

Out of control: city branding and protest in Tel Aviv

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ABSTRACT

To attract tourist and investors local governments develop city brands. How does city branding affect opposition to urban redevelopment? I propose that the adoption of city branding by local governments shift privileges “creatives,” whose skills rest specifically in the crafting of emotional experiences and messages. However, the political discourses that emerge are open to appropriation by rival political entrepreneurs. The analysis of Tel Aviv politics over the last decade and in-depth semi-structured interviews with protest organizers and participants shows how city branding was challenged by “creatives” to foment the largest protests in Israeli history. Yet, protest organizers too lost control of their message. Protests failed to produce notable policy results because organizers privileged maximizing mobilization over delivering specific platforms. Subsequently, protest values were co-opted by a rival political entrepreneur, landing a historical victory and displacing for the first time security from preeminence in Israeli national elections.

Keywords: Creative; protest; branding; urban redevelopment; political entrepreneur; Tel Aviv; Israel

City redevelopment embraces subjectivity

Governments of aspiring global cities faced with the double problem of financial austerity and weak mass parties increasingly engage in “redevelopment” - both material and symbolic. Material redevelopment is pursued as a strategy to augment municipal revenues through permits, fees, and taxes from investors, residents and tourists. Yet, the symbolic aspect of redevelopment is also essential. Mayors undertake branding to compete with other cities (Anholt 2007), to attract investment (Greenberg 2008), and to raise political clout and legitimacy (Pasotti 2009). Redevelopment and the often associated gentrification have thus become “state-led phenomena” (Hackworth and Smith 2001, Smith 2002, Davidson and Lees 2005, Uitermark, Duyvendak, and Kleinhans 2007, Atkinson and Bridge 2005), to the point that much scholarship considers “contemporary urban policy to be a form of state-led gentrification” (Lees 2003).

As city branding becomes a driving feature of redevelopment, the definition of the “legitimate” and “authentic” urban experience has turned into a key territory of struggle. The party capable of shaping and delivering the most persuasive narrative of “authenticity” (Lakoff 2008, Zukin 2009), wins the contest of legitimacy and the support needed to set forth claims over city space, its use and its meaning. Far from immaterial,

the production of the urban experience has major effects on political legitimacy, on redistribution, and on the rules of the game that determine both. On one side are municipal governments, vying to shape new seductive identities through urban redevelopment and branding operations with the goal of attracting financial and political resources. On the other side are those at risk being of dispossessed in the process. In their defense, urban movements mobilize around a variety of issues – from urban redevelopment and gentrification; to environmental justice, including public transportation, waste management, pollution and urban agriculture; to improved social services, community empowerment, and employment opportunities. Over the last decade, these goals manifest themselves not in isolation, but rather as components of a wider agenda of social justice and movements under the header of “Right to the City” are growing across the world (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2011, Fainstein 2010).

The government’s embracing of city branding has implications for what group is best equipped to resist. When voter loyalty and turnout were higher, and ideological cleavages were more stable, traditional mass parties and unions were the key political actors (Collier 2009). Yet with the shift to persuasion through branding campaigns aimed at the individual level experience, other actors emerge as better equipped to resist: the “creatives.” By “creatives” I refer to the lower end of the income spectrum among members of the “creative class” (Florida 2002), and consider primarily bohemians as well as underemployed and freelance workers in the arts, culture and media sectors. This group is interesting because the turn to branding and subjectivity in politics provides it with unprecedented levels of influence despite their relatively low economic status, thanks to high cultural and social capital.

Where governments have turned to city branding, resistance requires the ability to shape worldviews and communicate them to the public through emotional appeals and impactful experiences. Because of their educational and professional background “creatives” tend to possess skills suited to the task (Novy and Colomb 2012). They shape a specific approach to protest: culture and entertainment take the center stage in mobilization, as protests are constructed to be “the hip place to be in town.” Beyond entertainment, “creative” organizers provide participants with emotional experiences that deeply bind them to the cause. Persuasion is no longer pursued with speeches, but through lived, emotional, and communal events that allow participants to self-discover and reclaim space as well as new identities. The emphasis on exploration and self-discovery fed a more intense commitment to the cause than being passively persuaded by others (Aronson 1999).

