Anja Schmidt-Kleinert

INCLUSION THROUGH EXCLUSION

How Young Immigrant Israelis in the Nationalist Yisra'el Beitenu Party Read Israeli Citizenship

[transcript] Political Science

From:

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How do young people from immigrant families become engaged in politics? Anja Schmidt-Kleinert examines the case of young Israelis who are actively engaged with the nationalist Yisra'el Beitenu party, led by the Israeli minister of defence, Avigdor Lieberman. She explores how the activists present Israeli citizenship in a way that is exclusionary to non-Jewish citizens and analyses their strategy to actively construct a sense of belonging to Israeli society or, more precisely, to the Jewish collective by (re-) producing the ethno-nationalist discourse.

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1 Introduction

Unlike in most other destination countries of Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union (FSU), Israelis with an FSU family background have founded several political parties on the national level. One of the still existing ones is the Yisra'el Beitenu party (Hebr., Our House Israel, hereinafter also IB).

Avigdor Lieberman, who had immigrated to Israel from Moldova in 1978, back then a Soviet Republic, founded the Yisra'el Beitenu party in 1999. Lieberman became a member of the Likud party, served as the "former director-general of the prime minister's office [Netanyahu]" and was a "long-term associate of Benjamin Netanyahu" (Khanin 2010: 106). According to Khanin, Lieberman left the Likud party because of a "major conflict with the traditional Likud establishment" (ibid.). The Yisra'el Beitenu party was founded as a "Russian right-wing political movement" (ibid.); the party's founding members comprised basically of four different groups: "former Likud members, previous members of the Yisra'el baAliyah party [another sectoral party representing the interests of Israelis with an FSU background], municipal activists of Ashdod Beitenu, and former Soviet Zionist activists" (ibid.). In 2006, Lieberman's party first entered the governing coalition of the former Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert; the party's political leader, Avigdor Lieberman, was appointed to the new post of Minister for Dealing with Strategic Threats. In the 2009 general elections for the 18th Knesset, the Israeli parliament, the Yisra'el Beitenu party won 11.7 per cent of the total votes, i.e. 15 seats; among its voters were Russian-speaking immigrants as well as Israeli-born voters. The party became the third largest parliamentary group in the Knesset, and Lieberman was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Benjamin

Netanyahu. Within ten years of its existence, Lieberman's party had succeeded in expelling the Labour party, one of the two oldest and biggest Israeli political parties, from the first ranks.

Yet, ever since Lieberman's appearance in the front lines of Israeli politics, several voices in Israeli and international media as well as the public have discussed whether this would provoke a trend in Israeli politics toward a more ultra-nationalist and extreme right policy. In this context, Lieberman and his political party have been characterised as "right-wing extremist", "nationalist" or "racist"; and Israeli media have shown concern especially about Lieberman's verbal attacks against Palestinian citizens and concrete political actions, particularly law initiatives introduced by party representatives in the Knesset.[1]

Previous research papers that deal with the Yisra'el Beitenu party have adopted some of the attributes ascribed to the party or its leader in the media discourse, e.g. by referring to the party as an "extreme right-wing party headed by a West Bank settler, Avigdor Lieberman" (Peled 2011: 278), or a "Russian party" (Meller 2010: 1). Against the background of the emergence of the Yisra'el Beitenu party, in particular the degree of political adaptation of Israelis with an FSU family background to the patterns of the Israeli majority has been questioned. Newspaper articles, but also scientific research, have taken for granted a certain inclination or predisposition of those immigrants (not only in Israel) for "conservative" or even extreme right political attitudes. Quantitative studies on political attitudes of (1st generation) Russian-speaking Israelis suggest a certain stable set of those attitudes described as more right-wing and conservative than those of other Jewish segments in Israeli society (e.g. Philippov/ Knafelman 2011; Philippov/ Bystrov 2011; Arian et al. 2010). The authors imply that as a group they carry a particular "collective habitus", namely that of a "Soviet man" (Horowitz 1989), which is distinct from that of native-born Israelis and which can be explained by their socialisation in the former Soviet Union, or by post-Soviet realities. Those empirical studies struggle with the seemingly contradictory findings that those Israelis on the one hand claim an increasing

1 However, interestingly, as I am writing up the analysis of my material the Yisra'el Beitenu party is no longer considered the most dangerous party of Netanyahu's government, but Naftali Bennett's HaBait haYehudi (Hebr.: The Jewish Home) is—though Lieberman's approaches have not changed.

sense of belonging (Arian et al. 2010: 81-3), yet, on the other hand, display political attitudes, which are interpreted as hints to the maintenance of a "Soviet legacy" (Khanin 2011: 56). However, there are few voices, who acknowledge that the electoral success at the national level also shows the party's ability to take on sentiments of (the Jewish) Israeli society and gain political use of it. Against the background of the party's electoral success, it is no longer true that its constituents are recruited mainly among Israelis with a Russian-speaking family background.

