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The Post-Oslo Israeli Populist Radical Right in Comparative Perspective: Leadership, Voter Characteristics and Political Discourse

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ABSTRACT *This paper analyses transformations within the Israeli radical right in the era of the “Oslo war”: Palestinian terror attacks which began as a response to the Oslo agreements. Those terror activities have reshaped the Israeli political right wing, which transferred itself to what we call the “new” Israeli right. Politically and socially the “new right” became similar to right-wing movements that emerged in Europe in the nineties. The paper examines the “new”, focusing on its leadership, discourse and sympathizers’ public opinion.*

This article presents an analysis of the Israeli radical right in the post-Oslo years. After the Six Day War of 1967, the Israeli radical right was an ultranationalist movement whose almost only goal was the annexation and settlement of the Occupied/Liberated Territories (the West Bank and Gaza). As a consequence of the peace process of the 1990s, led by left- and right-wing governments, the Israeli radical right went through a process of crisis and transformation. Ami Pedhazur analysed this transformation as the transition from territorial nationalism to xenophobic, ethno-nationalism (Pedhazur, 2003). The present paper analyses another aspect of this change: the emergence of a radical right whose characteristics – prima facie – are similar to those of the populist radical right that developed in Europe in the late 1980s and 1990s (Betz, 1994; Taggart, 2000).

In order to assess the relevance of this claim, this article will compare the conditions that facilitated the emergence of a populist radical right in Europe with processes that took – and are taking – place in Israel. Then it will analyse, within the limitations of a brief exposition, the type of leadership and the discourse of this new radical right. Finally the study will present the first results of a survey carried out

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among radical right voters, in order to compare them with the opinions of sympathizers of European radical right populist movements and the general public (Rydgren, 2002).

The “Traditional” Israeli Radical Right

Studies on the Israeli radical right in the post-1967 War era coincide in characterizing it mainly as an ultranationalist movement whose almost sole goal was the “redemption” and annexation of Judaea, Samaria (West Bank) and the Gaza strip: the Occupied/Liberated Territories (which they referred to as “The Territories”). This goal was to be achieved by the combination of military force and the establishment of Jewish settlements. The settlements were not only the main instrument to achieve the annexation of “the territories”: they were also the geographical location of the radical right’s hard core (Shprintzak, 1991).

The Israeli radical right of the 1980s was represented by the *Gush Emunim* (the ideological and social movement of the West Bank and Gaza religious settlers) and parties such as Tehyia (a rightist opposition party to the Likud, the governmental right-wing party which signed Israel’s first peace agreement and territorial compromise with an Arab state) and Kah (a party that combined ultranationalism with a belief in the supremacy of the nation considered to be an ethnically and culturally homogeneous group). All shared an organic conception of society and the belief in the activity of illuminated elites as the best way to achieve their goal. The political activity of the radical right concentrated on the settlement of the “territories” and the political struggle for their permanent annexation to Israel. They lacked any programme concerning socio-economic issues.

While the Israeli right was, and still is, heterogeneous, representing most parts of the Jewish-Zionist arena, the radical right was an elitist movement rather than a mass movement. Sociologically, most of its members were middle-class Ashkenazi (western European) Israelis and their conception of politics was an elitist one. They saw the Israeli people as corrupted, ready to give up their historical legacy and the pioneer mentality and eager to adopt a hedonist and consumerist culture; and they saw themselves as the country’s avant-garde, whose task was to redeem the Jewish people and lead it to fulfil its destiny: the redemption of the land and, as part of their belief, the arrival of the Messiah.