The introduction of city branding as a tool for political persuasion on the part of city governments has therefore important implications. It catapults “creatives” to the forefront of resistance to an extent previously unseen in cities all over the world. It also de-institutionalizes the channels of political conflict because city branding shifts political communication from the level of organizations (parties, unions, etc.) to the individual and emotional level. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the result is that messages, ideas, and platforms are far more fluid, and the path dependency proverbially associated with institutional linkages takes a back seat. No longer embedded in conflicts among easily identifiable and long-standing cleavages, successful slogans, values and platforms are easily cooptable by political entrepreneurs, and especially by new political entrants who are not limited by

past promises and commitments. A proportional the electoral law further facilitates this new political environment because it opens the party system.

The case of Tel Aviv allows exploration of this phenomenon. The paper starts by examining city branding in historical perspective and explains how the White City brand displaced bohemians and “creatives” from representing the city, and privileged instead economic elites. It then introduces the “City for All” coalition, which while failing the mayoral election, facilitated networks and discourses for the July 2011 protest, the largest in Israeli history. An analysis of the 2011 protest follows, with special focus on the spatial, communicative and experiential features of the Rothschild Boulevard tent camps. The paper continues with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the protest, and its ability to awaken extraordinary mobilization, against the limited policy impact. The empirical analysis concludes by tracing how protest values were deployed in the 2013 parliamentary election, bringing protest organizers to the Knesset (albeit in the opposition), while a newly founded more conservative party was able to coopt the protest message and land a stunning victory.

The case of Tel Aviv thus offers three lessons. First, city branding promoted by developers and municipal authorities can provide a strong discursive tool for dissent coalitions. This is all the more surprising because the political and economic context is one in which politically conservative elites pursued neoliberal development strategies, a setting often inimical to citizen mobilization. In Tel Aviv, such top-down branding paradoxically served as a catalyst for protest because it offered a vision against which protestors could coalesce and develop their own response. Second, the case illustrates how “creatives,” an increasingly prominent and effective actor in urban resistance, deploy hipness and space to shape the experience and emotions of protest: specific spatial and symbolic features of the protest’s location, in the heart of the White City area, were critical in its success. Third, the case opens a conversation about the long term impact of this approach to mobilization, its interaction with different levels of government and its impact on policy. Protest organizers in summer 2011 specifically privileged maximizing mobilization rather than delivering explicit policy goals and therefore do not seem to offer effective tools for engaging civil society and governments to pursue reform. Yet, the 2013 parliamentary election unveiled the discursive power of the protest: what started as a highly localized conflict transformed the national debate. Yet, the protest values and messages also proved hard to control, and open to cooptation by skilled political entrepreneurs.

Government branding of Tel Aviv as the White City

Tel Aviv ranks among the top of the second tier in global city indexes¹ but what makes the analysis of branding in Tel Aviv rather exceptional is the degree to which this practice has been pursued over time. Official policies have aimed to present the city as a compelling place not only to outside actors, such as tourists and investors, but also to its own citizens since its very founding. Azaryahu (2008) identifies four stages of cultural positioning in the city’s history. The first stage (1909-1950s) presented Tel Aviv as the “First Hebrew City” and thus as the beacon of Zionism. The city was the locus of historical redemption where Jews could truly prove their abilities. The second stage (1960s-70s) promoted Tel Aviv as a modern cosmopolitan city and the regional window to the West, a message delivered with references to European cafes and commercial

sophistication centered along Dizengoff Street. In the third phase (1980s-1990s) the city was officially branded the “Nonstop City”, moving the emphasis to a vibrant lifestyle, with special emulation of New York and its nightlife. The effort centered spatially in the rebirth of Sheinkin Street as the new bohemian center of Tel Aviv, presented as a local version of Greenwich Village.

The most recent brand launches the “White City,” promoting Tel Aviv on the basis of its International (or Bauhaus) architecture. This approach sets an important departure by shifting focus from lifestyle to physical heritage in the city core, and thus privileges the elites residing in these areas as bearers of the authentic urban experience. The “White City” is more restrictive than previous brands because it emphasizes a specific period and its landmarks, thereby opening the door for a conception of status, worth and belonging focused on real estate ownership rather than on the residents’ lifestyle. The discursive shift has specific political implications, because it dislodges from preeminence the bohemians and “creatives” at the core of the city brand since the 1960s. In other words, “authentic” belonging in Tel Aviv is no longer expressed through the cultural sharing of a challenge (exemplified in the first phase), a regional leadership role (as in the second phase), or even a lifestyle (as in the third phase). Instead, the image of Tel Aviv is based on its special connection to the International Style architecture of the 1930s and 1940s. Therefore, the long history of branding in Tel Aviv should not distract from the ways in which current branding specifically supports neoliberal policies and redevelopment.

