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The People Demand Social Justice: The Social Protest in Israel as an Agoral Gathering

ABSTRACT

The summer of 2011 has seen the first mass-scale social protest in Israel in its 70 years of existence. This social wave that shook the country, showed unique characteristics a-typical of most social and political uprisings, that go largely unexplained by social theories of social change and crowd psychology. In this article I am analyzing published reports of the social protest of 2011, and draw the analogy with the concept of 'Agoral Gathering' that may account for these events and support discussion of their aftermath.

KEYWORDS: agoral gathering; social protests; crowd behavior; social change.

INTRODUCTION

Sociology and Social Psychology adopt a pretty grim view of social groups and crowd behavior in time of crisis. From the early notions of 'Behavioral Contagion' suggested by Le Bon at the end of the 19th century (1895), and theories of 'Emotional Contagion' (Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson, 1993), human behavior in

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large groups in time of crisis and challenge has been viewed in a somewhat unfavorable manner. Historically, the power of the crowd has been widely acknowledged and a force to be reckoned with: from the French revolution, the American rebellion against the British, to the Russian revolution, The Iranian Revolution and most recently – the so-called 'Arab Spring', among many more (DeFronzo, 2015). At the same time the power of the crowd has been eyed warily, often defined as undiscerning, lacking in regulation (therefore tending toward quick escalation) and in many cases – simply brutal: Concepts such as 'Herd mentality', and 'Mob behavior' reveal the perception of crowd behavior as mindless, panicky and often unpredictable, turning violent or otherwise destructive on what seems to be a whim (Bloom, 2000).

With the rise of positive psychology, focusing on adaptive, so-called successful behavior patterns and resources (Antonovsky, 1987), a few researchers have turned their attention to a somewhat different breed of crowd behavior. In numerous instances in history, crowds have displayed a unified, peaceful, mindful, and goal oriented behavior that resulted in social change. Examples of that less-acknowledged crowd behavior may include Ghandi's lead march also called 'the salt March', peacefully protesting a British mandate rule, or the events in Eastern Germany around the fall of the Berlin wall (as reported by Johnson, 1989), While a little before that, the Estonian 'singing revolution', a peaceful gathering of about 100,000 protesting the Soviet regime and calling for independence lead eventually to regaining its independence (Werft, 2016).

Many of the existing models and theories accounting for crowd behavior mostly fail to account for these events. One model that hold promise in this venue is that of 'Agoral gathering' (Biela, 1989). The term 'Agora', borrowed from Greek, describes a central gathering place where events of public importance took place: cultural, political, social and artistic. Biela's term, hence, builds on this historical tradition to describe the coming together of

large numbers of individuals to express and promote shared social values or in dedication to a common goal. Another essential characteristic of this type of gathering is mindfulness, shared consciousness, and the emphasis on positive, appetitive emotions. Put simply: in Agoral Gatherings the crowd can be excited, elated, even inspired, but not violent or enflamed. Actually It is suggested that the main psychological outcome of such gatherings, in both the individual and the group level is the experience of transcendence (Biela and Tobacyk, 1987). Although I will not go in depth into the nature of individual and group (also referred to as horizontal and vertical) transcendence, it may suffice to state that this experience is said to lead the people involved through a process of transformation that may change social realities.

'Agoral gathering' may be a useful tool to analyze and account for peaceful crowd-lead social change. In this paper I use this concept to address the social protest of the summer of 2011, in Israel. This series of formative social gatherings was the first of its kind in the history of Israel, and had a huge impact on social and national awareness among Israelis while creating a new type of citizen-participation in state affairs. This analysis will rely on the theoretical literature on Agoral gatherings on one hand and news reports, and the little published research focusing on the events of summer 2011 as data sources on the other hand.