The Oslo agreements and their aftermath – until the start of the second Intifada – represented a serious crisis for the Israeli radical right. For seven years, while Israeli society faced “the Oslo War” (continuing terror attacks which publicly undermined the legitimacy of the “peace process”), it seemed that, politically, an irreversible process had begun—a process that had as its final goal the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza strip.¹ This outcome would mean the failure of the radical right’s programme. The crisis resulted in the radicalization of the “traditional” radical right’s behaviour and protest strategies,² and the accentuation of xenophobic ethno-nationalist ideas (Pedhazur, 2003). It seems that the radical right developed some common characteristics with the European populist radical right movements and parties.³

Radical Right Populism: A Characterization

In the late 1980s and 1990s radical right movements, characterized as populist by several scholars, emerged as one of the most dynamic phenomena in Europe (Hermet, 2001). The Front National in France, Haider's Freedom Party in Austria, the Vlaams Block in Belgium, the Lega Nord in Italy and the Danish People's Party are the most successful examples of this phenomenon. Radical right populist parties are characterized by anti-elitism, a populist, anti-liberal conception of democracy, nationalism, xenophobia, lack of confidence in the traditional party system and the presence of a strong leader.

While most researchers agree that these are the central characteristics of radical right populism, there is no agreement concerning the conceptualization of the phenomenon. It has alternatively been considered as the expression of the politics of resentment (Betz, 1994), as nostalgia for a mythic "heartland" (Taggart, 2000), as a predominantly anti-elitistic movement (Mudde, 2004, forthcoming), or as the result of democracy's unaccomplished promises (Canovan, 1999). This article proposes an alternative conceptualization of the populist phenomenon in order to explain the specific characteristics of the radical right populist phenomenon. It considers that populist movements appear in societies where conflicts about the inclusion/exclusion of certain social groups (from society in general and from the political field in particular) are central. Populist movements address this conflict appealing to the idea of the people as the source of virtue and the guarantee of truth. All populist movements, as Guy Hermet points out, combine three different meanings of the term "people": people understood as the whole nation, transcending any class division; people understood as the plebeians, the "menu people", opposed to the elites; and an "organic", ethnic, conception of people, best expressed by the German term *Volk* (Hermet, 2001: 52).

Those two characteristics, the role they play concerning the inclusion/exclusion of social groups and the way they combine the three meanings of the concept "people", provides the basis for the division of populist movements into two categories. The first one, "inclusive populism", comprises movements that have played an inclusive role for subordinated social groups. Inclusive populist movements represent the way by which excluded social groups constituted themselves as political subjects. Inclusive populism combines the three meanings of the concept "people", but privileges its understanding as "plebeians". This category includes most of the "traditional" or "first wave" populist movements.⁴

The second group, "exclusionary populism", privileges the organic understanding of the concept "people" as ethnically or culturally homogeneous, and includes those movements that express the reaction of certain social groups to the threat to their identity and the feeling of dissolution of their subjectivity (Betz, 2001). The profound changes related to the transition from the Fordist society based on the national state to globalized post-Fordism threaten the traditional identities of several social groups. The reaction to the threat to identity, to the threat to the consistency of the collective subject, is the exclusion of the other, which is the main characteristic of radical right populism. The exclusion of the other is the way to

affirm and save the threatened identity. This explains why those groups who feel more vulnerable are the social basis of radical right populist parties: a reaction that translates chiefly into the exclusion of more marginal or weaker social groups.⁵ Radical right populist parties belong to the exclusionary branch of populism. The appeal to the three meanings of the word “people”, while privileging its understanding as an organic, cultural unity, explains radical right populism’s main characteristics. Nationalism and xenophobia (mostly directed against migrant workers, but also southerners, Walloons, Muslims or Jews) represents an attempt to preserve the threatened identity by the exclusion of the other, who symbolizes the threat to identity.