The “White City” brand seemingly emerged nearly by chance. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Tel Aviv’s International Style heritage was the focus of a limited cultural elite which fought to persuade the municipality of its concerns (Alfasi and Fabian 2008). In the 1990s mayors decided to embrace preservation. In particular the current mayor Ron Huldai (1998-present) recognized the fiscal and political benefits of this strategy, augmented by the recent rise in municipal autonomy over planning and finance (Kemp and Rajman 2004). From a fiscal perspective, the White City brand drove perceptions of value, and thus land prices, opening new opportunities for investors and the local government.² The political benefits of the brand were similarly notable, given the fall in turnout and institutional trust over recent decades. An unresolved conflict, the fragmentation brought about by kibbutzim decline, the rise of the religious right, and the immigration waves of the 1990s, are all factors that shook voters’ political identity. In response to this ideological crisis, politicians needed new narratives about Tel Aviv’s place in Israel, and in the world. While governing depended on managing the relationship between market forces and political control (Stone 1989), being elected was the necessary precondition of governing. Thus, politicians privileged above all those strategies that would win them the polls.

Therefore, far from happenstance, the coalitions set in motion by conservationist elites in the 1980s and 1990s represent a systematic configuration of interests – symbolic, political and economic - that came together because they shared a stake in the outcome. Determined branding efforts led to the international conference in 1994 entitled “Bauhaus in Tel Aviv” under the auspices of the municipality and Unesco, and were crowned in 2003 when Unesco announced the “White City of Tel Aviv” as World Heritage Site. Huldai built on this international platform with festive events to increase pride and loyalty not only for the city’s brand, but by association also for his political clout (Amit-

Cohen 2005). The mayor connected pride in the architectural heritage and citizenship with careful avoidance of references to ethnic or class cleavages in the effort of depoliticizing the area as a space of critique and resistance.

Yet, there is little question that the brand designation had implications for what kind of Tel Avivian was most direct expression of the new brand. Jaffa's architecture failed to receive any recognition by Unesco, leading to the asymmetrical distribution of the returns of gentrification and redevelopment in different areas (owners in the White City receive funds to restore their dwellings, which are compiled in official lists of heritage buildings, while Jaffa owners are not awarded preservation status). Moreover, the bohemians who had been the heart of earlier branding phases were unceremoniously dumped: in an interview with *Globes* in 2008, Huldai squarely stated that residents for whom downtown rents were too high should relocate.³ With its emphasis on real estate heritage, the "White City" brand thus allowed naturalizing pro-investors' notions such as market demand and supply that "naturally" pushed lower and middle classes, and among them longtime bohemian and creative residents, out of the city center.

Counter-branding with the "City for All"

As the "White City" brand prompted dramatic increases in real estate prices and gentrification, residents began mobilizing for their right to the neighborhood. Most active were Ashkenazim urbanites - yuppies and dinkies who had moved back to the city core in the 1980s, following new jobs in finance and services (Schnell and Graicer 1993). Protest groups formed around the mid-2000s and first coalesced in a large event in June 2007 at Cinematique, a prominent White City location, to denounce the rise in rents and the dislocation of 1980s in-migrants (and their offsprings) by more recent and affluent residents.

The organization that emerged gave life to a surprising challenge against the mayor in the 2008 election. Ron Huldai, after a veritable landslide in his 2003 election, won with 50.6 percent of the votes, while his opponent Dov Khenin received 34.3 percent. A member of the Knesset for Hadash, Khenin is a lawyer, an activist for socio-economic equality and an environmentalist. His *Ir Lekhulanu* ("City for All") list received the most votes, largely from the White City area. The slogan "City for All" signaled opposition to mayor-supported development and gentrification that raised living costs and congestion while widening the divide between rich and poor. The online platform denounced:

"Tel Aviv-Jaffa has been in turmoil these past years, with little to celebrate. Rents have gone up constantly, air pollution is getting worse, longtime residents are evicted from their homes and skyscrapers reserved exclusively for millionaires are springing up in its neighborhoods. Many residents are made to feel that they are a burden upon the municipality, which has shunted off its responsibility towards them, principally serving the interests of building contractors and real estate speculators." (<http://city4all.org.il>)

In a dramatic display of counter-branding, *Ir Lekhulanu* linked gentrification with the loss of diversity in the city – implicitly questioning what Tel Aviv was to be about, whether beautiful architecture for the upper classes, or the vibrant lifestyle stemming from its diverse population. At stake was the transition between the third brand (the

