Detachment and Engagement: Israelis' Everyday Verbal Representations of 'the Israeli Person' and the Contest for the Right to Condemn a Collective Identity

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This article examines strategies of detachment and engagement in the ongoing struggles over defining a collective sense of 'Israeli identity' that take place in contemporary Israeli everyday discourse, and which is intended for insiders alone. The analysis compares material from two different samples of voluntary formulations of 'how Israelis behave' offered by anonymous Israelis in domestic public forums: one is a collection of about 300 folkloric aphorisms in a popular newspaper column, and the other includes over 1700 on-line talk-backs to 14 Internet reports about the bad reputation of Israelis abroad. These miscellaneous materials reveal a heated contest for the right to condemn a generalized collective image of 'an Israeli person'. Mobilizing alternatively two value-paradigms, that of 'European codes of civilized behaviour' (an outside perspective) and that of 'local patriotism' (an inside perspective), a negative collective image of 'misbehaved person' is established, towards which conflicting group-attitudes are formed. Four main strategies are observed in disputing or confirming this negative image: a total personal alienation; patronizing engagement; a variety of denial tactics; and a provocative identification with 'uncivilizedness' as an 'authentic Israeli mindset'.

Introduction

The subject of this article is the ongoing everyday negotiation and struggle for defining a collective sense of identity which take place on the level of everyday verbal interactions, and are not identical with the explicitly political identity discourse. This dynamics is especially intriguing in the context of unsettled social spaces with intense

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conflicts and changing power balance, where the idea of a national-scale shared identity is severely challenged. One such case is contemporary Israeli society.[1] Critics of Israeli *Jewish* society describe it as a torn, multicultural society, to the point of questioning the viability of a common ground in it (Yonah & Shenhav, 2000; Zuckerman, 2001; Michael, 2005). These critics and sociologists mainly focus on what are believed to be this society's two major divides: the *ethnic* (referring to the antagonism between the so-called 'Western' [*Ashkenazi*] and 'Oriental' [*Mizrahi*] Israeli Jews) and the *religious* (referring to the tension between secular and religious Israeli Jews; e.g., Beit-Hallahmi & Sobel, 1991; Ben-Rafael & Sharot, 1991; Lissak, 1999; Peled, 1998; Kimmerling, 2001; Hever *et al.*, 2002; Smooha, 2002). These two aspects of cultural cleavage have been politicized during the period of Israeli statehood since the 1950s, and increasingly so in the last three decades (Herzog, 1984; Ben-Simon, 1997; Tsfati, 1999; Ben-Porat, 2003). They go back to the historical alienation between the veterans and the newcomers even before the early days of statehood, an alienation which found its cultural expression in the conflict between the *Native Israeli* and the *Jewish Diaspora* cultures, namely, the conflict between a secular modern national culture and a religious-traditional one. Once a pertinent element of pre-state Zionist culture-building project (Even-Zohar, 1990; Bar-Tal, 1994; Shavit, 1987; Shapira, 1997), the allegedly fabricated unifying native secular culture is now being challenged by the contemporary Post-Zionist discourse (Raz-Karkotzkin, 1994; Kimmerling, 2001; Yonah & Shenhav, 2000; Zuckerman, 2001).

The persistence and reclaiming of traditional—ethnic and religious—identity options, in the face of a disintegrating formerly hegemonic, all-embracing Native Israeli one thus stands at the core of today prevailing narrative, according to which Israeli culture currently undergoes an accelerated process of 'sectorialization'. 'The intense and forceful melting-pot once imposed by the founders of the State was and still is baseless', says Sami Michael (2005), a prominent Israeli writer, 'We look today like separate islands in a turbulent stream' (my translation). This conclusion seems however a bit exaggerated in light of the persistent search for a definition of a 'typical Israeli' identity which pervades Israeli popular discourse, as manifest by the endless trivial comments on 'the Israeli person' produced by and addressed to large heterogeneous segments of Israeli society. The question is, then, what people still mean by the extensive use they continuously make of this generalized idea of 'being an Israeli' in their everyday exchange, or rather, what they expect to achieve by it in terms of their identity performance.

Moreover, while the explicitly-political intellectual discourse seeks to reflect, establish and legitimize a plurality of identities as political options, it fails to capture the ambivalence of sentiments and attitudes invested in everyday representations of 'being an Israeli' the way they are constructed through the popular idiom. As the extensive literature on the subject shows, people's sense of identity, including their choice of 'ethnic options' (Waters, 1990), is much less coherent and more context-dependent than are the established categories of identity that are sought and sustained by the political discourse. As active social agents, people constantly

construct multiple and shifting real-life identities, built on 'common pools of cultural resources' (Swidler, 2001, p. 5) available to them (see also Davis, 1994; Harrison, 1999; Giampapa, 2001; Howarth, 2002). This dynamics of identity construction takes place in variable social spaces that can not always be framed by the predetermined polarized notions of ethnic or religious conflicts.

Proceeding from the assumption that the ways people describe themselves and others serve them as means of self-assertion and gaining status (Goffman, 1959; see Lamont, 1992, 2000; Dolby, 2000; Campbell & McLean, 2002), I set out to examine in this article the popular images of 'the Israeli person' which are continuously constructed in various forms of everyday talk, and the strategies of status-claiming employed by Israelis through their use of these images. Regardless of how close they are to reality, these images are powerful means of regulating social relations. Repeatedly constructed and contested in different everyday situations, they are used by people to negotiate their agreements or disagreements on their social world (Davis, 1994; Katriel, 1999) and to claim their position within it.