Radical right populism’s anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism are also a reaction to the threatened identity and to the changes associated with neo-liberal globalization. The elites are cosmopolitan, they are citizens of the world and they support processes that result in cultural homogenization and the loss of identity. The elites are perceived as addressing the people not as a sovereign subject but as an object for their goals. As Le Pen (2003) puts it, “French public and economic elites behave as if society were no more than a laboratory for their experiments”. The elites’ support for Europe is perceived as a threat to the “people”, as weakening the subject’s autonomy and sovereignty. As is the case of immigrants, the elites are both a threat to the subject, but also the condition for its reconstitution as the subject “people”, which exists in so far as it opposes the elites. For example, the Lega Nord, as Mario Diani claims, defines its identity in opposition “to the traditional political elites, intellectuals and journalists who do not belong to the people, those whose behavior ran counter to the ordinary person’s values and aspirations” (Diani, 1996). The elites are also held responsible for the threat represented by immigration. As the Front National claims, “The elites would like that the immigrant issue remained ignored by our people. In the sixties, the Debre and Pompidou governments organized with the Big Business the easy immigration of workers” (Diani, 1996: 19).

Anti-liberalism, the populist conception of democracy and a lack of confidence in the traditional party system are also explained by the threat to collective identities. The defence of mythical culturally homogeneous people is the response to the endangered identity. In the past, political parties were central to collective identities. Party membership transformed individuals into collective subjects in an unmediated form. However, as big parties became “catch-all parties” and later began to function mostly as public relation offices for the candidates, representative democracy and the party system are perceived to be alienated and alienating. Thus, the party system and politicians become the representatives of the other: the elites, the undeserving poor, immigrants, foreign interests. Radical right populism fills the vacuum left by the transformation of traditional class parties⁶ and opposes a Rousseau-type populist conception of democracy, which emphasizes the people’s will, to the liberal conception, which emphasizes representation, procedures and rights.⁷

Finally, the centrality of the leader in populist radical right parties is also a way of coping with the threat to identity and to collective subjectivity. The leader is able to embody the collective subject because of his double condition as “one of us” and

somebody enjoying special abilities. The idealization of the leader as strong and gifted compensates for the feeling of disempowerment and loss of identity. In order to enable identification, the leader must also be regarded as “one of us”. Right populist leaders’ rhetoric usually emphasizes their condition as “one of the people”. It was Le Pen who declared that “Having personally known some of the roughest trades, including bearing arms, I have walked hand in hand with human misery, and I am able... to understand working people and their humble but heartrending problems” (Raker, 2004: 146). By representing the unity of the people, the strong leader protects it from exclusion or dissolution of the collective identity.

The emergence of radical right populist movements in Europe was facilitated by several conditions: the transition to a post-industrial economy, economic crisis and unemployment, the dissolution of established identities and multiculturalization, leading to the growing salience of the socio-cultural cleavage dimension and popular xenophobia (Betz, 2003). All of this contributed to the centrality of the conflict of the inclusion/exclusion of social groups. Other contributing factors which can be included are: a widespread feeling of political discontent, the convergence of the established political parties in the political space in countries with a proportional voting system and the emergence of issues that cut across the old party cleavages.⁸

Conditions Facilitating the Emergence of an Israeli Populist Radical Right

Some of the conditions that explain the emergence of right populist movements in Europe also exist in Israel. During the 1980s and 1990s Israeli society experienced a transition from a Keynesian/Fordist mode of organization of society to a neo-liberal/post-Fordist mode. Among the changes that characterize this transition, the crisis of traditional labour-intensive industries such as the textile and the food industries, and the changes in the forms of organization of the workplace and labour relations resulted in job insecurity and a high unemployment rate. Another central feature of the transition to a neo-liberal/post-Fordist mode of organization of society was the commodification of everyday life and the adoption of an individualistic pseudo-cosmopolitan culture, which eroded traditional forms of solidarity.

In Israel this process ran parallel to the erosion of the ethno-republican ethos, characteristic of the pre-state years and the 1948–80 period – an ethos characterized by a relatively high degree of (Jewish) solidarity, and a republican (non-liberal) political culture. The vision of Israel as a “melting pot” producing a new, common identity that would replace the diverse, diasporic Jewish identities was replaced by a society divided into several, conflicting, particular identities (Oriental Jews, Ashkenazi Jews, Ethiopians, Russians, secular, Orthodox, ultra-Orthodox, and so forth). The long-standing national conflict and the centrality of identity politics made xenophobia (directed mainly against Palestinians, but also against migrant workers) ubiquitous in Israeli society.