NonStop City) and the fourth one (the White City) and their implications for the “authentic” Tel Aviv experience. The candidate stated:

“Over the years the city has become home to all kinds of people, becoming a symbol of sane and dynamic living, bubbling with freedom and creativity. Sadly, this unique human and cultural fabric is under real threat. In recent years, troubling developments have affected the city. In many ways, it is becoming a city for the rich alone. Growing numbers of its citizens sense they no longer have any place here.” (<http://city4all.org.il/dovkhenin>)

The conclusion starkly points to the role of planning and branding in determining citizenship and belonging in the city. Khenin’s alternative was a turn to diversity as the essence of the city, and a shift in the brand back from architecture to lifestyle:

“A ‘city for all’ intends to restore the city to its residents. It is the people of this city – not the skyscrapers – that make it so enthralling. Together we shall restore the city to its residents and make it into a place that is good, healthy and fun to live. A city for us all.” (<http://city4all.org.il>)

The campaign thus captured the frustration of citizens who felt left out of the recent growth and redevelopment. The linkages inherited from the 2007 protest at the Cinematique were further expanded by the campaign’s focus on the internet, with hundreds of blogs and social networks, in a strategy that followed several leads from the Obama campaign. For example, artists shot videos to support the campaign, with the slogan “Tel Aviv is no longer your city.”

Ir Lekhulanu was a coalition able to expand both spatially and ideologically into a sustained mobilization effort. While the coalition’s support was centered in the White City, it was able to broadcast a broader appeal with an inclusive vision of planning for the city. For example, Khenin denounced evacuations of Jaffa’s Ajami neighborhood, claiming the “right to continue living in existing communities” and the municipality’s responsibility “to improve the condition of these neighborhoods without moving its populations” (<http://city4all.org.il>).

The focus on housing costs and displacement allowed overcoming traditional ideological lines. Because in Israel security dominates political cleavages and determines common readings of “left” and “right,” Khenin’s focus on housing and planning brought together groups usually sitting on opposite sides of the aisle. Acclaimed as an especially “buoyant, inclusive and party-affiliation-busting movement” (Shabi 2008), *Ir Lekhulanu* was not associated with any party, and the movement included religious traditionalists and secular individuals, residents of affluent northern neighborhoods alongside those living in the south, Jews and Arabs, as well as a broad representation across generations and genders.

The “cool” factor catalyzes the 2011 protest

The legacy of the 2008 campaign soon came to fruition. In July 2011, Daphne Leef, a newly evicted freelance filmmaker, launched a Facebook event to set up tents in the city center in protest of rising housing rents. She was not an activist, and this was the first Facebook event to reach outside her network of friends, but the *Ir Lekhulanu* network quickly mobilized to join her initiative. Within a week, an inner core of ten organizers was composed with individuals most of whom she had never met before (interview with

Daphne Leef, 2011). They were overwhelmingly Ashkenazim from the media sector, with middle-class backgrounds. The oldest was 34 years old, with most in their mid-20s. Their professional background activated mass media networks, including the top bloggers in the country, bringing the protest to the forefront of the news even before it took place and mounting exceptional expectations.

Organizers were able to capitalize on the media attention by staging a highly captivating event. Participants, organizers, and observers interviewed for this study consistently explain the success of the 2011 mobilization with reference to its hipness: the tent camp was the cool place to be in Israel. In the words of a protest organizer:

“It had to be cool and hip for our generation to come. Only protesting and demonstrating is boring. We must think of our costumers - the civilians are our costumers of the protest, of the demonstration. We need to sell it in the right way” (interview Yigal Rambam, 2011).

Other protest leaders highlighted the key role played by the “fun factor”. Stav Shaffir, a leading organizer and spokesperson, explained in an interview: “Happiness was the key. Journalists asked, ‘Is it really serious? Because I see a lot of people smiling.’ I said that’s what makes it serious. People have hope again” (Vick 2011).