Studies of group identities underline the pertinence of 'the gaze from the outside' in constructing and maintaining people's views of themselves (e.g., Hall, 1991; Howarth, 2002). As I will try to show, this is a central factor in the identity-representation work performed by Israelis. Let me stress, however, that my interest lies not in representations intended for foreign ears, but only in those produced in the domestic arena, namely, *things that Israelis would say only among themselves and will not say to outsiders*. My purpose is to examine the interplay between 'outside' and 'inside' perspectives within this domestic discourse, and the ways they create solidarity or demarcation among Israelis. I would like to know whether there are any agreements about a shared experience of being Israeli, what the most accepted components of this experience are, and how they are confirmed or contested in everyday exchange.

In examining how Israelis mobilize existing cultural resources, while shifting between these two perspectives, I also ask if and how they make use of canonical 'indigenous' images that pertain to the Israeli historical legacy. An outstanding element of this legacy is the Native-Born, *Sabra* archetype, the once glorified emblem of pre-Israeli culture. Named after a prickly-pear, that is, a cactus that yields sweet fruits inhabiting the local landscape, this image suggests a metaphor of authenticity, according to which underneath the thorny, rough surface there hide sweetness and vitality. Promoted by dominant groups in Hebrew Palestine as the ideal personification of the 'indigenously Israeli' ethos of naturalness, devotion, straightforwardness and love of the land (see Even-Zohar, 1990; Sivan, 1991; Elboim-Dror, 1996; Almog, 1997; Shapira, 1996, 1997; Shavit, 1998), this archetype is believed to have had the strongest impact on the Israeli collective self-image in its formative phase, before and during early statehood. Being considered today an icon of the veteran *Ashkenazi* elite, it is now resented and delegitimized by much of the public intellectual discourse. However, it turns out that in the popular discourse of identity it is not entirely displaced.

The Sources

My analysis is based on two samples of verbal representations, proposed by anonymous people in the media. One sample comprises 295 brief responses to the question 'what makes one an Israeli', recorded in the voice mail-box of *Maariv,* the second largest newspaper in Israel, and published in a column under this title, between 1996 and 1998 (for a detailed analysis see Sela-Sheffy, 2004). The other sample includes over 1700 talk-backs to 14 Internet reports dealing with the bad reputation of Israeli tourists abroad, published during 2001–2003 (Anonymous, 2001; Eichner, 2002; Limon 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d, 2001e, 2001f, 2000g, 2003; Magal, 2002; Palter, 2002; Sade, 2001, 2002). The reports, with the attached talk-backs, appeared on the Internet site of *Ynet* (http://www.ynet.co.il), an on-line newspaper affiliated to *Yediot Aharonot*, the largest Israeli daily (for a thorough analysis of such talk-backs [2001–2002] see Ribke, 2004).[2] This sample is only a small selection from myriad similar such reports and talk-backs available on the Internet. The information about the respondents in both sources is minimal or entirely missing (while we have names and places of residence in the newspaper column, on the Internet site we have none), and in any case is not verifiable. My analysis is therefore based solely on the verbal material offered by the respondents.

These two sources obviously differ in their status as cultural institutions. While the newspaper column (*Maariv*) was intended as a collection of witty folkloric aphorisms in the trivial section of the weekend supplement, the Internet talk-backs are increasingly established as significant forums of popular public discourse. Consequently, these sources also differ in terms of editorial intervention. Whereas the contributors to the newspaper column were instructed to be sharp and concise,[3] and the printed messages (usually of one-sentence length) were selected by the editor and published on the newspaper's responsibility,[4] the Internet talk-backs are intended as open spontaneous reaction forums, in highly colloquial language (the spelling and grammar mistakes, incomplete sentences and vulgar, often offensive language testify to it). There are no restrictions on length or style, or on multiple messages by the same respondent, and the host's responsibility is limited to warning against and blocking outlaw or extremely obscene language. These differences notwithstanding, the two sources share an advantage over conventional surveys and polls in that the respondents choose their own themes and use their own idiom and classifications, instead of passively responding to formulated questions and predetermined categories.[5] The choice of themes, style and attitudes is certainly also constrained by the conventions established in these forums as cultural institutions (for instance, both of them encourage sarcasm and witticism). However, being self-selected and voluntary, the responses in these two sources are safe from the problem that often occurs in interviews, when the speaker may be pressured to invent an opinion in order to accommodate to the interviewer's expectations.