THE SOCIAL PROTEST OF SUMMER 2011 IN ISRAEL

The events that consist of the focus of this paper began in July 2011 as a wave of Protest gatherings aimed at both the government and the business sector leadership in the country, triggered by the high cost of living and a growing frustration with an on –going public policy that was perceived as greedy, ignoring the public good to benefit a small financial and political elite (Shumapalby et al., 2011). The protest began in the social media, around the

costs of local produce, specifically – Cottage Cheese, sold in stores at a much higher price than what the same product, by the same local maker sold for overseas. This grassroots awakening was coined "The cottage cheese protest". The dairy product makers were fast to respond and offer a 'responsibly priced cheese', but this already triggered a country wide unrest under the slogan 'The people demand social justice'(Streckman and Darmony, 2017). The main targets for this social wave were economic in nature, but actually reflected a growing concern and unrest around the tilting balance between the government's commitment to the citizens, or the people vis-à-vis promoting the interests of business and political elite members who benefitted from the somewhat draconian capitalist policy leading to ever increasing costs of living, alongside a heavy tax burden. The most conspicuous targets were the cost of housing, daycare and kindergarten services, in other words – two elements that are perceived as the basic right of citizens in welfare states: Housing and education (Trachtenberg, 2011).

Unlike previous protests and demonstrations (often taking place around specific events or issues in most democratic countries), this protest did not identify itself with a specific political party or body and, in a manner that surprised many, was devoid of aggression and violence: Individuals gathered in city squares and central streets, many of them moved into makeshift tents and camping sites. Spending many hours together out in the open, lead people to socially interact with each other, discuss the situation and ways of action in so-called discussion circles, organized and lead social events, cultural discussions and even music concerts (performed by well-known artists who joined the movement). There was no single person identified as the initiator or leader of these events: they were coordinated online among individuals and groups in different locations all across the country, with the emerging leadership being 'regular people': not politicians but individuals who wanted change, like everyone else

(Wexner foundation, 2012). These makeshift tent camps housing families, young people in communities all across the country lasted about 2.5 months – a vast number of people either lived in them or visited them for participation, to take part in what people believe may lead to an essential change in society. It is believed that overall more than one million Israelis participated in one way or another in these events.

At first the authorities were very dismissive of the protest. However as the media's attention to this phenomenon reached unprecedented highs and sympathy toward the protest and the values it represented within and outside of Israel was on the rise, the government had to address the so-called elephant in the room. This alone was the most valuable achievement of these events: citizens setting a new agenda to the government by means of peaceful gatherings and social presence. As the government promised changes in policy and established a special committee to examine ways to promote social justice, the tent-dwellers started to evacuate and the protest changed phase: many of the leaders took to NGOs and governmental bodies with the promise of bringing the agenda presented in the city-squares to fruition. The committees were fast to submit their recommendations and numerous promises were made especially regarding the cost of education and its availability in younger age as well as housing costs. These processes also saw the demise of the active protest, sometime around mid-October 2011.

THE SOCIAL PROTEST OF 2011 MEETS THE CRITERIA
FOR AN 'AGORAL GATHERING'

Biela (1989) proposes 6 different characteristics that define agoral gatherings: (1) The gathering is guided by higher' common values, (2) the gathering is of non-violent nature, (3) voluntary participation, (4) the gathering is highly publicized, communi-

cated in mass media, (5) large scale fathering, consisting of many thousands, at time' more, and (6) the gathered individuals are aware of the importance and meaning of the assembly, or events they take part in.

I will now demonstrate how the events described above meet the above criteria, and may therefore be defined as a series of 'Agoral gatherings'. I will then offer a few potential insights based on this model into the success and failure of these gatherings in social terms.

1. *Shared values as the basic motivation of the gathering*: As its leading slogan may suggest – the first large-scale gatherings in the protest of 2011, drawing in huge crowds, was aimed at goals that at first may seem concrete and materialistic. These goals, however, represent a set of values shared by the vast majority of the civilian population in Israel: these basically suggest that the state assumes at least some responsibility for providing the basic needs of its citizens: Food, shelter and education (Trachtenberg, 2011). The fact that no official political party or NGO stood behind the protest and that its leadership emerged spontaneously from the people participating in it lent even more credibility to these values. At a certain point national poles revealed that as many as 70-90% of the population supported the goals of the protest (Werter, 2011).