On the contrary, the party has become a mainstream phenomenon—and problem. Thus, the idea for the present study stems from the observation that despite several consecutive electoral successes of Yisra'el Beitenu in Israel since 2006, the media discourse about the party is rather negative. The point of departure was the question of how young Israelis with an FSU family background (the so-called "1.5th" and second generations), who engage in the framework of IB, speak about their civic engagement in a broader sense and about their political engagement with IB in particular. In this context, I argue that previous research has asked the wrong questions about the phenomenon of the emergence of the Yisra'el Beitenu party, but also the party's passive and active supporters. I argue that questions like the following two examples from previous studies—whether the Yisra'el Beitenu party is a "Russian party", or whether IB voters support strong leadership because of their "Soviet legacy", do not help to understand the phenomenon. This is true for the younger generation of Israelis with an FSU family background who have lived in Israel for most of their lives, as much as for Israeli-born supporters of the party. Instead, an approach which delves into the underlying reasonings of the IB constituents' political choice is needed.

In addition, looking for possible explanations in adjacent areas of research does not offer much in understanding the phenomenon at hand. Most empirical studies on civic engagement either concentrate on an individual's current psychological state of mind or belief system, or on the process of socialisation, in which the individual belief system that motivates engagement develops; yet, they rarely combine both aspects. Besides, previous studies—to my best knowledge—hardly answer the question of how people rationalise their civic engagement.[2]

2 One of the few exceptions is Helen Haste's lay theory approach.

Rather, previous empirical studies usually look at civic engagement from an entirely positive angle. Ever since Almond and Verba's classical study on civic engagement, citizens, who are actively engaged, are considered as representing a civic ideal and to show particular features like political interest or democratic values. Studies on civic engagement agree that the active involvement of citizens in public matters is essential for the establishment and maintenance of stable democracies. In the normative eyes of society as well as of the researchers, active engagement is presented as "a civic virtue" (Almond/ Verba 2016). Engagement with a political party that by considerable portions of society is considered to not represent those democratic values, is not addressed in those studies.

Yet, this is just the case with the interviewees taking part in the present study. Immigrant (political) adaptation, again, is usually looked at from the angle of structural adaptation to the host society, or single aspects or resources but not with a holistic approach combining the macro and micro levels. Moreover, it is rather an exception that immigrants are considered architects of their own fortune.

Departing from the current state of research just described, I suggest a different approach to understand the (political) adaptation of immigrants in the present study. Taking Israelis with an FSU family background, who engage with the Yisra'el Beitenu party, as a case study, I suggest taking their perspective, and, above all, regarding them as active in their process of adaptation. The initial research interest of the present study was to understand how the participants had become engaged with the Yisra'el Beitenu party. I organized the research by applying a grounded theory approach, which has two advantages: a) it enables the researcher to take a micro-sociological perspective or the perspective of the individual as a social actor, and b) it equips the researcher with a flexible methodological framework, which is open to developing new theoretical insight. In-depth interviews about the individual paths of the participants toward civic engagement with IB served as the main data material; I conducted these interviews in 2009 and 2010. I applied a snowball system-approach and targeted young Israelis who, at the time the interviews were conducted, were active in various forms in the framework of the party. I interviewed party activists as well as those engaged in community activities and programmes, which co-operated in one way or another with a local branch of the party. In order to outreach to potential interviewees, I initially approached party

officials at different levels: national (i.e. members of the Knesset) as well as local representatives. In addition, I contacted student cells of the party within the students' councils at the Universities of Haifa and Tel Aviv. Yet, the most successful way to find interviewees was through a personal network of colleagues in Israel or German colleagues with contacts in Israel. When I approached the potential interviewees, I explained I would be interested in their story about how they had become engaged. I did not explicitly say, however, that I approached them because of their connection to the Yisra'el Beitenu party but instead only made the engagement with IB as well as the public discourse about the party and its political leader, Lieberman, a topic in the interview itself.

I conducted interviews with young Israelis (aged 18-29) with an FSU family background. Most of them had immigrated as children (the then oldest interviewee immigrated to Israel at the age of 11) from the former Soviet Union. The interviews were conducted in two field phases: in 2009—by chance not too long after the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) operation Cast Lead in the Gaza strip—I approached young activists who acted clearly in the framework of the party (members of the Knesset, parliamentary assistants, local spokesmen as indicated on the website of the party etc.). The participants I had interviewed in 2009 lived all over the country: in Bat Yam near Tel Aviv, in Ashdod (in the south, close to the Gaza Strip), Haifa, Jerusalem and in Ari'el in the Occupied Territories. In 2010, coinciding with the Gaza flotilla raid, I concentrated on Haifa and Natserat Illit (a neighbouring Jewish town of the Christian Nazareth).