For the same reason, these sources do not serve as a sample corpus, because they include only the responses of those who have access to this particular newspaper or to the Internet, and among them, only of those who care enough to take a stance and voice their opinion. However, *Maariv*'s readership and the population of the Internet users are large and heterogeneous enough to provide an unmarked evidence of Israeli idiom, worthy of investigating. In terms of language, style and content, the hundreds (and thousands) of representations in the two samples are very similar to countless such representations that appear frequently in various other popular channels, such as newspapers and magazines, Internet web-sites and radio talk-shows (see Aviv, 2005),[6] as well as in infinite everyday verbal interactions. The vast quantities and emotional intensity of these representations make them significant testimonies of Israeli everyday discourse of identity. Judging by the verbal expressions in all of these sources, it transpires that most of the contributors tend to take for granted that there exists a generalized type of a 'standard Israeli', whom they see as a Jew, however non-religious and non-traditional, and about whom they have a firm opinion. In most cases they avoid formulating specific sectorial factors, save for a most generalized idea of a *Mizrahi* ethnicity, which is sometimes evoked with hostility in heated Internet disputes.

The massive presence of such representations in everyday Israeli life is compelling. Their repetition by so many people suggests that they form a stock of platitudes that people use by way of performing verbal rituals (Katriel, 1985, 1999). By contrast to studies that aim to explore through verbal expressions what people 'really' think or feel about their world, I am more interested here in the very existence of such stocks of ready-to-use platitudes, and in their use-value. Without being able to establish to what extent people 'really believe' deep down in their hearts in these commonplaces, and in view of the fact that the same people may express different ideas of the world on different occasions, their very willingness to use (or oppose) certain common-places on certain occasions is a statement that identifies them (together with other actions) as belonging to a certain group. In analysing what people say we therefore must also take into account those repertoires of 'things to be said', which place constraints on what people are eventually disposed to say. There is a great diversity and personal creativity in how people employ these repertoires, but there is also a considerable repetition that creates consistent trends.

In what follows I will first briefly sketch the images of 'the Israeli person' which emerge from these stocks of commonplaces. Then I will discuss the respondents' attitudes towards these images.

A Negative Characterization of a Collective Person: A Portrait of an 'Uncivilized' Israeli

The large samples at hand reveal a heated contest for the right to condemn the collective image of 'the Israeli person'. The ample representations of Israelis' bad behaviour attest to this fact.[7] An image of an 'uncivilized average Israeli person' is

thus perpetuated to the point of creating a common ground—if from different and conflicting standpoints—for the hundreds (and thousands) of participants in this popular discourse, on the basis of which conflicting group-identifications are formed. What the hundreds of representations in both samples recycle is not just an abstract idea of an 'uncivilizedness' but also concrete descriptions of whole sets of everyday situations in which habitual manners are portrayed. Surprisingly or not, what people tend to talk and complain about in these messages are not the grand issues of politics, economy or national security, but rather day to day practices. They produce repeated scenarios which relate mainly to consumption habits, food and eating, driving, money, littering and cleanliness, personal interactions with neighbours, shopkeepers, wives or friends, and behaviour in public places, such as on the road, in queues, supermarkets, elevators, restaurants, hotels, or nature and holiday resorts. Driving dangerously, talking loudly, bargaining, pushing the queue, grabbing too much food, violating hotel regulations, and the like, are common topoi. While in the newspaper column (*Maariv*) the representations are framed by an impersonal formula ('An Israeli is someone who [commits a certain action]'), the Internet talk-backs are less structured and convey the individual narrator's voice. Nevertheless, the scenarios in both samples are usually very much alike.

The Israeli person is thus portrayed by many of these scenarios as noisy, rude, greedy, aggressive and self-centred, a hypocrite and a smart-ass. The striking fact is that these judgmental characterizations are often evoked as against an implied paradigm of what is taken to be European codes of propriety, such as etiquette and good manners, restraint, respect and consideration, modesty, fairness, trustworthiness and tolerance, civic awareness and a sense of a venerable cultural legacy. So much so that the generalized portrait that emerges from these representations may be formulated in terms of failing to comply with these codes. Let me briefly illustrate the major aspects of this 'failed behaviour' with a few examples (the following citations are from *Maariv*; all translations are mine):

> Lack of manners and etiquette: 'An Israeli is someone who pushes out the door ahead of you, and lets it slam in your face. If you walk out before him and hold the door—he does not say "thank you"'; or: 'An Israeli is a driver who arrives at a red light, opens the door and empties the ashtray on the ground'.

> Disrespect and disregard of others and of the public space and order: 'An Israeli is someone who drives through a pedestrian crossing while people are still crossing it'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who goes on field trips just in order to scratch his name on trees and stones'.

> Lack of decency, deceitfulness: 'An Israeli is someone who takes his nephew along on a honeymoon because a child in the room is free of charge'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who queues in a falafel shop and meanwhile consumes all the pickles [placed freely] on the table'.

> Lack of civic awareness and evading civil duties: 'An Israeli is someone who asks himself what else the country can do for him'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who sends

his children to school and thinks he's done with his responsibilities for their education'.

Unrestrained materialism: 'An Israeli sees his neighbour coming with a new car, calls a family gathering and tries to find out where the money came from'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who receives a gift from abroad and goes to a shop to find out how much it costs'.

Double-standards and intolerance: 'An Israeli is someone who jumps the queue and wants to know why others are pushy'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who will commit a traffic offence, if necessary, only in order to chastise another driver for committing a traffic misdemeanour'.

Lack of modesty, untrustworthiness and presumptuousness: 'An Israeli is an opinionated analyst on every subject, always knowing what should be done before, during and after, and it's a shame they did not consult with him in real time'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who, veering over a white [dividing] line while passing another car, tells his wife on the mobile phone why the government should fight road accidents'.