As was seen above, another condition favouring the emergence of radical right populist movements is a sense of dissatisfaction with the political system. In the early 1990s – as a consequence of the Labour party’s attempt to form a coalition

through the co-optation of rival parties' members of parliament (attempts that were seen as a betrayal of the popular will) – a pervasive feeling of disbelief and dissatisfaction with the political system spread through Israeli society. This mood gave birth to the biggest grass roots movement in the history of Israel, a movement that raised the populist call for the direct election of the prime minister by the popular vote.

While the Israeli electoral system is proportional, in the pre-Oslo years the two main parties were clearly differentiated by their stand concerning the peace process and the West Bank and Gaza territories. The Oslo agreements blurred this distinction and the positions of the two main political parties converged. Both parties were involved in the peace process,⁹ and both adopted a line that – at least at the level of rhetoric – was “hard on security issues” but open to territorial compromises.

Moreover, the post-Oslo years produced at least other three changes – specific to Israel – of the kind that may contribute to the development of a populist radical right movement. Firstly, the peace process produced an illusion of normality that reduced the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, allowing the emergence of neglected issues and claims. Secondly, the post-Oslo era – until the beginning of the second Intifada in September 2000 – produced, as claimed above, a crisis of the traditional radical right. While this crisis produced an exacerbation of violent behaviour, it also opened the way for the emergence of other radical right currents. Lastly, the suicide attacks which began in the post-Oslo years produced a deep feeling of insecurity, a feeling that researchers see as facilitating the emergence of radical right populist movements. It may be concluded that in the late 1990s Israel presented most of the conditions that make the appearance of a populist radical right movement possible.

However, does the presence of facilitating conditions mean that a populist radical right movement did emerge? The next section will be an attempt to answer this question.

Radical Right Populism in Israel: Leadership, Discourse, Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Voters

This article will attempt to show in this section that a populist radical right movement is emerging in Israel, led by Knesset member Avigdor Liberman, the former transport minister. Liberman's political career has been meteoric. He was a relatively unknown Likud activist when Benjamin Netanyahu – elected head of the Likud – appointed Liberman as the party's general manager. When Netanyahu was elected prime minister in 1996, Liberman was appointed general director of the Prime Minister's Office. He resigned his post and left the Likud in 1997 to create a new political party, Israel our Home.¹⁰ While political analysts considered “Israel our Home” to be a former Soviet Jewish immigrants' party, Liberman saw it as the first step towards the leadership of the Israeli radical right. Israel our Home did not limit itself to issues relevant to the new immigrants, but presented a programme for society as a whole. In order to make clear that he addressed the general public – and not only the new immigrants – he chose Israel Cohen, a former Air Force officer, as his number two. In the 1999 elections Israel our Home obtained two seats in

parliament. During the Barak government, it remained in opposition, before joining the government when Ariel Sharon was elected prime minister in 2001. Avigdor Liberman was appointed as infrastructure minister, but left the coalition in 2002 because he considered that the Sharon government's reaction to the Intifada was too mild. In the run-up to the 2003 election, Israel Our Home created a parliamentary bloc with The National Unity, a traditional radical right party. In the elections for the 16th Knesset, they ran together achieving seven seats and Avigdor Liberman joined the government once more, this time as transport minister. Today Liberman is the leader of the radical right, but is he a right radical populist?

In order to answer this question it must be verified whether Liberman and his party present the traits that characterize European radical right populism.

