

Chapter 5.

Settlers, environmentalism and identity: Western Galilee 1949-1965

Report on a pilot study

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5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Identity work from below

While top down policies are important for the formation of collective identities, they are not always as overpowering as they are sometimes believe to be, as emerges, for instance, from the bulk of studies on national propaganda and education. Their effectiveness inevitably depends on the way they are received, if at all, in specific social settings. With this in mind, my project aims to examine *grassroots processes* of identity formation, as developed in a specific local context – the Israeli-Jewish society in Western Galilee during early Israeli Statehood. In line with constructionist approaches, I take identity to mean the concrete performance of ‘the kind of a person I am and where I belong’ (Goffman, 1959), which is produced by individuals as members of groups, according to resources available to them in everyday contexts (Swidler, 1986) – be it a family, an occupation, a locality, etc. Participating in an *environmental movement* can also serve such a site for identity work (e.g. Kitchell *et al.*, 2000). While macro-level environmental discourses have been profoundly studied, it is only recently that studying environmental *identities* in this micro-scale sense is beginning to take shape. From this perspective, I find the history of the Israeli environmental movement a very interesting case, precisely because of its co-occurrence with Israeli nationalism and state formation processes.

5.1.2 Israeli proto-environmentalism – a brief historical overview

While in the USA and Europe environmental movements originated already back in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in Israel (and formerly British-ruled Palestine) this process was belated. By and large, it depended on a belated modernization process, which was introduced to this territory by two central forces: the Hebrew national culture-building project, which transformed the local social space ever since the late 19th century; and the British Mandate, which ruled Palestine between 1918 and 1948. Before British times, awareness of and sentiments for the Nature and the Land, as conceptualized today by Western cultures, are believed to have been alien to both Jewish and Arab traditional communities. Descriptions of Palestine in late 19th century under Ottoman rule report unrestricted exploitation of natural resources by excessive grazing, wood cutting, fires and hunting (Figure 1 and 2). The British Mandate initiated nature protecting regulations, yet it had little impact on the local communities. As for the emerging modern Hebrew culture, it was inherently ambivalent with regard to this matter: on the one hand, influenced by European Modernism, it embraced the idea that intimate experience with the natural environment was indispensable for the formation of a 'healthy Native Hebrew Person'. On the other hand, it is believed that the very idea of nature *conservation* conflicted with the national mission of 'conquering the wilderness' (e.g. De-Shalit, 1985).



Figure 1. Kibbutz Hanita early settlement 1938 (the Wall and Tower operation); still under severe grazing and wood cutting.



Figure 2. The old tower of Kibbutz Hanita, 1990s, after forestation and nature protecting actions.

Nevertheless, as early as the 1900s, a dozen of young Jewish zoologists and botanists began to study systematically the flora and fauna of geographical Palestine¹⁶. As European-oriented scholars, they formed an elitist circle of professionals; at the same time, as ideologically driven Zionists, they also claimed a role in the Hebrew cultural revival. Consequently, in the Hebrew teacher-seminaries biology and geography (*'Erdkunde'*) became major fields of study. During the 1920s and 1930s there emerged clubs of *Nature Lovers* and *Wandering Teachers*, endorsed by the leading Zionist bodies; In 1931, a Hebrew periodical for *Nature and the Land* was founded, and in 1953 the *Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel* (SPNI) – the first nationwide green body in Israel – was officially founded by a group of 70 devotees, who were joined by several thousands of members over the next few years (Alon, 1959). However, it was not before the mid- 1960s, with the foundation of the

¹⁶ Before the British Mandate 'Palestine' never constituted a political or administrative unit. Under the Ottoman Empire Ottoman this territory was taken to loosely encompass parts of nowadays Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Jordan.

Israel Nature and National Parks Authority that all this hitherto predominantly voluntary-based activity evolved into an economic and legal apparatus.

Consequently, although seminal attempts to write a history of the Israeli environmental movement have concentrated largely on organizations and legislation on the national level, they all agree that these processes were massively propelled from below (Tal, 2002). While the SPNI was originated by a group of professionals, it actually started as an avant-garde popular movement based on local networks in peripheral areas, about whom we still know very little.