2. *Non-Violent gathering*: News reports of the protest, all through the 3 months of its active existence, noted its non-violent nature: Reports emphasize the community-like atmosphere dominating the tent-areas where protesters gathered, to lead discussions, sing, and convey a message aimed at each other as well as the government. Minor aggressive events may have taken place but where very anecdotal and limited to minor vandalism or trespassing (Berenson, 2011). All in all the events of three months of public protest did not yield any riots, criminal charges of arrests. The gathering were perceived as safe and family-friendly, to the extent that families and individuals

who did not participate in an ongoing manner in the events, would take a few hours to visit or join some of the gatherings, often with their children, and then go back home.

3. *Voluntary participation*. The grassroots nature of the protest made sure participation was totally voluntary. Official organizations, political parties and NGOs were very hesitant to show active support of the protest. The National workers' union took its sweet time but eventually did declare support of the protest but did not actually mobilize resources to bring more protesters or financially support the protest efforts. People were talking about being drawn to the city squares or to the tent areas in their locality either by a sheer will to be a part of what they perceived as the right thing to do or by curiosity (to see what it is all about) (Haber, Heller and Herman, 2011).

4. *High media exposure*. The protest gatherings were communicated, coordinated and organized through social forums such as Facebook and private groups. If the media was somewhat hesitant to give prime-time slots to the coverage of the protest in its first steps, once in full force the events of summer 2011 took the headlines by storm, receiving prime time attention in the news, in both the printed and electronic media. Beyond news coverage the events lead to a public discussion of the role of the government in the local market, business and social responsibility, and the agenda set by the government for social development (Hatzeroni and Lewinstein, 2012). Such high profile discussions turned the issue into the hottest topic of that time. Even individuals who were not personally involved in the protest found themselves debating it with friends, family, and others.

5. *Large scale gathering*. It is estimated that more that 1 million (at the time, about 17% of the population!) actively participated in the protest, in one way or another. An overwhelming majority of the population (the most prominent poll reflects support by 88% of the participants, others ranged between 70-90%)

expressed support of the ideas and values expressed by the protesters (Ram and Filk, 2013). The messages emanating from the protest headquarters were always unifying: 'this is a non-partisan protest', it was emphasized, 'this is the voice of the people and for the people'. The entire social process relied on show up in large numbers and the visibility of high levels of civil participation (Berenson, 2011). Beyond the sheer numbers of people attending the rallies and demonstrations, a staggering number of people moved out to live in tent towns in a few major cities, the most prominent of which was Tel Aviv where at the height of the protest journalists reported over 2300 tents housing dozens of thousands (Hagin, 2011).

6. *Participants' awareness of the meaning and importance of the events*. Examination of speeches given at rallies and recorded gatherings during the period of the active protest reveal a sense of 'historical event' in which the people demand the government and other regulatory bodies to change their agenda to better represent the interest of the people (Yona and Speavak, 2012). In this case, however, and in retrospective there is a sense that the organizers and participants (at least those whose speeches were recorded and documented) at times over-estimated the graveness and importance of the events: Numerous messages raised the expectations of major social change and political change. This did not happen. In retrospect it can be said that the speakers of the protest exaggerated their own and the events' importance. This will be discussed later as one of the factors associated with 'the fall of the protest'.

To sum up, it may be stated that the events and dynamics of the protest of 2011 in Israel meet all the criteria for an 'Agoral gathering'. The theory suggests that such gatherings result in what Biela and Tobacyk (1987) describe as self-transcendence. This state does not only elate individuals beyond their own private interests and evokes dedication to a larger-scale value or goal, but also may result, as it is communicated and spread – to deep,

on-going social change. I will now examine the outcomes of the protest – as a case study of an agoral gathering.