Inspired by the Arab Spring, by Madrid’s *indignados* and by Hooverville encampments in Central Park during the 1929 recession, the action initially lacked a polished brand (the title of Leef’s Facebook event was a clunky “Emergency: take a tent and make a stand”). But quickly, designers and marketing experts were brought on board, and the protest developed its own seductive brand. The slogan became “Bet-ze-Ohel,” a word play of difficult translation because it refers to a well-known children alphabet song in which the letter A stands for “tent”, and the letter B for “house.” The slogan thus translates to English as “H [the first letter for “house”] like Tent” and communicates that “a house is a tent”, and vice versa. Moreover, “Bet” phonetically means “house” in Arabic. The graphic was simple, in line with the fact that the slogan referred to a children song, and presented the letter Bet (for house) inside a tent (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The protest logo

Other words from the same children alphabet song inspired most of the subsequent rallies and protest themes, with logos designed in the same style (for example, “E like Education”). Sometimes a different letter would be used to create dissonance. The

simplicity contributed to the success of the logo, which was reproduced by private individuals and could be seen on windows, in stores, on clothing, on cell phones and on computer screens. The logo was also used in the many spontaneously created songs, videos and poems:

“The brand is naïve, childish, simple, in a way. It’s straightforward. It says that you can be in a tent and it would be your home. It’s very Jewish, it’s connected with travelling and being a Bedouin. I said: ‘I can’t believe that by giving up my apartment I would find my home’ and that’s the essence: it’s not real estate, it’s a place for yourself to blossom. It stands for community” (interview with Daphne Leef, 2011).

For the first three weeks, organizers closely managed entertainment to ensure daily concerts and interventions. Tents were identified with numbers to locate them and mimic a city-within-the-city, and decorated with ironic or patriotic artifacts. While tent camps mushroomed to twelve around Tel Aviv, and 110 throughout the country, the camp on Rothschild Boulevard with its nearly 500 tents along 2.5 kilometers remained the point of reference for media and much of the public. It served as the base for the key protest events: ten weekly rallies, each focused on a different social concern. What started as a Facebook-driven protest over housing prices grew into a largely middle-class revolt against the rising cost of living. The rallies brought to the streets the largest crowds in Israeli history, with a peak of 450,000 participants, according to cell phone signals alone (in a country with a population of 7.6 million). The optimism and patriotism of the rallies was a direct emanation of the experience of the tent camps, broadcast in non-stop mass media coverage.

Various factors contributed to the success of the tent camps. The face of the protest was propitious: that someone like Daphne Leef would move out to the street was well out of the ordinary, and thus appealing to the media. She represented a usually privileged profile: a green eyed Ashkenazi woman, educated, with a middle class background, part of the intellectual elite (interview with Hani Zubida, 2011, leading Israeli blogger, activist and academic).

The timing of the protest was key. First, the mayor had made incendiary remarks denying the need for Tel Aviv to stay affordable. Second, the middle class was feeling the pinch of welfare benefits cuts worsened by the recession. Third, because the protest took place in the summer, it could attract students on vacation, who were available throughout the country in large numbers.

The location was also critical: the event permit was moved by authorities from the initial request in the lavishly renovated huge expanse of Habima Square to the tree-lined Rothschild Boulevard, and this turned out ideal. The elongated location allowed participants to feel less monitored than in the centralized space of a square of inhuman proportions. Moreover, the Boulevard enjoys enormous vehicle and foot traffic: plain citizens as well as participants could walk and explore a myriad perspectives in an exciting succession of happenings, forums, concerts, discussions, teach-ins and plain fun activities. The landscape facilitated multiple centers and communicated a horizontal and decentralized governance (interview with Yifat Solel, activist and lawyer, 2011). Organizers identified the resulting “chaos” as essential: “If you have one head, they know

what to cut off. You have to be like water, to be everywhere, to be unpredictable. We work like an open code. ... Everybody should act like a leader” (Vick 2011). The long serpentine of tents also gave an innovative character to the protest, which was key in sustaining media attention.

Above all, the Boulevard was in an excellent position to challenge the municipal version of the White City brand, as it lays in the core of the heritage area, and its sides are graced with dozens of newly renovated glamorous buildings, testament to the redevelopment and gentrification taking place. Moreover, the Boulevard lies only a block from Sheinkin Street, the small but highly symbolic street center of the third branding phase of Tel Aviv, home of artists sympathetic to the protest. In short, the location well encapsulated the conflict over the legitimate meaning of urban experience in the center of Tel Aviv. The tent camp on Rothschild Boulevard constituted an outspoken reappropriation of gentrifying space by a bohemian middle-class intent in “redefining its access, appearance and representation, and reinterpreting its dominant cultural purpose” (Hatuka 2011).