5.1.3 Grassroots processes

The notion of grassroots is most often used in the context of anti-establishment spontaneous actions (e.g. Cable and Benson, 1993; Kousis *et al.*, 2008). However, not always is local action geared to a pointedly political agenda; often, in fact, it reveals interdependencies with centralized forces and enjoys cooperation of the authorities (Rootes, 2007). The SPNI is a typical case in point. While its early activists were often seen as eccentric (sometime even anarchist), their action was actually imbued with 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1985), the *doxa* of the Hebrew-Israeli society at the time. This complexity in conceiving of social movements is addressed by the *culture*-approach (e.g. Poletta, 2008; Swidler, 1995) which moves away from seeing these movements as rationally organized groups fighting for well-defined political goals. Instead, it takes them in a broader sense, to be *social spaces* within which cultural repertoire is learned and maintained. In line with practice theories, notably that of Pierre Bourdieu, environmental sociologists (e.g. Crossley, 2003; Haluza-DeLay, 2008) talk about an environmental *habitus* – in the sense of a complex of cultural dispositions and practice models that are acquired and performed in a given time and space. In this light, my project focuses on the *experience of the participants* in their own natural habitat: their motivation to act, their sentiments and aspirations, and the social role they assumed in their communities.

5.1.4 The regional setting – peripherality

Western Galilee (stretching along the northern coastal plain of Israel, 19 km from Acre to Rosh-HaNiqra on the Lebanese border, and around 25 km eastwards up to the mountain range; Figure 3 and 4) was one of the areas where Nature protection activism burgeoned most rapidly during early



Figures 3. Map of Israel.



Figure 4. Map of Western Galilee.

statehood, and one of the pioneering centers of the SPNI activity from its very initiation. The reason for this accelerated process was, I believe, the extreme socio-geographical *peripherality* of this region. From the viewpoint of the Jewish society in Palestine before Israeli statehood (1948), it was a remote frontier, inhabited sparsely by Arab, Druze and Bedouins living on traditional farming and grazing, with even sparser Jewish settlements between 1934 and 1949. The latter were modern agricultural communities (mainly *Kibbutzim*) founded by young newcomers from Central and Eastern Europe or natives of Palestine, who arrived in the region in groups supported by the Jewish settlement bodies. As a result of the 1947-1949 Israeli-Arab war and the formation of the Israeli state (1948), this region underwent rapid transformation, with Arab communities on the coastal plain largely gone, and with the intensification of Jewish communities, mainly *Kibbutzim*, but also semi-urban communities of newcomers from the Near East and North Africa, together with some industry and tourism along the coast (Sofer and Yedaaya, 1975). It was this growing community of Jewish-Hebrew '*veteran settlers*' who then became the social elite of this region; it was also they who became the chief proponents of environmental action in this area.

5.2 Preliminary hypotheses

So far I have interviewed 7 key informants, inhabitants of the region, between 70 to over 90 years old, and started to trace whatever archival material that could be found, identifying a core group of 20-25 old-time participants, and their broader milieu. Naturally I do not rely on their retrospective testimonies for accurate reconstruction of historical events. To the contrary, I take their personal narratives to be *mythologies of selves and the collective* (e.g. Andrews *et al.*, 2006). On the basis of these preliminary findings I suggest the following points for further consideration:

5.2.1 Environmental habitus as a resource

My interviewees reveal that appropriating a nature loving ethos and environmental practices provided them with a sense of empowerment and social distinction (to use Bourdieu's terminology). Moreover, the vigor of nature loving as an *avant-garde disposition* lied, in their eyes, precisely in that it endowed these activists with distinction vis-à-vis their own communities, often at the risk of being condemned as the 'enemies of the people'.

Vignette 1

Joseph grew up in one of the pioneer *Kibbutzim* in this region, which farms fish ponds. The ponds attract many water birds; shooting the birds was very common at the time. As a teenager in the 1940s Joseph used to help the hunters collecting the shot birds. Later, however, after having graduated from the *Kibbutzim* teacher seminary, which was known as an incubator of Nature lovers, he openly opposed the bird shooters. In his interview he emphasizes that he had gone very far with his conviction even at the cost of fighting his own peers. At first, he tried to convince them not to hunt, using his artillery of professional and moral rhetoric: 'I'd tell them look... these birds *come to us for the winter* and ... this is an *educational asset* [...] an *aesthetic experience* for travelers coming to this area... don't hunt, *you are not so poor that you need this duck for food* [...]' (lines 237-239; emphases added).¹⁷ As he gradually became involved with the *SPNI*, however, he started to report the shooters. He accentuates that he would report 'even members of our *Kibbutz* [...]' then they came complaining that I was an informer... they accused me of being disloyal, that I gave away my own people [...]' [lines 242-243].