Lack of a profound sense of one's own culture and a pursuit of a globalized trivial culture: 'An Israeli is someone who is at home in London and New York, but doesn't know how to get to Tzippori and Peqiin' [two ancient Jewish spots in the Galilee]; or: 'an Israeli is someone who eats [at] McDonald's, listens to M.T.V., celebrates New Year's Eve and does not understand Arabic'.[8]

While all these above-cited examples from the newspaper column offer invented sketchy scenarios (however familiar and concrete they may sound to an Israeli person in the culture), the Internet talk-backs claim to report real situations which the respondents have personally experienced or witnessed (mostly during their visits abroad) in greater length and detail. Therefore, they often make explicit what remains implicit by the messages in *Maariv*, namely that they are familiar with European culture and know what 'civilized behaviour' is about, and judge their compatriots against its standards. To cite one such example:

A month ago I was in Prague. We were staying at Hotel President and during breakfast we witnessed the rude ugly Israeli in action. What happened is the following: people from all over the world come to eat; they take a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and the soft drinks were in jars where everyone can fill his own glass and proceed to his table. But the Israeli—no, he paid for the hotel, so he bought all the services. What happened? A guy came in, took 4 glasses and took one of the jars containing orange juice as if it was his own property. When we came in one day later, a drink machine was already placed there like those we have in Israel, that you have to press, and the staring gaze of the other guests did not [exactly] contribute to the [good] atmosphere . . . in short, I was ashamed to be an Israeli and really it's no proud with those psychos who bye flight-tickets so they bought the whole world. Relax and start enjoying, animals. (Sade, 2001, #23)

An outside gaze thus prevails in hundreds of such representations so as to define Israeliness as 'what is not done'. Obviously, this standpoint and the image it creates do not remain uncontested. To counter them, an opposed ideal-type of an Israeli person is often also evoked by some representations, drawing on the mythical Native Israeli archetype (the *Sabra*). These representations accentuate positive features such as solidarity, altruism, devotion, warm-heartedness and integrity. Naturally, evoking this canonical image often produces a clear sense of patriotism; as one message says:

> An Israeli is someone who lives in this country, loves this country and serves in the army. Every person who is willing to contribute to and work for the country, and who takes the good with the bad. (*Maariv*)

However, more often than not this sense of patriotism is rather undecided. Often the *Sabra* archetype is mobilized precisely to create an ambivalent attitude of approaching the Israeli 'uncivilized mindset' with a critical-yet-forgiving tone (which in fact was also typical to past romanticizing descriptions of the *Sabra*). For example:

> An Israeli is a reckless type. Usually he is very open, too, especially those who were born in the country; (*Maariv*)

or:

> An Israeli is a bullshit-artist who does not give a damn about anything, and does everything carelessly, but when needed, all unite. (*Maariv*)

In any case, articulations of the *Sabra*'s merits are not dominant in these representations (they appear in only 82 responses in *Maariv*, which make 27.8 per cent of this total sample; in the Internet talk-backs they are rather negligible). In certain cases, by contrast, the contributors declare their outright disenchantment with the *Sabra* as a model for identification. One such harsh example suggests a reverse interpretation of the *Sabra*'s celebrated quality of daring:

> An Israeli is someone who was born with a great deal of courage, which turned over the years into impudence. (*Maariv*)

By and large, most of the respondents take their model from the non-indigenous, European-like idealized archetype, as they see it, sometimes with explicit reference to it. For instance:

> I have just returned from abroad and was captivated by Europe's charm—the driving culture, the patience, the tranquility. Maybe the struggle [for improving our behaviour] should start with education at home. (Limon, 2001f, #10)

or:

> . . . if only we would learn a little bit from the culture of the Europeans, you can be sure we would have looked differently, and would not have 10 road-accident

casualties in one day . . . what's the wonder we are being detested so much? (Limon, 2001a, #40)

The Dynamic of Position-taking Towards a Collective Negative Image: Detachment and Engagement

It is therefore apparent that a negative image of 'the Israeli person', and the 'foreign model' it implies through negation, are what stand at the heart of these identity negotiations and serve as their central points of reference. Debating this image, the respondents' attitudes range between solidarity and a sense of belonging at one pole, and alienation and resentment at the other.

1. Respondents' Attitudes as Manifest in the Newspaper Column (Maariv)

As can be expected from such a trivial collection of folkloric (mostly witty) aphorisms as that presented in this column, it tends to reflect a simple opposition of attitudes (although, as mentioned earlier, the representations it holds are not always one-dimensional and predictable). Moreover, as I have already indicated, this sample reveals minimal information about the contributors (the information includes only names and places of residence), which fact calls for speculating about the social distribution of these attitudes. Only one third of the responses (95) were solicited specifically from members of rather well-defined groups: 65 of them were by residents of 6 development towns in the Negev desert, towns which are stigmatized as ethnic enclaves beaten by social and economic backwardness, and predominated by right-wing political orientation. The others were by taxi drivers, market stall-holders and primary-school teachers. The remaining 200 responses in this sample were by residents of different places scattered all over Israel. However, about 70 per cent of this miscellaneous group identified themselves as residents of the three largest cities in Israel (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa) and other veteran, established localities in the central, wealthiest part of the country.