In the camps, participants could find utopia: a context unimaginable in daily life that allowed discussing a better, more equitable future. Participating meant making history. It was an adventure that emphasized community but also individualism through its kaleidoscopic celebration of horizontality and diversity. The camp represented the opportunity for creativity, solidarity and self-realization and allowed participants to “leav[e] a personal and creative imprint” and recognize a “complex repertoire of identities” while struggling “to unify them into one biography” - traits long associated to Sheinkin Street’s population (Schnell 2007). Thus the experience was described in the media as truly transformative, not only for participants but also for the country as a whole, and was presented as a pilgrimage of mythical significance.

Mobilization over platform: Whither the protest?

Rothschild Boulevard protestors were able to challenge the White City brand and its commercial deployment to powerful political effect. Several factors made the challenge against the White City brand not only effective, but also sweeping. First, the White City, as the specific physical and symbolic location of the protest, activated the sense of betrayal experienced by Jewish middle classes because the White City embodied nostalgia for the Zionist promise of welfare and solidarity right where the impact of gentrification was especially evident. Thus the mobilization of summer 2011, just in virtue of its location, was endowed with rhetorical tools that could reverberate across the city and the country (as powerfully argued in Marom 2013).

Second, the protest strategy effectively built on Zionist nostalgia for frontier life by focusing on tent encampments. By choosing the tent as a symbol, the protest connected to antiquity, the heritage of nomadic life, and “authenticity.” The image of the tent was loaded with youth, defiance and empowerment. Third, protest was experienced as a utopian space of solidarity and self-realization, able to offer a new model of co-existence. This further connected the protest experience to the myth of the founding of Israel. Fourth, messages and images of the protest travelled far and wide across mass media thanks to the skills, social networks, and broad sectorial sympathy that organizers enjoyed given their professional background. Finally, in this context of myth reappropriation, it is important to recognize the generational dimension of the protest. For many, it presented the occasion to “fight” with vision and honor, and thereby debunk the

popular image of “Sheinkins” as soft, directionless and hedonistic (Schnell 2007). Plenty of war images were deployed in the description of the protest by organizers. Daphne Leef – who did not serve in the army – even received a medal of honor from a soldier, an act that exemplifies generational redemption through a new, now social, reading of “existential threat.”

These factors together explain the extraordinary success in mobilization of the 2011 protest. However, the protest failed to deliver significant policy outcomes. The main reason is that throughout protest events, and especially in the tent camps, the emphasis remained on participation, rather than outcome: through participation, individuals sought to become carriers of those values that they perceived as key for their own image and self-esteem. Most participants were drawn by this self-expressive purpose over specific policy goals.

Media communication compounded this shortcoming. Given their professional background, organizers were well versed in shaping how they were portrayed, and did so to sustain the flow of participants. Their anti-institutional and anti-party stance supported a broad mobilization of outrage, which in combination with horizontal leadership and consensus decision-making undermined programmatic coherence:

“It was like a family, then it became too big a family. It was a freak show: every person in Israel who had an ideology, a solution, came to Rothschild - Orthodox Jews, secular people, right- and left-wingers, youth parties, anarchists, punks, artists, Holocaust survivors, reserve army soldiers and officers, dairy workers - everyone came to Rothschild” (interview with Yigal Rambam, 2011).

The articulation of a specific program was further undermined by the refusal to engage in formal institutional linkages. Observers commented that nonpartisanship was isolated as key to the movement: “There was no room for labels and even less for parties in a protest that strove for a ‘new language’ based on common ground staked out in group discussions, assemblies or councils” (Vick 2011). Isolated collaboration with the workers’ union and the leftist party Hadash provided know-how and resources to produce the rallies. However, mistrust towards formal political institutions ran high and increased after the union refused calling a general strike in support of the protest. Moreover, protest organizers viewed an early stint of formal negotiations over the yearly budget as a tactical mistake, and staunchly refused further formal talks. They not only lacked a coherent solution to address the crisis they were denouncing – they strategically refused to provide one with the specific goal of maximizing mobilization (interview with Yigal Rambam, 2011). The Trachtenberg Committee, a body set up by the national government to shape possible policy solutions, was met with skepticism. The result was that the policy impact was scarce, and the proposals developed by the Trachtenberg Committee remain largely unimplemented.

The protest withered down after the last rally of September 3rd, when many participants such as student unions declared they would move on to “new strategies.” The extraordinary mobilization had strengthened activist networks and shifted the political discourse in the country, bringing social concerns to the fore. Yet, both results seemed to lose vigor within a year.