Leadership and Discourse

The unification of Israel Our Home with The National Unity party made Avigdor Liberman the undisputed leader of the Israeli radical right. He possesses the characteristics that distinguish radical right leaders. He is both special and strong, and "one of us". Liberman made himself a name as a strong leader, one who does not make empty promises but has the power to "get things done". This image is reflected, for example, in the following statement by a motoring journal correspondent: "Believe it or not, but even the most experienced journalists, true cynics, were enchanted by the magic of power which flows from the big man" (Pasok, 2003). Liberman is considered to be charismatic, and "no-nonsense". He is even capable of physical violence, and was indicted for beating two children who were involved in a fight with his sons. This fact, which could have finished the political career of many a politician, contributed to his image of power, the image of someone who will know how to confront an aggression. Alongside this image, the fact that he is a relatively new immigrant, clearly not a member of the old elites, allows for his identification as one of the "people".

Liberman's discourse – and his party's – includes several of the motives found in the political discourses of European radical right populists. It is a combination of a Manichean, anti-elitist conception of society, an anti-liberal conception of democracy, ultranationalism, xenophobia, the belief in the "common man" as the source of truth and virtue and a neo-liberal conception of economy that goes hand in hand with a belief in a strong state.

Nationalism and xenophobia are the party's main ideological feature. Strangers, which in the Israeli context are all the non-Jews, are the main enemy. Xenophobia is specially focused on Palestinians (whether Israeli citizens or living in the "territories"). Liberman's xenophobia and ultranationalism addresses all Arabs, but especially Palestinians who are Israeli citizens. In a press conference he claimed that "Israeli Arabs are a worse problem than the Palestinians in the "Territories", and we must eliminate their extremist leadership" (Liberman, 2002b). He considers that Arabs must pledge allegiance to the Israeli state in order to be entitled to citizens' rights. His party supports the denial of citizenship and even sending "subversive elements among Israeli Arabs" into exile (Liberman, 2002c). Like many radical

right populists, Liberman equates strangers with enemies and political rivals, for example, in his claim that Amram Mitzna – the former Labour Party chairperson and candidate for prime minister – “who supports the transfer from Jews (of land] and supports surrendering to terrorists, should try to be elected mayor of Jenin, and not Prime Minister of Israel” (Liberman, 2002b).

Anti-elitism is also an outstanding feature in Liberman’s discourse. The “oligarchy” of the old elites is constantly posed as a threat to the common people and to the nation’s success (Liberman, 2002a). He presents the common people as being opposed to elites that represent the vested interests of a minority. Who are, for Liberman, those elites? First and foremost, the judiciary – the Supreme Court – but also the media, the police, the state bureaucracy and government officers (principally Treasury officers), and the so-called experts. The elites “[do not] represent democracy but the oligarchy” (*ibid.*). Against the elites, he posits himself as the representative of all the declassed, the true people, the majority. In a radio interview in 1999, he clearly expressed his (populist) view of the cleavage dividing the Israeli society: “we have been displaced by the elites. We, the Mizrahim (Oriental Jews), the Russians, the settlers, the ultraorthodox. But we are the majority” (Liberman, 1999).

Like other populist leaders, Liberman privileges the common man’s knowledge over the expert’s knowledge. For example, when explaining his decision to transfer Hertzlia’s airport he stated: “You can get every opinion you want from experts if you pay them. . . I do not understand anything about aviation, my only knowledge is that of the guy who flies, I have no other expertise” (Liberman, 1998). His conception of democracy is a populist, anti-liberal one. He understands democracy firstly as the expression of the will of the majority. The expression of his conception of democracy at an institutional level is his call to replace the current parliamentary system with a presidential one, and his call to transfer constitutional attributions from the Supreme Court to a Constitutional Court whose composition would represent the popular vote.

In a presidential system the president embodies both the unity of the nation and the will of the majority, in opposition to the parliamentary system, where divisions come to the fore and the voice of the minority carries a greater weight. Moreover, in a presidential system the president will be able to “perform what we need to do, and not what we are forced to do” (Liberman, 1998). The idea of a Constitutional Court also expresses a populist conception of democracy since it would be formed by representatives of the political parties in proportion to the number of votes they receive, reflecting thus the “people’s will”.