THE SOCIAL PROTEST OF 2011 AS A SEMI-SUCCESSFUL AGORAL GATHERING: OUTCOMES AND ON-GOING SOCIAL CHANGE

As the summer of 2011 drew to an end so did the tent camps and the gatherings that brought so many Israelis together over a period of over 2 months. The government, deeply shaken by this new phenomenon promised change was coming. High rank-ing and highly esteemed individuals were gathered to serve on committees entrusted with the task of examining the claims of the protest leadership and offer solutions. It seemed for a mo-ment there that the protest achieved (at least most of) its goals. So people started going back home. Recommendations were sub-mitted to the powers that be, declarations were made, but many claims – that nothing really happened. Not much at least.

The few studies (e.g.: Ram and Filk, 2013) that analyzed in retrospect the tangible outcomes of the protest seem to substanti-ate the claim that most of the issues addressed by the protesters, mainly the cost of education (especially in early childhood frameworks) and housing, were eventually not resolved. It is true – some changes were made (e.g.: the law for mandatory education was revised to include early childhood as of the age of 3 onwards thus reducing kindergarten costs), and the prices of Cottage cheese never rose back to what they were when the upheaval began but the overall scheme did not. Housing costs are still on the rise, taxes are higher than ever and the return on investment as far as the average citizen goes (i.e.: the quality and quantity of serviced provided by the state to its citizens as a ratio of tax payment) is among the worst in the OECD. The system, if you will, did not change. The distributions of political power in the Parliament and in the public opinion have not varied dra-

matically. If anything it seems like current polls reflect loss of public trust in the government and its motives (See Katz, 2016). Thus for example an OECD public poll of public perceptions of government corruption by public trust show Israel to be on the lower end of both axes (OECD, 2017). The same goes regarding other aspects of the social issues that were carved on the flag of the social protest: There were a few attempts to revive the protest but people just did not come to the city squares as they did before.

A few of the protest leaders, the ones that inspired the so-called agoral nature of the protest, joined political parties and went into the Israeli parliament. Others remained socially active while a few, disappointed with the aftermath of the events, left Israel.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE EVENTS OF SUMMER 2011 ON THE NATURE OF AGORAL GATHERINGS?

I would like to suggest that the true outcome of the events of summer of 2011 were neither materialistic nor tangible (again – with a few exceptions): They were the general realization of the power of peaceful public gatherings in democratic context. This was a 'test balloon' if you will that showed that when people come together, in good will, with shared values and goals and express those goals in a clear manner. Peaceful yet assertive, reality may change. Numerous examples of Agoral gatherings' power demonstrate its power against totalitarian, power-thirsty systems that find themselves without a real answer to a message that does not fit in their systems. Totalitarian systems (political, economic or other) tend to react to power, assault and rebellion by using the same token – answer aggression with even worse aggression. When it comes to peaceful yet assertive and powerful messages such systems seem to be left without an answer. Here, the settings were different. Israel is a liberal democracy. The government is chosen by the people every 4 or less years. A broad range of

social and political opinions and approaches is represented in its Parliament and government. So what happened?

Again, I would suggest that what happened was a drift – of the government from its voters and citizens. Years of relatively docile citizenship might have led certain leaders to think that they no longer owe everything to their voters and began serving other agendas. Reports of corruption and unsavory associations between politicians and economic leaders for example lead to rising suspicion that policy was modified to support marketing and business moguls' riches rather than public good. This is where the public protest was rooted – in giving a loud and clear voice to the citizen vis-à-vis his or her government. The agoral gathering of this sort is rare and potentially very powerful. So what may account for the 'relative failure'?

