In this direction, by examining the wave of protests which occurred during Summer 2011 and those organized against the massacre in Gaza in Summer 2014, I aim at focusing on three crucial questions: first, whether and how women and feminist activists have been involved in these and what were the priorities which motivated such different types of mobilizations; second, in which way such diverse perspectives and practices have dealt with the major asymmetries and discriminations based on class, ethnic, national and gender cleavages within the Israeli grassroots activism; third, what level of critical discussion has been reached as regards the current significance of Zionism.

Summer 2011 and Summer 2014: dividing social and political activism

In the Summer of 2011, a rather unexpected wave of protests took place in the main Israeli cities in opposition to the government’s socio-economic policies that has been called as the “Tent
Protest”, which is also known as the “J14 Movement” since the protests began on July 14, or as the “Israeli Social Justice Movement”. A significant number of young Israelis - with the support of the national student union - asked for the implementation of more affordable-housing solutions, especially in the biggest cities such as Tel Aviv, in which thousands of tents were set up on Rothschild Boulevard. This protest movement has been explained mostly in terms of a generational struggle initiated by young people, principally middle class Ashkenazi Jews living in the major Israeli cities, who were not able to fulfill aspirations due to the rising of house prices, and because basic welfare state policies were inadequate.

Some commentators have described the Israeli protest as fitting within the global economic crisis framework, though with its own local specificities, while others have stressed the significance of the use of social networks in shaping the new mobilizations’ contents and practices by calling for what protesters assumed as their core slogan, which was “the people demand social justice”. In a sense, the protesters tried to demonstrate that it could be possible to be a national movement and, at the same time, to claim more social and economic rights, whilst being critical of the way in which Left Zionism has historically overlooked the social justice topic. Nonetheless, going into more depth, a controversial question has concerned the expression “the people”, and in particular who it was who were referred to and represented in this way throughout such struggles. A few protesters, mainly women and feminist activists who joined in, wanted to move from a discourse founded on the issue of national security to a new one aiming at restoration of social security. As Shira Ohayon, who became one of the most well-known activists representing Mizrahi women and single-mothers, said during her speech at the August 6th 2011 rally attended by a very heterogeneous audience:

“we have no security in the state of Israel. Security begins at home - with housing, with fair employment, with health, education and welfare, as well as with culture. […] Today we are all here: men and women, Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, new immigrants and veteran Israelis, religious and secularists, residents of the South, Centre and North, migrant slaves and refugees” (Ohayon 2011).

On the other hand, as soon they were able to capture the national scene, the leading group decided to remain apolitical with the intention of embracing as many of the common people as possible, and especially, of avoiding mention both of the core political issue of Israeli politics, namely the ongoing military occupation, and of discriminations caused by ethnic, national, gender and class divisions within Israel. Such a strategy allowed them to gain attention from the mainstream media, a widespread support in opinion polls and a general consensus at least in the earliest weeks, but nothing changed in the end. In questioning neither the Zionist ideology nor the debate around allocation of resources to the military occupation and to the massive military budget, they did not make any concrete proposal for renewing a viable welfare state. “Neither left, neither right” was another common slogan shouted during demonstrations to stress the social rather than political nature of their protests. Indeed, from the beginning of the 2011 protest movement, its participants sought to underline
how it was necessary to split political and social issues, reflecting the political disenchantment experienced by most Israeli Jews after the collapse of the Oslo “peace process” that failed to deal with the deterioration of the socio-economic situation. Building on this standpoint, Daphni Leef, a young woman activist, at that time a twenty-five year old film student and freelance video editor, and the first one to pitch a tent in Rothschild Boulevard after being evicted from her apartment and being unable to afford another one, became the movement’s symbol by urging that this dichotomy between political and socio-economic levels be taken into serious consideration. With the aim of excluding political subject matter, the J14 Movement emphasized the fact that the large majority of Israeli Jews have continued to understand the debate around the military occupation as purely a security issue, and as something related to the left-wing parties and not to their cause for social justice.

Accordingly, the contribution of women and feminist activists to such mobilizations was quite marginal and they did not really affect the internal discussion. As a consequence, a variety of reactions emerged from the broader anti-occupation leftist background: some felt enthusiasm and hope that something seemingly impossible could be transformed into a reality; others criticized the movement’s stance on ignoring major political matters, and did not join the movement since in their opinion it represented only a small and privileged section of the population; others adopted a challenging stance during the protests in order to try to address political issues, particularly the end of military occupation and the oppressed status of the Palestinian people both in the West Bank and inside Israel, in parallel with the social justice discourse.