Like many of its European counterparts, the party supports a combination of a strong “law and order” state and a neo-liberal programme, which is justified by the appeal to the common man’s interest. Yuri Stern, one of the party’s leaders, claimed:

[we support] liberalization – the reduction of the government apparatus and the encouragement of the business sector – hand in hand with national projects which will be the leverage for economic growth. The support for the business sector will concentrate principally on the small and medium enterprises. Privatization will be achieved through the stock exchange, in

order to ensure decentralization of economic power and the weakening of the monopolies that govern Israel's economy. This is the way to avoid the strengthening of the oligarchy and the reduction of economic inequality. (Stern, 2002)

The populist appeal to the common people is used also to justify the limitation of workers' rights. This is illustrated by Stern's following claim: "The right to strike is important for the protection of workers' rights, but in essential industries and in the public service – whose role is to help the common people – the right to strike is opposed to other social interests. . ." (*ibid.*).

Their support for privatization and neo-liberal policies is not confined to the level of discourse. Liberman has played an active role in the privatization of public enterprises. As transport minister he was central to the privatization of El Al, the Israeli air company, and he aims to privatize the railway system and "Maatz", the state company in charge of the road infrastructure.

In sum, it can be seen that Liberman's characteristics as a leader, and his (and his party's) discourse reproduce most – if not all – of the themes that appear in the European populist radical right's discourse: an organic, ethno-national understanding of the term "people" leading to xenophobia; ultranationalism; an anti-liberal conception of democracy; belief in the (ethnically homogeneous) common people as the source of virtue and knowledge and consequently an anti-intellectual stance; anti-elitism and support for the minimal state of neo-liberalism with a strong "law and order" state, capable of "getting things done".

Characteristics of National Unity Voters

While the analysis of the National Unity rhetoric and world-view support the claim that they represent the Israeli version of the European populist radical right, in order to evaluate the possibility of its success as such, the existence of a political space for the emergence of a populist radical right should be assessed. It must also be asked whether the National Unity voters' opinions and ideology are similar to the party's, or whether their support reflects the attraction to a charismatic leader. In order to answer these questions, in July 2003 the authors conducted a telephonic survey that asked about National Unity voters' postures, opinions and socio-demographic characteristics. The survey consisted of a closed questionnaire put to a sample of 1,283 Israeli citizens. The findings were analysed using a cross-tabulation analysis and the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) method. The independent variable was the pattern of vote (National Unity voters versus voters for all the other parties), and the dependent variables were the answers to the questionnaire. The answers were on a 1–5 scale, while – for the purpose of the statistical analysis – the scale was transformed into a 1–3 scale.

An analysis of the National Unity voters' stances on different issues found that their answers reflected most of the populist themes that appear in the radical right populist discourse. Their conception of democracy is clearly an anti-liberal one. They have more confidence in institutions that represent the popular vote – Parliament – than in

institutions that represent the liberal separation of powers. The National Unity voters' confidence in the judiciary is much lower than that of the general population (66 per cent indicated low confidence in the Supreme Court against 21 per cent among the general population; 43 per cent claimed that their confidence in the courts in general was low, against 24 per cent among the general population). However, their confidence in the parliament, which represents the popular will, is significantly higher than that of the general population: while among the latter 70 per cent of respondents expressed a low confidence in the parliament, among National Unity voters only 39 per cent gave this answer. National Unity voters share with the party leadership their opposition to the fact that the Supreme Court has constitutional attributions. Only 30 per cent of them (58 per cent among the general population) support the Supreme Court's power to abolish a law voted by parliament on the grounds that it is against the Basic Laws, 77 per cent consider that the "intrusion" of the Supreme Court with governmental decisions represents a problem, and 90 per cent support the transfer of constitutional powers from the Supreme Court to a Constitutional Court. Another element of the anti-liberal conception of democracy is reflected in the fact that National Unity voters manifest a very low degree of confidence in the press (80 per cent) and 82 per cent of them consider the degree of "intrusion" of the press in political issues to be a problem.