The combination of strong mobilization and inadequate policy proposals captures an important weakness of this approach to protest, built on the creation of spectacles. In the words of Daphne Leef: “We can organize. We can prepare music with social and political text and it’s the coolest party in town.” However, “we understood that it does not matter: even if we are millions of people on the street, they are not going to change anything... There is something devastating about being in the street and nothing happening” (interview with Daphne Leef, 2011).

Consequently, most protest leaders withdrew from massive events and turned to solutions that sidelined politics altogether and focused on the private sector. Interviews conducted in December 2011 documented a profoundly fragmented leadership. In a revealing blog entry on the Huffington Post, Shav Shaffir wrote that:

“The summer ended without the expected change. And a difficult year passed. Some gave up but many continued the fight. We established organizations, took a stand on social and economic issues, but also suffered setbacks. The most hurtful ones were within the protest movement, and emerged - as always - over questions of power: Who has the power and how will it be used? Sometimes, while trying to retain our purity, we ended up resembling the very essence of what we so wanted to change” (Shaffir 2012).

On the anniversary of the tent camps, a few hundred protestors returned to Rothschild Boulevard. Police aggressively broke up the demonstration and arrested Leef and dozen others. During the event, a participant, bankrupt and facing homelessness, self-immolated. The tragic event further demoralized the movement, depriving the protest of the hipness, enthusiasm and hope that had distinguished the previous summer. In the meantime, several parties courted protest leaders in preparation of the early parliamentary elections called in October for January 22, 2013.

How protest values won - and protest organizers lost - national elections

The campaign for parliamentary elections revealed the political power of the protest - albeit with a twist. The protest had started over specific issues (rental costs in downtown Tel Aviv) brought forth by a specific group (underemployed and financially insecure young “creatives”). It quickly turned to concerns broadly shared by low- and middle class families by spreading the focus from housing to education, credit, welfare and health care. Then, between fall 2011 and fall 2012, the protest splintered into several uncoordinated and often rival groups.

Yet, new and unexpected political entrepreneurs were able to re-activate the discourse developed during the protest to great electoral gain in 2013. Two parties in particular set social issues at the forefront of their campaigns, with a focus on equity in sharing the fiscal burden, closing the income gap and curbing the cost of living. The first was the Labor party, led by Shelly Yacimovich. Yacimovich’s choice to capitalize on the protest’s themes and relegate geopolitics to the second tier in the election was highly significant, given that the party has a strong dovish tradition. Even more impactful, however, was her early declaration that Labor would not enter any Netanyahu-led coalition. This stance persuaded protest organizers, who considered the possibility of joining Netanyahu as an unacceptable turn against the movement’s anti-neoliberal spirit. Thus, two of the core protest organizers decided to enter formal politics with Labor, the

party which they saw as close enough ideologically and large enough to be influential. Itzik Shmuli, the chairman of the national student union, after the protest had moved to Lod, a poor city outside Tel Aviv, where he fund-raised from the business sector for the community. Stav Shaffir, the protest spokesperson, had later founded the Israeli Social Movement to coordinate disparate social justice groups and embarked on a cross-country tour to connect with grassroots and citizens. Both Shmuli and Shaffir accepted to run in the Labor Party primaries and won seats in the 2013 parliamentary elections.⁴

Yet, Labor was not alone in invoking the protest values to attract voters. Charismatic journalist Yair Lapid formed a new populist party called Yesh Atid (“There is a Future”), and made outright reference to the protest’s call for change. Lapid centered its platform on social rather than security issues, with a focus on improving living conditions for the (urban and secular) middle class, in particular by lowering housing costs and enforcing participation in the army and the labor force by ultra-orthodox Jews. Thus, Yesh Atid found the core of its supporters among urban Ashkenazim sympathetic to the 2011 protests, to the point that the party was described as “a ‘white tribe’ of upper-class descendants of Eastern European Jews” (Rudoren 2013). In Tel Aviv and its middle class suburbs, Yesh Atid won 1 out of 4 votes cast.

Lapid avoided a clear position in foreign policy, implicitly lending support to Netanyahu, and was thus able to gain the support of two key groups: voters for whom the introduction of a social agenda was the top priority, and while dovish were not willing to “waste” their vote by voting Labor or another opposition party; and voters who wanted to introduce a social agenda, but were also eager to keep Netanyahu in power. The latter group constituted a full 40 percent of Yesh Atid’s supporters, and demonstrated the value of this transversal strategy in broadening the party’s appeal.