In view of these basic data, a pattern of attitudes distribution can at least be attempted. Most of the responses (180 = 61 per cent of the total *Maariv* sample) tended to describe the 'Israeli person' as utterly uncivilized, expressing a hostile, pessimistic view of it. 82 per cent of them (165 responses) are by people who presented themselves as residents of the big cities and other established localities. The blatant component in these responses is their cynical alienated tone, that of someone who excludes themselves from the collective. It seems as if all of these respondents actually felt obliged to demonstrate a dislike for their cultural surroundings, which they ranked below their own personal standards of 'culturedness'.

On the other hand, those who took a patriotic stance were mostly people from the periphery. While the ratio of such responses in the total of the sample is relatively small (27.8 per cent), they constitute the majority of those responses solicited from people in development towns and other lower status sectors (64 out of 95 people, i.e., 67 per cent). These responses tended to draw massively on the legendary virtues of

the native *Sabra*. They usually did it with overt empathy, without irony, sometimes declaring their own personal identification with it. For instance:

> An Israeli is someone who loves Israel and gives his whole life to it. *One like me*, who has never been out of the country, who tours it and buys only Israeli products. (emphasis added)

It should be borne in mind that demonstrating identification with the *Sabra* archetype, taken usually to be an icon of the Israeli veteran elite, is by no means compatible with the assumed *political* stances of the social groups with which these respondents are usually affiliated. In fact, voting patterns in development towns are usually interpreted as expression of resentment towards what they view as the hegemonic veteran culture (Arian & Shamir, 1999). Regardless of the question how 'sincere' these speakers are in evoking the *Sabra* image, the very fact that they chose openly to hold fast to it suggests that they prefer to present themselves as participating in the cultural mainstream rather than setting themselves apart (Ben-Sira, 1988).

This rough distribution of attitudes between center and periphery reveals a dynamics of 'chase and flight' (McCracken, 1990; Gladwell, 1997) so characteristic of processes of repertoire-diffusion in whatever domain of culture: the more a leading repertoire sanctioned by dominant groups stabilizes as the mainstream, and the wider its reception even in the periphery, the more its value decreases for those in the centre. This sample of representations suggests that the veterans, who are more confident in their Israeliness and feel closer to the cultural core, allow themselves to openly disparage its collective image, without risking their secured belonging. However, what they feel obliged to reject still function for people in marginal groups as valuable assets, the adoption of which signalizes their integration.

2. The Attitudes of Contributors of Internet Talk-backs

As mentioned, this large sample comprises discussions incited as a reaction to 14 Internet reports dealing with the bad reputation of Israeli tourists abroad. The writers of these reports express their concern and assume the position of ambassadors of good will, calling for a change of attitude on the part of Israelis in order to improve their image. The talk-backs are addressed to the writer or to other respondents, often creating a direct dialogue between different individual respondents. The dozens to hundreds of talk-backs in each case create fierce confrontations of attitudes among the contributors. In his insightful analysis of such talk-backs, Ribke (2004) traces an interaction between three groups of respondents, taking into account hints made by them with regard to ethnic and political factors. Following this important preliminary analysis, in a broader scope of such material, a complex interplay of attitudes, wavering between outside and inside standpoints, can be observed. We can establish that at least four different strategies are used in disputing or confirming the collective image of the 'uncivilized Israeli'. Individual respondents do not necessarily

employ consistent strategies. There may be incongruities in the stances expressed by one and the same person, or their stance may be contextually revised in response to provocations by other respondents. However, these strategies seem to constitute, in general, four recognized options of position-taking which are available to insiders of Israeli culture as participants in this negotiating of identity game. These four strategies may be described as follows:

(a) *Alienation*: People taking this stance utterly reject what they characterize as an uncivilized behaviour of Israelis to the point of denying any common ground with those 'other Israelis' who they claim perform it, complaining they suffer from a collective stigma because of 'them'. They report feeling repelled and demoralized: '. . . go to the beach and try to find a clean stretch of sand', says one of them,

> there are plenty of garbage cans . . . but the Israelis would not get up and walk four meters with an empty bottle if they can simply leave it on the beach. I am furious every time I go to the beach. Who are those people? Where have they grown up? How do their homes look like? Why don't they have the slightest sensitivity for the others? (Limon, 2001d, #30)

Often, drawing the line between 'you' and 'us' comes as a direct response to another respondent, for instance:

> When I read your response I felt repulsed by you and all the environment you represent. If Israelis knew how to behave then there would be no need in this report and in actions to protect our reputation. But there are some people who think that everything goes and that 'no one should tell us what to do'—this is how we look like, all because of you . . . (Limon, 2001f, #15)

The aggressive rejection expressed in these messages is often enhanced through the use of extremely offensive terms, such as 'animals', 'baboons', 'barbarians', and the like. For example:

> To my regret, there's nothing one can do about it . . . If I, on an airplane, see 2 Israeli friends who did not get to be seated together and are determined to sit next to one another without regard for a married elderly couple (and all that without getting permission from anyone) disregarding requests by the married man who shows them that they have taken his and his wife's seats, and he is getting scorn and rejection from them, and I am talking about young people 25–26 years old; what else remains to be said? If at that age there's no respect for elderly people and basic rules [of behaviour] between one person and another, how can one teach these animals to behave politely? How? Absolutely disgusting. (Limon, 2001a, #117)