In the course of the analysis of the interview material it became obvious that the interviewees first made their presentation of Israeli citizenship a central point of reference in their narratives, and second and used the notion of citizenship they presented as a discursive strategy to construct a *sense of belonging* to Israeli society. In particular, I have examined how the interviewees put their engagement in the context of their view of Israeli citizenship and the role they play as citizens, and they do so in two ways: on the one hand, they do it indirectly through narratives referring to personal experiences and/ or collective knowledge such as the public discourse about the political party they are engaged with. On the other hand, the interviewees do so directly by way of lining up their arguments, for example by reproducing or modifying the public discourse. Thus, in the further process I developed more detailed questions, in particular about how the

interviewees frame their engagement a) indirectly, through the reference to personal experiences and collective "reservoirs of knowledge" (Keller 2011a: 78), e.g. the public discourse about the political party they are engaged with, and b) directly, through argumentative strategies, such as the reproduction or modification of that public discourse, with their interpretation of Israeli citizenship and the role citizens have, and which are the goals they pursue by doing so. In a further analytical step, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social space, field, habitus, capital, and social practice serve as a theoretical-methodological framework, or, as introduced by Strauss (1987), a *coding paradigm*. In order to answer questions about immigrant's political incorporation, I argue that the various levels can be integrated into what Edgerton and Roberts called a "'structure-disposition-practice' explanatory framework" (Edgerton/ Roberts 2014). Their aim is to open up Bourdieu's key concepts of social space, capital, habitus, field, and practice for quantifiable research.

However, I suggest integrating Bourdieu's concepts into qualitative research on the political adaptation of immigrants—or rather one particular way of incorporation—in order to get a more comprehensive picture of how immigrant adaptation can work. Thus, in order to make Bourdieu's concepts applicable, I combine them with different approaches of discourse analysis. A sociology of knowledge-based approach to discourse analysis (SKAD), as suggested by Keller (e.g. 2011a), shall help to grasp *objective structures* because with the help of this method it is in particular possible to analyse collectively shared amounts of social knowledge, e.g. for instance in the form of patterns of interpretation. I understand social practice here as discursive, as Helen Haste (1992) in particular emphasises the impact of the situative context on an individual's line of argument.

In the present study, I can show how the interviewees actively construct a *sense of belonging* to Israeli society based on a particular reading of Israeli citizenship: perceived *citizen's duties* of contribution and loyalty condition the allocation of *citizen's rights*. The interviewees present Israeli citizenship as a conditional relationship between *citizen's duties* and *rights*. They identify several segments, Jewish and non-Jewish in Israeli society, which—in their eyes—do not fulfil one (Jewish ultra-orthodox, "draft dodgers") or any (Palestinian citizens) of their *duties* as citizens. In contrast to those other segments, the interviewees claim to have fulfilled their *citizen's duties* and hence to be good citizens. Alongside with the adaptation of migrated and

Israeli anti-Muslim racism as rooted in the society's ethno-nationalist discourse, the interviewees feel legitimized to decide who *belongs* to the collective and who are the *ultimate (national) others*. Based on their individual strategies of coping with personal experiences, their perception of Israeli society and the Israeli ethno-nationalist discourse as well as their engagement with the Yisra'el Beitenu party, the interviewees construct three arguments:

- that the ultimate (national) others—non-Jewish, in particular the Palestinian, minorities—should be deprived of their basic citizen's rights and, consequently, their Israeli citizenship,
- that Palestinian citizens and non-citizens are an ultimate threat to Israel's security, and
- that Israel's security situation is directly linked to broader processes of what the interviewees present as an "Islamisation of the Western world".

The book is structured as follows: in the theoretical-methodological part (chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5) I will first outline the grounded theory methodology as developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, which serves as the methodological basis for the present study (chapter 2). In chapter 4, I will describe the process of data collection and analysis and describe the data material. Finally, I will explain the necessity to adapt the approach, in particular the coding paradigm, to the needs of the present study and offer an extension to it based on Bourdieu's work and different approaches to discourse analysis in chapter 5. In order to frame the empirical findings, chapters 3 and 6 review the state of research on three aspects I regard as important to contextualise the present empirical study: previous research on civic engagement, features of the Israeli society, the Yisra'el Beitenu party.

Part II outlines a material theory of *belonging*, as developed from the systematic analysis of the empirical material. In chapters 7 and 8, I will provide a descriptive analysis of the interviewees' objective position in social space as well as their *sense of place*, and their narratives of personal civic engagement, i.e. their motivation, sources, and (lack of) resources for becoming engaged. In chapters 9 and 10, I will show how the interviewees frame their narratives of civic engagement with a particular interpretation of Israeli citizenship and Israeli society. They present a conditional reading of citizenship, consisting of two dimensions of a *citizen's duties—contribution*

and *loyalty to the Jewish state*—, allocating *citizen's rights*. I will discuss these dimensions in detail. In chapters 11 and 12, I will show a) that and how the interviewees construct their *belonging* to the Israeli society on the basis of being good citizens and against the constructed notion of Palestinians as the *other*, and b) how the interviewees consider the Yisra'el Beitenu party as the rightful political representative of those good citizens. In the final chapter (chapter 13), I will summarise the main empirical findings and critically discuss those findings against the background of the study's theoretical considerations.