5.2.2 Social networks as generators of environmental habitus

Where did these young people acquire this disposition? Originally, many of them were already equipped with a modern, romantic, anti-urban pantheism acquired through their secular education at elementary schools or agricultural boarding schools, youth movements, or the Hebrew teacher seminaries, all of which were elite institutions in pre-State times. The practice of hiking and trekking was particularly endorsed by these educational channels. As a social ritual it was not necessarily connected with nature protection; in fact, it was often associated with anti-protection activities, such as collecting plants or even hunting. But the knowledge and habits of getting acquainted with Nature were already there.

Yet how was this disposition maintained in the local arena? Two interdependent social networks in particular seem to have been responsible for it:

1. In 1952, a ***Regional Geographical Circle***, the first of its kind in the country, was founded by members of the local *kibbutzim* in the region. They were around a hundred nature freaks and devoted hikers, including biology teachers and academics, and amateur archeologists, whose interest lied in exploring the region's natural phenomena and ancient sites. Although this

¹⁷ All translations are mine.

was a volunteer association, it nevertheless initiated serious campaigns such as zoological, botanical, geological and archeological surveys and mapping projects, the findings of which were subsequently published in a special series they established (e.g. Yedaaya and Gil, 1961), which often enjoyed the recognition of university scholars. The Circle also organized conventions and trips, created nature collections and exhibitions, and launched the project of marking paths.

2. This highly active group, dispersed throughout the region, served the pool of volunteers who participated in the earliest ***SPNI Nature protection campaigns***. At this early phase, there was actually no clear-cut distinction between the *SPNI* action and that of the Regional Circle. Igal, one of the founders of the regional Circle, was also the first *NPNI* employee in the country. Recruited in 1956, he later mobilized his friends – as volunteers or part-time workers – to help in the various campaigns he initiated with the *SPNI*. The *SPNI* thus relied on these local agents for information and services. In this way, most of the campaigns were actually *locally based* and emerged *from the community*, and thus not really conflicting with its needs.

Vignette 2

In the 1950s, the increased population of boars in the Galilee was declared a severe threat to agricultural plantations. The ministry of agriculture fought the boars with pesticides. However, *as the locals observed*, while the number of boars was not reduced, poisoning was devastating to other wild animals and birds. A survey was then launched between 1957 and 1962 by the local *SPNI* agent 'together with people of the settlements' (Sela, 1963: 238); they worked 'under the assumption that if there is no way to improve the efficacy of the poison, or find a replacement for it, there is no reason to jeopardize in vain the large population of birds and wild as well as domestic animals – which are being poisoned directly or indirectly' (ibid).

Another example is the central role of the Regional Circle in initiating cave research in Israel:

Vignette 3

In 1952, Igal discovered a stalactite cave while wandering in a local *Wadi* (*Wadi al-Dilb*; now *Nahal Namer*). The news spread, and the cave attracted thousands of visitors. 'I am sad to report', he writes, 'that these visitors left behind them cans, bottles, soot on the walls, and even worse; most of the small stalactites were demolished' (Sela, 1959: 41). Members of the Regional

Circle tried to fight these phenomena. In 1955 they gathered dozens of local school children in the *Wadi* to mark paths to the cave so as to control access to it. With the support of the Regional Council a lock was installed on the cave. But because of road constructions in the area it was left broken, and preventing the destruction of the stalactites was impossible. Nevertheless, a trend of cave searching developed rapidly throughout the following decade by local, highly motivated adventurers, who managed to mobilize the Post & Telephones services as well as the army for technical support (such as hug ladders for climbing to inaccessible spots, or cables for sliding down cave pits). This trend yielded the discovery and mapping of 35 caves throughout the Galilee, the documentation of which was handed over to the Hebrew University and became the basis for an academic cave research in Israel.

5.2.3 Activists' self role-images

Finally, what were the personal motivation and forms of self-gratification invested by these settlers in their environmental action? As my pilot interviews suggest, they all treated this activity as a *vocation*, one that met their internal drive and grew organically in the course of their lives, and at the same time also involved social responsibility and leadership. Accordingly, they wavered between three main role-images which they have embraced so as to make sense of their action and build their authority as agents of cultural change. Let me briefly mention these role-images:

1. *The educator*. One way or another all my interviewees saw themselves as educators in the sense that they were dealing with changing conceptions and habits within their community. 'I persuaded the nursery teachers' Joseph says, 'that daffodils are beautiful when they grew in the field. Go with the children, enjoy, and go home, do not pick [the flowers]... [I was doing this] even before the SPNI started its campaign [for protecting wild flowers]' (lines 272-274). As mentioned, some of them were actually teachers by their profession; those who worked with the SPNI served as teacher-guides and later as supervisors in the Nature Reserves. Regardless of their official title, however, they all portray themselves as *total educators* who combine science and humanities, devoting countless extra hours to their mission.
2. *The professional researcher*. All my interviewees were also mindful of acquiring a highly professional-scientists profile. In their interviews, they exhibit profound knowledge in botany, zoology, geology, climatology or archeology, often using scientific jargon. For instance, here is how Michael, (who died in 2010 at the age of 95), tells about a colleague, who

'[...] published his findings, with a picture of [...] the Blue Water Lily – *Nymphaea caerulea*, as it is called in Latin [...] According to Linné, [...]' (lines 288-293). They had connections with academic researchers, who in turn acknowledged these local agents' expertness and consulted with them in their studies. Michael, narrating his joining a research expedition for sea turtle hatching in the area, is also very aware of acknowledging the discoverer of a phenomenon he is describing, as a token of a professional ethics:

[one day in 1952] I got a message from [Prof Heinrich] Mendelssohn: 'Michael [...] we are going to *Akhziv* [...] you'll see there a very interesting natural phenomenon, (-) sea turtles.' (-) Well I waited for Mendelssohn, and also for Prof. [Alexander] Barash [...] ¹⁸ and we drove to *Akhziv*... and there Igal waited for us [...] we saw the whole process [of hatching] and it was impressive! It is extraordinary. But Igal is [actually] the one who discovered [the whole thing] [...] (lines 115-130).

3. *The authentic Nature freak and hiker*: this is the most stereotypical image usually attributed to the earlier generation of SPNI members. They are usually mythologized as non-conformist, unaffected, risk taking adventurers with unrestrained love for nature and the land. Etan, a local *kibbutz* member, exhibits this disposition to the fullest. For instance, this is how he recounts his first arrival to the region in 1948, at the age of 15:

[My fiend and I] heard [...] that... a leopard was caught in Western Galilee, in a *Wadi* [...] so we both took backpacks and [...] came [to the region] with backpacks and sleeping bags and soup powders. [...] We wandered four days [...] in the *Wadi*. [...] We used to wander alone throughout the country, without problems (lines 94-127).

He clarifies that being a hiker was his natural disposition, independently of any official constraints: '[...] I used to hike... don't belong to any body... the SPNI did not yet exist [when I started]' (line 34). He is therefore quite critical of institutionalized environmentalism and makes a point of dissociating himself from mainstream organizations, including the SPNI: '[...] we started building [...] the field school [in *Akhziv*]... [I was involved] not as a regular member, [but rather] only... when I was needed. [...]' (lines 572-576); 'soon enough [...] I no longer liked it [...] it no longer suited me [...]' (lines 726-727). Consequently, he claims an inherent authentic understanding of nature, to

¹⁸ Both Prof. Mendelssohn and Prof. Barash were among the founders of the Zoological Institute in Tel Aviv, later to become the basis for the Biology Department at Tel Aviv University upon its foundation (1953).

the point of despising the recent trendy scientific-like environmentalism, which he calls a 'panic of Nature protection': 'I said we need to protect Nature but [also] to remain normal [...] it was a kind of transformation from [no awareness at all] to Nature protection orthodoxy [...]' (lines 736-742).

5.3 Conclusion

There is a seeming paradox in the fact that these proto-environmentalism emerged from within agricultural communities, the forerunners of the Hebrew settlement movement in this region, whose practical interests obviously conflicted with nature preservation. These people's earlier environmental actions were not about defending their interests, such as public health or social justice, but rather about *Nature Protection* as such. Why was it important to them? Given the hardships of their life as settlers in a remote periphery, this concern would have appeared as eccentric – as indeed it was often seen. The reason for it must therefore have been *cultural*. Beyond material conditions, I suggest that this was a matter of *identity struggle in the face of a changing socio-demographic surrounding*. These secular Jewish settlers were new in the region and novice in agricultural work. Even if many of them were natives of Palestine, they still had to get better acquainted with the place and get used to rural life. In making this region their home, they had the ambivalent position of competing with both *old-time* Arab and Druze communities, on the one hand, and *newly-arrived* Jewish communities, on the other. I suggest that the Modern repertoire of Nature Loving attitudes and practices, which were alien to the local traditional communities of both non-Jewish natives and Jewish newcomers, served them as a distinguishing resource for claiming status as locals. Given that the non-Jewish population was by then severely disempowered, this identity contest seems to have been first and foremost an internal dynamics within the *Jewish* society.

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