Usually these talk-backs recommend individual solutions of detaching oneself from the Israeli collective. People report they remained silent in certain situations 'in order to avoid being heard talking Hebrew' (Sade, 2001, #32); or that they pretended to have a non-Israeli passport while travelling abroad in order to avoid being treated badly (Sade, 2001, #46). Sometimes, however, this stance is pushed to the extreme

and verges on giving up on Israeli society altogether. Some respondents declare their wish to emigrate and cut themselves off the local culture, while others say they have already done that. For instance:

> To all the ugly Israelis: thanks!!! . . . Thank you for helping me to understand that my place is not among you. Thanks for pushing me to leave the country and discover the good life . . . I feel sorry . . . sorry for you the beautiful Israelis . . . I am never coming back. (Limon, 2001b, #18)

This is obviously an ultimate expression of participating-through-detachment, given the fact that this stance is uttered after all in an internal Israeli forum.

(b) *Reproach combined with deep concern*. This is a most common and very 'politically correct' strategy. Those who employ it totally reject manifestations of 'uncivilized behaviour', yet also express a sense of collective responsibility. In this way they show engagement without identification. They speak about 'us' but in a patronizing way that implies their being more civilized and cosmopolitan than the average Israelis. For instance:

> In my trips abroad, too, I realized that the Israeli public simply does not know how to behave. And it is a shame. Even without this, our reputation in the world is ruined. Those who go abroad should be taking [before] a workshop in human-relations. (Limon, 2001a, #14)

Their typical reactions are shame on behalf of their compatriots, and calling for active participation in spreading norms of civilized behaviour. For instance:

> I just came back from a vacation in Eilat [a resort town on the Red Sea], and more than anything else I was disturbed by those parents who, when their kids are instructed that 'feeding the fish is forbidden' in the coral reserve, they not only not apologize, but [actually] take the piece of bread from the kid's hand and feed [the fish] themselves. Ill-mannered adults grow up from kids who are raised with bad manners! Parents: take responsibility!!! (Palter, 2002, #94)

While these respondents usually believe in education and often say that 'everything starts from home', they also tend to express their civic awareness by demanding a solution from state institutions, notably from the system of education, the police, and the legal system. For instance:

> This behaviour does not start at the airport. These people also act the same way in buses, in supermarkets, in the cinema and everywhere in the country . . . There is only one solution: an iron fist! See the case of Singapore; it is heaven on earth because they were brought up the hard way. (Limon, 2001b, #10)

(c) *Denial*. This strategy is more evasive and self-contradicting, in ranging between total denial of the notorious behaviour of Israelis, to admitting its manifestations but trying to trivialize and belittle it. Those who employ this strategy are not willing, or not

in the position to condemn the collective 'Israeli person'. While demonstrating national loyalty seems to be what they value as their strongest advantage over the 'snobs' and 'deserters', they also acknowledge the importance of being civilized. For instance:

> Personally I have serious troubles with the term 'ugly Israeli'. True, we are a nation that needs improvement in numberless points, but this recent fashion, in which we praise the European people and on the other hand never stop talking obscenely in self-criticism, in violent expressions and in burning hatred for the state and for the people—I am fed up with all these, too. (Limon, 2001f, #10)

Manifestations of this attitude oscillate between several ways of denial. One way is killing the messenger, that is, discrediting the motives of those who complain about Israeli's bad behaviour, saying, for instance:

> everyone who supports you and there are many like you here is motivated by hatred and lack of self love as if this will help them become Swedish. (Limon, 2001d, #67)

or:

> maybe there was a note of anti-Semitism here? Who knows. (Palter, 2002, #89)

Another way is to minimize the effect of the alleged bad behaviour when it comes to Israelis, by comparing it with that of other national groups. For example:

> Not long ago I was in Budapest and ran into a large group of tourists from Spain. A noisy, screaming bunch, that made the Israelis look like well behaved children in comparison to them. But lo and behold, I didn't see any Hungarians getting angry or becoming hostile [towards those Spaniards]. Nor did I see Spaniards from the group trying to hush them or calm them down. (Limon 2001a, #84)

Pertaining to this rhetoric is also the claim that blaming all Israelis with rude behaviour is an unfair generalization:

> Whenever I am abroad and a gang of British, French or Eskimo people disturbs me and does not let me sleep, I do not blame entire Europe of Vandalism. (Limon, 2001d, #67)

Yet another tactic of denial is to trivialize the damage caused by Israelis' misbehaviour and put it in proportion *vis-à-vis* serious existential problems the Israeli community is faced with. For example:

> It makes me wonder how far we have gone with our self-flagellation. Do we, over and above our lousy national security and economic situation—to put it mildly— have to deal with yet another problem? An attempt to show ourselves how bad, stupid and uneducated we are . . . (Limon 2001a, #121)

(d) *Provocatively defending the uncivilized behaviour*. Those who use this strategy in fact challenge the very common accepted norms of 'cultured' and 'uncultured'

behaviour, and turn them upside down, as an open act of protest. In doing so, some of them exploit ad absurdum the plain nationalist rhetoric of a 'persecuted chosen people', for instance:

> We are the chosen people and we are entitled to be violent, rude, corrupted, racist, and disrespectful . . . So let's disregard all the grumbling ones, who do not know how to be supportive, and carry on being light to the nations!! (Limon, 2001a, #170)

These respondents do not hesitate to declare themselves as those who perform the acts of hooliganism and often actually brag about their disregard for civilized codes of behaviour. The following talk-back, for instance, is titled: 'A self-righteous report— good for the barbarians!' and it says:

> There's nothing you can do, every time me and my folks are going abroad we do that to have fun, not to keep up some Israeli 'good boys' image. These gentiles are all anti-Semitist anyway, so they deserve that we burn their [hotel] rooms and hotels. Every time we jump the queue in Europe we do that as a protest . . . (Limon 2001d, #44)

This attitude is certainly the most intentionally political and radical, in calling for upheaval of cultural standards, and exposing the quasi-European pretensions of 'the civilized Israelis' as it were, calling them fake and detached from authentic Israeli life. Without explicitly saying it, their statement actually invokes the aura of 'the savage' which was assigned to the 'Native Israelis' in former generations by way of rejecting what they viewed as a decadent, affected European 'civilized life' (see, for instance, Rabau, 1982). According to this rhetoric, being Israeli means *being uncultured in a good way*. Applying this rhetoric today, however, inevitably invokes a sense of ethnic conflict and racial discrimination, for example:

> To all the gentle souls[:] take off your ugly color from your faces and don't let your nose scrap the sky[.] we live in the Middle East. (Limon, 2001b, #9)

or:

> Want a European country here?—don't count on it—we are Levantine people in a Levantine country and you should stick it well into your heads—and we shall rule here soon; we are the Israeli young generation who simply has got enough of civilized people like yourselves—you who are just putting on a nice face outwardly—inside the house you show up in your lack of all integrity and utmost hypocrisy. (Limon, 2001d, #122)

Mobilizing this argument of 'authenticity', these people claim priority as the genuine patriots *par excellence*, to the point of excluding all the others. Contesting another respondent, one person says, for instance:

> If you are so unhappy then go and leave. No one holds you here. With such an attitude you surely also haven't served in the army, and you surely also don't have

any patriotic feeling not even a bit. So you know what?? We don't want you here!!
(Limon, 2001e, #60)

This latter extremely militant strategy is however the least employed. By and large, most of the talk-backs in the sample do not dispute the accepted standards of 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' behaviour. They fight only over the questions to whom and to what extent either of these titles is applicable, and who is in a position to condemn the other. While the two extreme opposite attitudes sketched above—that of the 'deserters' and that of the 'patriots'—mark their holders as openly stepping out of the consensus, most of the talk-backs in fact express more ambivalent attitudes in negotiating the forms and degrees of their engagement in the Israeli common culture and the factors that determine their status in it. While the 'patriots'' statement seems to be meant as pointedly revolutionary, one of the newly arrived who 'have (yet) nothing to lose', the 'deserters'' statement appears as coming from a standpoint of veteran capital holders, whose privileged cultural standing forces them to always seek for further expressions of cultural distinction and higher threshold of participation. Unsurprising, they find all this in 'external resources' which they present as inaccessible to 'the masses'.[9]

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the application of these various strategies is often rather flexible and elusive, so that a person can shift perspectives and express more than one attitude in one and the same talk-back, as in the following example, in which the speaker shifts from a demoralized-alienated stance to an engaged-aggressive one:

> Regretfully, there is no cure to our behaviour problems. We are caught in a vicious circle in which if someone behaves like a civilized person he will be an exception and will be eaten alive. So why should we actually change? Who wants to be a sucker? We live in an environment of brutes . . . and our survival instinct makes us behave like brutes. (Limon, 2001b, #51)

Conclusions

The two forums of Israeli popular identity discourse examined here reveal that expressing detachment from and contempt for a collective identity are powerful strategies in this discourse. Technically, it is about what Israelis are *not*, which in fact implies what the speakers *aspire to be* (Hall, 1991). Establishing a negative collective image with which most of the individuals participating in this discourse make a point *not* to identify, allows each one of them to claim moral advantage over the 'masses' to which this image is said to apply, who are always 'the other Israelis'. However, adopting this negative, distinction-seeking attitude also creates solidarity among those 'concerned' ones. And the fact that it is so commonly presented in such popular forums of public discourse suggests that this solidarity permeates larger segments of society than a well defined upper class or intellectual elite.

What is at stake in most of these representations is how 'civilized' Israelis are. The manners mastered by a person appear to be, according to these representations, the

utmost parameter of judging 'what kind of person they are'. As in other cultural settings, this is eventually about establishing value boundaries (Lamont, 1992, 2000), which in essence is not different from more material forms of the same dynamics of distinction (Bourdieu, 1986; Carey, 1992). While in the reality of their lives these individuals may also compete for accumulating material status symbols, in their use of verbal platitudes about identity they are busy evaluating everyday practices so as to establish a value-scale of 'proper *behaviour*' and a 'civilized *mindset*'. This value-scale, however, does not necessarily comply with their *practiced* values. So, for instance, while overt materialism is strongly condemned by most of these respondents as a typical sign of lack of culturedness (Lamont, 1992), cars, TV sets, cell-phones, vacations and travelling abroad, hotels, restaurants, and many other icons of contemporary middle-class consumer culture, are mentioned as taken for granted components of their standard life-style. This implicit discrepancy between doxa and practical behaviour, which is a common feature of cultures in general, thus suggests that this popular discourse of identity constitutes a cultural practice that has a life of its own, with its own repertoire and evaluation system.