Authors suggest a few points: (1) The protest promoted numerous agendas – too many, some claim, which diluted and muffled the message, (2) The protest left out a few central crowds that may have undermined its effectiveness, mainly the ultra-orthodox Jewish communities and the Arab communities in Israel, and (3) The leadership was not ready to take the protest to its end. When a solution or a way out was offered, the protest started dying out without making sure leaders made good on their promises (Katz, 2016; Ram and Filk, 2013; Wexner foundation, 2012). Based on what authors claim I would simply suggest that people still had a lot to lose, and were not desperate enough to follow through. Successful Agoral gatherings came from a combination of spiritual and social elation against the background of deep distress, or at least such is suggested by Biela and others (1987). One may claim that the Israeli public was just not desperate enough and did not experience the levels of distress to inspire the ongoing standing that effective Agoral gatherings may require. These are of course merely speculations, and a lot is left unsaid and unexplored around the events of the summer of 2011 in Israel. Be that as it may, I will carefully lay out a few additional characteristics

of effective Agoral gatherings, based on the case study described above. Agoral gatherings will be most effective when:

1. Beyond the common values and goals there is distress, discomfort or a sense of emergency (something that needs changing). The greater the discomfort, the higher are the chances of the gathering being effective.
2. Emergent leadership is clear and focused in its messages.
3. There is (at least at the perceptive level) overall agreement beyond political parties of different population groups regarding the values promoted by the gathering.
4. Persistence, while shift-shaping movement: persistence is seemingly at the basis of any successful change, but it seems that the power of agoral gatherings as agents of social change is also in shift-shaping – changing form and evolving from crowd gatherings to social movements and from social movements into formal social or political change.

These points do not conflict with any of the points suggested by Biela (1989) but rather add or complement his suggestions and definitions. As more case studies accumulate, the more we will learn about the nature and dynamics of Agoral gathering as a theoretical concept, and a social phenomenon.

LAST WORDS: IS AGORAL GATHERING THE FUTURE
OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

While news of violence around the world, terror attacks and wars may shake us, from a historical perspective we live in a world that is becoming more and more peaceful: Wars and direct conflict are scarcer and farther apart across time and political entities turn to politics and negotiations more often than ever to resolve disagreement and conflict (Pinker, 2011). Historians and political scientists attribute this trend to the power of international trade, and the terror balance of nuclear power and weapons. However,

if we adopt a more optimistic and a somewhat humanistic view of our history and experience as a species one may dare claim that we have taken some lessons from past experience, and that as a whole, on the global level the human race has somewhat matured. War is 'out'. Negotiations and collaboration to maintain balance and mutual benefit to different parties to avoid direct conflict is 'in'.

One such shining and very recent example is the US-North Korea conflict: The POTUS, Donald Trump and the North Korean leader (and some say tyrant) Kim jong-un exchanged verbal and symbolic military blows, leading the world to the verge of a world war. However it seems that nobody really want world war 3 to happen: it seems like various powers, one of them is probably the careful diplomacy of South Korea, have led to a recent sub-dued tone to emanate from both Washington DC and Pyongyang. As these lines are being written it seems like there is a real chance for the first time in decades for a real truce and perhaps peace among North and South Korea as well as a somewhat unexpected calm in the relations with the west.

In a world in which bloody revolutions may be less 'fashion-able' if you will, and as the standard of living in most countries rises and people have more to lose in outright conflict – what can be the vehicle for social change in the future? We may ask ourselves if Agoral gatherings will become the main vehicles of social, moral, cultural and political change. Evidence of such trend are evident around the globe from the 'occupy wall street' move-ment in the US (Deluca, Dawson and Sun, 2012), the fall of the Berlin wall (Johnson, 1989) to environmental social movements and other communities for change that demonstrate many of the characteristics of Agoral gatherings.

While it might be too optimistic to hypothesize that human society will shun violence and will choose peaceful community power over arms and violence each and every time, current evi-dence may suggest that the concept of Agoral gathering may

develop into an important tool for understanding modern social and cultural change in our future as a global society.

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