Ironically, one of the main missing actors in such protests has been the Palestinian community inside Israel, even though they were the first people who experienced housing issues and problems after 1948. Just a few of them joined the epicenter of the movement in Tel Aviv, attempting to call for Palestinian rights and erecting a tent that was named the “1948 tent”. This was the fruit of the strong commitment of a number of Palestinian and Jewish activists who were dedicated to encouraging a common politics founded on the recognition of the dispossession of native Palestinians in 1948. As emphasized by the leading woman activist who initiated the Palestinian protest group in Rothschild Boulevard, Rozeen Bisharat:

“the core issue is political. For this reason, in the middle of the protest, a few friends and me we made a tent, the 1948 tent. There were two Palestinian flags, and we were Arabs and Jews asking for a democratic state for everybody. We are political activists, the Jews are anti-Zionist, but they are very few, a small minority inside Israel and hated by the majority of Israelis. Our agenda was based on equal rights, a state for everybody, Palestinians and Jews, by stopping racism against Palestinians. […] This country should be for everybody and not only for Jews” (Bisharat 2014).

An alternative answer to such discriminations inside the J14 Movement has been represented by a multifaceted bloc that was organized under the umbrella called “Forum Periphery”, including the most disadvantaged and marginalized components - such as several single mothers - of the Israeli
population, and in particular Palestinian, Russian, Ethiopian, and Mizrahi Jewish people who were systematically excluded from the Rothschild protests (Monterescu and Shaindlinger 2013). On the basis of common demands for universal social rights, they began to organize their own alternative protests by involving most of the people suffering from the lack of a just public housing policy. Unlike what happened in central Tel Aviv, this social and political initiative has demonstrated the potential for an egalitarian discourse on social justice, by including all citizens. In such a way, the term “periphery” has assumed a precise social meaning in addition to the geographical one, and this bloc raised its demands in contrast with those of the mainstream representatives from the J14 Movement.

Following the slow decline of such mobilizations, Israel has not experienced similar mass protests, with the only exception being a very brief phase of demonstrations which occurred a year later, in Summer 2012. However, in Summer 2014, a new critical political discourse started to emerge inside the country during the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip named “Protective Edge”, in which more than 2,000 Palestinians were killed. Though it concerned itself with rather different issues in comparison with those highlighted in 2011, a dissident voice from within Israel attempted to rise up by combining protests against the killing of civilians in Gaza with the ongoing historic struggle against the Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and the siege of Gaza.

Demonstrations sympathizing with the people of Gaza took place around the world, with a few also being organized across Israel. By encompassing a variety of grassroots movements and networks rather than political parties, several forms of mobilization have taken place, thanks especially to the coordination of women and feminist activists, both from historic organizations and from new movements and initiatives. Above all, the “Coalition of Women for Peace“i has been one of the main promoters of a few rallies where the mainstream Zionist Left did not join in, either during the military operations in the West Bank or during the attack on the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, by putting at the centre of their discourse the role of women, both as individuals and in the socio-political debate, new expressions of women’s and feminist activism, such as “Courage”ii and “Women Wage Peace”iii, have grown up with the idea of becoming a decisive force aiming to change the priorities of the current political agenda, and to embrace women from different political, ethnic, religious, social narrative identities. Women who have spent their life in the Israeli feminist and peace movement have looked at such new projects with mixed feelings, as one of them, Yvonne Deutsch, stated:

“about other current women’s initiatives, for me, maybe I should get out from this radical left view, to open the boundaries since in such a tragic situation maybe we need a wider platform to bring out women, more and more. On the other hand, how do you combine not giving up what you do think, your views and, at the same time, including more women? Only requesting a peace process, it is not enough. We already know. Now there is a feeling about a rising awareness among women, where it will go and what will happen to it, it’s too early to know” (Deutsch 2014).
If something did seem to change in Summer 2014 regarding new types of political grassroots activism, a violent climate was however increasingly produced by acts of rage and incitement coming from Israeli institutions, mainstream media, and ultra-nationalist right-wing groups. Several of these protesters were attacked, both verbally and physically, without any police intervention; indeed, slogans such as “Death to Arabs” and “Burn the leftists” became ordinary. In fact, in most recent times describing someone as “leftist” has meant detraction, implying someone accused of being a “traitor” to the Zionist state, or even a “crazy radical” opposing the natural values and interests belonging to the Jewish people.

This escalation of violence against critical voices towards the government’s policies has created a sense of terror and isolation among many Israeli radical leftists, and specifically among women and feminist activists. Both in parliamentary parties and extra-parliamentary movements, violent racist actions and sexual harassments have increased from the right-wing scenario, attempting to restore a nationalist pride founded on the original Zionist idea of the Jewish state. At the grassroots level, two of the most influential among such organizations have been “Im Tirtzu” that has claimed to promote “building the Zionist dream” and has often used violence against anyone who has been perceived as being anti-Zionist, and “Lehava”, that has opposed any kind of assimilation (to begin with mixed marriages) between Jews and non-Jews and in November 2014 was charged with organizing an arson attack against the “Hand in Hand” school, the largest bilingual educational institution in Jerusalem.