National Unity voters share with their leadership the anti-elitist, anti-intellectual position. This is not only reflected in the afore-mentioned opinions about the court and the media, but also in the relatively low degree of confidence they have in the universities (among the general public 73 per cent express a high degree of confidence in researchers and university professors; among National Unity voters only 55 per cent) and in their belief that "capitalists and big business rule the political system" (65 per cent of National Unity voters supported that statement). Belief in the "common man" – as opposed to the elites – is reflected in the fact that 69 per cent of them agree, or partially agree, with the statement that "a true national leadership should emerge from the common people, and not from the old elites".

National Unity voters also share with radical right populists their strong opposition to the state bureaucracy, and 82 per cent of them consider that the latter jeopardizes citizens' rights. While this opinion may be shared by many liberals, in this case it goes hand in hand with a positive view of the institutions that represent the state's strength: 97 per cent of the National Unity voters have great confidence in the army (90 per cent for the general population), and 50 per cent express great confidence in the police (40 per cent for the general public).

The xenophobia that characterizes European radical right populist voters appears very strongly among National Unity voters. Eighty-seven per cent of them do not support the entitlement of Israeli Arabs to full rights, 97 per cent of them are against employing Palestinians from the "territories" (63 per cent in the case of the general population), 63 per cent of them do not support recognition of migrant workers' rights (49 per cent in the case of the general public).¹¹

In sum, the survey shows that the National Unity voters share with their leadership the anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, nationalism, xenophobia and anti-liberal conception of democracy characteristic of European radical right populism. Thus,

the conclusion is that support for a radical right populist party may not be a transient phenomenon resulting from Liberman's charisma, but rather reflects the existence of a significant sector within the Israeli electorate that shares the ideological motives and postures that characterize the European populist radical right.

While the analysis of National Unity voters' opinions seems to confirm the claim that the Israeli radical right in the post-Oslo years has much in common with the European populist radical right, it should be noted that their socio-demographic characteristics are significantly different. The most outstanding difference is the gender composition of the voters. Research on the European populist right shows that most of its supporters are men (Taggart, 2000). This article's data show that a huge majority among National Unity voters are women (57 per cent in 1999 and 70 per cent in 2003!).

A second difference is that, while supporters of radical right populist parties in Europe are mostly blue-collar workers with little education (with the exception of parties such as the Lega Norda and Haider's party), among National Unity voters are found a high percentage of students and people with tertiary education (25 per cent have a post-high school degree, and 56 per cent are studying or have a college degree). Their high level of education notwithstanding, their income is mostly low. Forty-one per cent answered that their income is much lower than the average (23 per cent among the general population), and 21 per cent answered that their income is lower than the average (16 per cent among the general population). Only 6 per cent answered that their income was higher than the average (30 per cent among the general population), and none that their income was much higher than the average (2 per cent of the general population).

There is no satisfactory explanation for the gender distribution of the voters. The high degree of educated voters can be explained by the great number of religious people (studying in post-high school religious institutions) among National Unity voters. This same fact may explain the apparent contradiction between the level of education and the level of income, since post-high school religious education adds little to market performance.

Reviewing these findings, the conclusion is that the National Unity voters share with European radical right populists an anti-liberal conception of democracy, their anti-elitism, nationalism and xenophobia and the belief in the "common people" as a source of power. National Unity voters oppose the state bureaucracy but support a strong, armed state.

Conclusions

Since the mid-1990s, Israeli society has acquired conditions that make possible the emergence of a radical right populist leadership. This was the consequence of both the transition to a neo-liberal/post-Fordist socio-economic model and the peace process launched through the Madrid Conference and the Oslo agreements. In the previous sections it has been shown that the National Unity party under Avigdor Liberman's leadership represents such a party. The analysis of Liberman's style of leadership and discourse shows that they express the main themes that appear among

European radical right populists: xenophobia, ethnic or cultural nationalism, anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, the appeal to the people as the source of virtue and sovereignty and a populist understanding of democracy. The analysis of the electorate's positions supports this article's assumption that the populist radical right phenomenon does not result from the transient attraction of a charismatic leader but rather reflects the desires and beliefs of an important sector of the electorate.