The election results took observers and commentators by surprise. Labor suffered a serious blow. After winning 13 seats in the 2009 elections, polls had shown it heading for 20 seats - instead, it only won 15, a result that stroke party leaders as a catastrophic loss.⁵ Newly formed Yesh Atid was the surprise winner of the election with 19 seats and entered government as the second largest coalition party.⁶ Quickly embracing Lapid’s victory, Netanyahu promised to prioritize the two main goals on Yesh Atid’s platform: lowering housing costs and forcing ultra-Orthodox Jews to “share the burden” by enlisting in the army and entering the labor force.

Thus Yesh Atid succeeded with a platform that was center-left on social issues, and rightwing on foreign policy, a combination that captured a large portion of the electorate. In government, Lapid was nominated minister of finance and engaged in the complex dance of managing a 10 billion dollar budget deficit through fiscal cuts and increases in taxes for the wealthy. Seen as neoliberal by far leftists and as fiscally irresponsible by austerity champions (starting with the head of the Bank of Israel Stanley Fischer), Lapid positioned himself squarely at the center of the fiscal debate and far to the right of protest organizers.

With a landmark election, recent Israeli politics shows how anti-neoliberal protest values can be coopted and selectively adopted by politicians of different ideological leanings. Israel’s political environment was especially prone to this dynamic because it is unusually open to new entrants thanks to its highly proportional electoral law. While

polls made clear that the combination represented vast sectors of the electorate, Labor could not espouse this platform, because of its longstanding dovish position. A new party such as Yesh Atid instead entered the political field unencumbered by ideological legacies, and could capture the opportunity of novel cleavage combinations without raising credibility questions.

Conclusion

This paper has traced how, over the last decade, city branding influenced novel forms of resistance in Tel Aviv. It provided “creatives” with new clout that resulted in an unexpected challenge in mayoral elections, followed by the largest wave of protests in Israeli history. Protests were especially successful in mobilization because organizers were able to make participation into an experience viewed by media and public as both hip and transformative. The broad mobilization was however too heterogeneous to produce coherent policy platforms. Thus the protest fizzled out after a few months. Yet, the protest’s call for change was surprisingly resilient and reappeared at the forefront of national electoral debates, appropriated not only by protest organizers running for Parliament, but also by their political rivals. Thus discourse over what constitutes the legitimate urban experience, and how urban space and housing should be governed, travelled from local government, to urban resistance, to national elections. In this journey, the de-institutionalized environment brought about by the new emphasis on city branding, compounded by an open party system, allowed claims to be open to cooptation by the most effective communicators, regardless of political affiliation. No single actor, not even the “creatives” who so affectively challenged government notions of the “legitimate” urban experience, could confidently exercise any control over their own message.

This new set of political strategies raises several implications. Above all, perhaps, it brings to the fore “creatives” as a new actor, still much understudied in its political dimension. The low economic status of this group is alleviated by its cultural and social capital, and the associated access to networks among media and institutions in both government and civil society (for example universities, professional interest groups, foundations, NGOs, etc.). The disjunction between economic capital on the one hand and social capital on the other raises a provocative rebuttal to Bourdieu’s longstanding and illuminating work (Bourdieu 1977). Further research is needed to elaborate the “creatives” socio-demographic profiles and networks. We also need research to uncover the impact of these new political actors on interest representation. While usually slogans are on the left (and even on the far and anarchic lefts), the actual distributive implications of “creative” politics remain unclear. Studies are needed to document how disadvantaged groups fare under this new resistance leadership. Finally, a natural extension of the current project is comparative work to explain the variation in mobilization and policy impact of resistance led by “creatives.”

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¹ World Cities (GaWC) research network, downloaded at <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/world2008t.html>

² See Margalit (2009).

³ See <http://city4all.org.il>, "Housing Policy Statement."

⁴ Stav Shaffir became at 27 the youngest female ever elected to the Knesset.

⁵ Because Labor positioned itself as a "centrist" party, the leftist Meretz managed to double their seats from 3 to 6, on the claim of being the main left wing party.

⁶ Netanyahu's Likud Yisrael Beiteinu coalition party received 11 fewer seats in 2013 than the combined Likud and Yisrael Beitanu parties had going into the vote, but was still the largest faction with 31 seats. The nationalist far-right pro-settlement party "The Jewish Home", led by Naftali Bennett, entered government with 12 seats, as did the center-left pro-negotiation party Hatnuah, led by Tzipi Livni, with 6 seats. In a rare result, Lapid succeeded in excluding ultra-orthodox parties from government. Negotiations took nearly two months and the resulting government, announced on March 14.