In addition, throughout the recent legislative regulation, which has mainly comprised the Nakba law, the boycott law and the NGOs law, freedom of expression has been put in danger by the silencing of any opposition, and this has affected not only radical left-wingers, but also those minority communities who have continued to lack recognition within Israeli society. Although the current critique directed towards the strategy of silencing any dissident voice has created turmoil among Israeli leftist activists, a few of the most radical leftists, and including new as well as historic feminist groups, have attempted to reopen an internal debate and to regain their role within the Israeli political scenario following the deep-seated impasse which marked the last decade.

Towards alternative forms of women’s and feminist activism: a current challenge

As demonstrated by the most recent cases of social and political activism experienced within Israel, a number of heterogeneous narratives have been merged in relation to different political, ethnic, national, gender and class identities. More precisely, political identities have been strongly influenced by other narrative identities through the ongoing perceptions and interpretations of each individual identity as well as their mutual negotiations in such a fragmented society. Historically, this process has nurtured diverse forms of discriminations, hierarchies and oppressions which still exist in the current
reality. In such a frame, the recognition of internal asymmetries cannot be something to be taken for
granted, as the dominance of white middle-class Ashkenazi male leadership has continued to be at the
core of Israeli society in general, and also at the core of social and political movements.

At present, both at the grassroots and institutional level, what seems to be needed in Israel is a
new political discourse. It is undoubtedly true that something new has happened in Israel in the most
recent years, and a few challenging forms of social and political activism have represented an
inspiring chapter of contemporary Israeli history, or at least a significant awakening of Israeli society,
especially taking into consideration the long period of political apathy experienced just after the Oslo
Accords. On the other hand, this important trend came to an end when, in late Summer 2011 and
throughout Summer 2014, it has become clear the hegemonic and male-dominated structure of
Zionism has not yet been dismantled, but rather in recent times more serious violations of rights have
pointed to the impossibility of creating a viable future in Palestine/Israel.

In spite of such a discouraging status quo, new forms of activism have suggested the
enlargement of women’s participation beyond past paradigms and approaches towards a society
founded on equality and justice. Whilst the recent initiatives of women’s feminist mobilization have
been sometimes put into question by the most historic ones, the intersection of plural narrative
identities has needed to accompany any development of women’s feminist political activism in the
direction of improvement of a broader opposition to the present situation of ongoing violent de-
humanization by way of a gendered specific awareness, as underlined by one of the participants in
historic feminist activism, Edna Zaretsky-Toledano:

“I really feel that we must bring the very humanistic basic concepts and terminology back, I
feel that we as women - although we have also very right-wing women - must work on the
concept of humanistic perception. My dignity is your dignity. If I reduce you and de-humanize
you I am de-humanizing myself. If there is not security for you, there is not security for me. If
we are not going towards the right direction, if we are part of the perception of a Jewish state
then we are doomed. I feel responsibility, I am trying to see who we can mobilize, even
though we need the help of the world to put pressure on Israel. The situation is exploding, our
society has become indifferent to the ‘other’, not only the Palestinians, but many
‘others’”(Zaretsky-Toledano 2014).

Such a discourse has also been relevant in relation to the internal debate growing up inside
Israeli women’s and feminist organizations dealing with asymmetric relationships based on class,
ethnic and national disparities among the women activists themselves. Therefore, unlike what has
happened in general terms between the Ashkenazi white middle-class left-wingers and the
representatives of the “others” (including the Mizrahim, the Palestinians and other minority
communities), an increasing number of women activists have sustained the necessity of deconstructing
such connections among the numerous forms of power asymmetry that have remained in existence up
to the present time inside Israeli society.
Founded in 2000, the Coalition has consisted of nine historic organizations, including “Women in Black”, “Movement of Democratic Women in Israel - TANDI”, “Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom - WILPF”, “Women for Coexistence - Neled”, “Noga Feminist Journal”, “Women and Mothers for Peace”, “New Profile”, “Machsom Watch”. It has represented the most prominent feminist initiative within Israel in the last decade, promoting what they have called “the feminist vision for peace”. See more details on their website: https://www.coalitionofwomen.org

From their own closed group’s description on Facebook they are “a direct action group objecting against the military assault on Gaza and seeking a political solution of friendship and peace between Israelis and Palestinians”. Since Summer 2014 they have organized meetings, seminars and demonstrations to demand feasible peaceful alternatives to the male-dominated mainstream conflict resolutions.

As a new movement in the peace-oriented and feminist scenario inside Israel, they launched their first initiative in November 2014 by organizing a train from Nahariya, close to the Lebanese border, down the Mediterranean coast as far as the southern city of Sderot, and picking women up at several stops along the way, publicly demonstrating against other future wars.

These laws state respectively the withdraw of government funding from any Israeli institution commemorating the Nakba, the summons of any individual or institution calling for economic, cultural or academic boycott related to the state of Israel, and restriction on foreign funding for Israeli NGOs documenting the increase of human rights violations, in particular regarding the Palestinian population.