However, the interruption of the peace process and the renewal of the armed conflict since October 2000 (from the "Oslo peace process" to "Oslo war") raises the question of whether the conditions that facilitated the emergence of a populist radical right still exist, or whether Israel has returned to the time when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was almost the only relevant issue for the political system as a whole, and in particular for the radical right.

Notes

¹ Yitzhak Rabin, the Labour candidate, who was elected because he underlined his military past, designed with Shimon Peres the Oslo agreements. Benyamin Netanyahu, the Likud candidate, was elected after he publicly stated that he would honour the Oslo agreements. Ehud Barak, another Labour leader elected prime minister and a former chief of staff, had an aggressive discourse towards the Palestinians, but eventually offered them the most generous territorial deal ever presented by a left-wing prime minister. Ariel Sharon, the "aggressive general" and a Likud candidate, was elected prime minister when he underlined his will to bring peace and he had publicly accepted the inevitability of a Palestinian state. See Lebel (2003).

² Accused of being ideologically responsible for Yitzhak Rabin's assassination. See *ibid*.

³ The phenomenon of the populist radical right is not a historical development of the traditional Israeli Zionist Right, which has been since the early 1960s a political partner of Israeli statism and governments, known as "the national camp" (see Goldberg, 1992). Prime minister Menahem Begin, leader of the Likud (the major party of "the national camp") was the first and only prime minister who signed a territorial compromise with an Arab state (returning Sinai to Egypt and transferring its Israeli settlers, as part of the Israel-Egypt peace agreement). Through that policy his party became a rival to the radical right which is analysed here.

⁴ The American People's Party, Latin American populism and populism in Africa.

⁵ Fascist movements differ from radical right populist movements in that they privilege only the ethno-national connotation of the term.

⁶ As Nona Mayer shows, "among younger working people the Front nationale is taking the privileged place the Communist Party held twenty years ago" (Mayer, 1999).

⁷ This is exemplified by French radical right populist Bruno Megret's understanding of democracy. For him democracy means the people as sovereign. It is from them that power proceeds, they decide their destiny... this is the principle of sovereignty... Far from being a mere constitutional mechanism defined by holding elections it is... the well-nigh sacred expression of the legitimacy that comes from the people" (quoted by Surel, 2002).

⁸ Many of the afore-mentioned conditions are not inherent to the transition to a post-industrial society, but the result of a specific – neo-liberal – mode of organization of this transition. The feeling of insecurity that results from the changes in the modes of employment and the pervasiveness of unemployment; the dissolution of established identities and solidarities that is a consequence both of the extreme individualism and the migration movements characteristic of global neo-liberalism; the limitations to the power of national governments posed by the global capital market, limitations which fuel the feeling of disenchantment with politicians (since these appear as incapable of transforming reality); are all consequences of the neo-liberal articulation of the transition to a new mode of production. See Rydgren (2002).

- ⁹ The Likud was in government when the Madrid Conference took place, the Labour party signed the Oslo agreements, and the Likud, headed by Netanyahu, signed the Hebron agreement.
- ¹⁰ The case of a radical populist party founded by a former member of a traditional right-wing party is not peculiar to Israel. See, for example, the case of the Republikaner party in Germany.
- ¹¹ Their tolerance towards minorities is limited to the ethno-national group. The authors asked whether they would support the violent repression of demonstrations held by different groups (ultra-orthodox, fired workers, feminists, Bedouins, Israeli Arabs and migrant workers). When demonstrators are Jews (ultra-orthodox, fired workers and feminists) almost all the interviewed opposed violent repression (95.8 per cent, 100 per cent and 96.4 per cent respectively). When demonstrators belong to other ethno-national groups (migrant workers, Bedouins and Israeli Arabs) the degree of support for their violent repression increases significantly (30.9 per cent, 47 per cent and 71.1 per cent respectively).

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