The scenarios represented in these samples reveal that what troubles Israelis the most is 'not being European enough'. This is interesting in light of the fact that critics of Israeli culture are mostly concerned with the trend of Americanization which prevails in the local popular culture (Azaryahu, 2000; Illouz & John, 2003). Apparently, the mythological image of a 'European person' still maintains its highest symbolic status as the canonical model for a civilized behaviour, which prevails even in everyday representations of identity. The aspiration to be 'like the Europeans', which means being 'like people of the World', certainly has to do with the growing reception of globalized culture that has transformed the tendencies of identity formation in Israeli society (e.g., Roniger, 1994; Moore & Kimmerling, 1995). However, it is also a rather long-standing tendency in the identity struggles that shaped this culture ever since pre-State times. In fact, very similar discontentment, if less aggressive and contemptuous, was pronounced by the older generation of Jewish immigrants in Palestine against the 'savage' behaviour and mindset of the Native younger generation (Even-Zohar, 1990; Elboim-Dror, 1996). A segment from a 1947 report in a Kibbutz bulletin, for instance, sounds rather similar to present-day complaints about the 'uncivilized Israelis':

> The atmosphere is determined . . . by the commoner who is of course a '*Sabra*', and he is a type which in our vocabulary is called 'animal'. The wildness sometimes reaches such proportions that it becomes unbearable . . . (cited in Kadish, 1995, p. 149)

This historical perspective may explain the continuous vital use of the canonical 'Native Israeli' archetype in present-day discourse of Israeli identity. Being today marginalized by the mainstream intellectual discourse, this identity option is apparently invoked by people with lesser symbolic capital, in two different ways. It is either deliberately adopted as an outdated-yet-glorified canonical symbol of

mainstream culture, by way of participating in the veteran society (*Maariv*), or, by contrast, implicitly invoked as a typical 'anti-civilized', 'counter-culture' evaluation system, in support of a radical change of the social power balance (*Ynet*). In this latter case, it no longer sustains its status as an all-embracing identity option, but rather that of a differentiating one.

Notes

[1] Because of the complex factors of Israeli identity, I restrict my present study to representations of identity produced by the largest sector of the predominantly secular Jewish population, leaving aside questions of identity of Arabs, Orthodox Jews, and other national and religious groups in Israel. I assume, however, that the strategies of shaping and sustaining a collective identity that emerge in this particular case are not unique but can also be found in other cultural settings.

[2] I am indebted to Nahuel Ribke for having allowed me to use some of the abundant material he presented in his M.A. thesis, supervised by me (Ribke, 2004). It goes without saying that I have learnt a lot from this study.

[3] The instruction was brief: 'What in you opinion makes one an Israeli? Call [a number], leave your first name, last name, and place of residence. The best [sic!] (and shortest!) messages will be published'.

[4] Dvorit Shragal, the editor of the column, explained in a personal communication that editorial intervention was limited to preliminary selection (5–10 responses were selected from dozens, often hundreds, received each week. Unfortunately, the large bulk of the discarded messages are lost). The guidelines of selection, according to her, have never been firmly determined. Nevertheless, a corrective discriminative policy seemed to have been unavoidable in favour of a gender and ethnic-balanced representation, so that the women's sample in the column is by far relatively larger than in the total of the recorded messages, and the same holds for bearers of typically *Mizrahi* names.

[5] The problem of such formulated questions and categories lies not only in the imposition of the surveyor's own biases on the respondents' scope of possible stances, but more acutely in the very assumption that all the respondents are equally equipped with 'a stance' on all matters to which they are asked to respond (see Bourdieu, 1983). This problem does not exist in the samples at hand.

[6] I am grateful to Michal Windsberg, Eyal Aviv, Tamar Katz and Uri Bar-On for providing me with additional collections of such expressions, and for their very helpful insights.

[7] The term which is often used by Internet talk-backs is 'The ugly Israeli'. This expression, which followed 'The ugly American' (Lederer & Burdick, 1959), has been adopted and circulated by Israeli press during the 1960s and has long became a wide-spread Israeli idiom (e.g., Millner, 1994; Shavit, 2001; Ribke, 2004).

[8] The ignorance of Arabic by Jewish Israelis is deplored for many reasons. In this context, the speaker evokes the symbolic status of Arabic as an autochthonous cultural asset to lament its being disregarded as such.

[9] In most cases the 'masses' remains an implied vague notion, unspecified in terms of ethnic or religious identities. However, there are cases where explicit references are made to 'Oriental', or Orthodox Jewish population. In still other representations, such insinuations are deliberately rejected to emphasize, instead, the speaker's aversion to mass culture ('the hordes') in general, and specifically to groups going abroad on cheap deals. For instance: 'I know usually the mob which arrives on cheap "vacation deals" is the source of all evils. There are also Dutch people like that, as well as Americans . . .' (Limon, 2001a, #2).

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