INTERVIEW

Israeli Utopianism Today: Interview with Adi Ophir

Joe Lockard

Adi Ophir is one of the central intellectual figures of the contemporary Israeli Left. He rose to public prominence prior to the first Intifada, when together with cultural studies critic Hannan Hever, he founded the Year 21 group to oppose Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Today Ophir is a philosophy professor at Tel Aviv University's Cohen Institute, from which he publishes on contemporary continental philosophy, ethics, and politics.

Ophir and Hever's engaged style of simultaneous intellectual and political embroilment, wherein Israel's social conflicts define an agenda for philosophical and cultural inquiry, has been deeply influential in formulating post-Zionist discourse. Ophir pursued these analyses as editor of *Teoria ve Bikuret* (Theory and Criticism), a leading Hebrew-language journal well known for its critiques of nationalism and nationalist culture.

This interview, conducted in early September 2004, explores Ophir's ideas on Israel's utopian visions, ones that regularly transform themselves or get transformed into dystopias. It exhibits both the potential and the problems of the Left in Israel, which has produced acutely perceptive analyses, even as left-wing parliamentary power has declined over years.

The despair that finally characterizes Ophir's responses—leaving him with a self-delegitimizing analogy of Israel to a racial apartheid regime—speaks to the frustration of an Israeli Left able to visualize possibilities for social justice and peace with the Palestinian people, but unable to achieve the political power necessary to achieve such visions.

JL: Israel today seems to function without a utopian consciousness, although it has a rich political tradition of utopianism: Ahad Ha'am, Ber Borochov, and far less-known "practical utopianists" like Enzo Sereni. What happened? Did utopia disappear from Israel's public consciousness?

AO: I think it is wrong to assume that "Israel today seems to function without a utopian consciousness." Israel is replete with utopian discourse, dreams, and plans. True, utopianism characterizes the Right, and especially the religious Right, more than the Left, and the social movements that dare to use utopian language are much stronger on the Right. But utopian discourse and utopian practices exist on both sides of the political spectrum.

On the Right, a new generation of "pioneers," who take the hills of Judea and Samaria as their frontier, dream about an empty landscape where they can build their scattered farms and develop their typical blend of fanatic religious faith, a new-age mentality, and individualism of the new brave Jew. Many of the old guys of Gush Emunim, who have been driven by utopian consciousness throughout their adult lives, still dream about a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which Jews settle everywhere in Eretz Israel and their presence is somehow accepted by a weakened and reduced Palestinian population. And there are all those who dream about a once-and-for-all violent solution of the conflict in the form of another war, transfer, or even worse.

On the Left, the Geneva Accord can be seen as an entirely utopian vision, though not a very inspiring one. And there is a tiny group of people who still—or once again—dream about some form of bi-national state, in which Arabs and Jews would share land and power in a system of government where the state would be separated from nation and nationhood, in the same way that it was once separated from the church.

However, the statement "Israel today seems to function without a utopian consciousness" does contain a grain of truth if one thinks only about the political sphere. Politics has deteriorated to such an extent that it lacks not only utopian consciousness, but self-consciousness and common sense. Political discourse has lost touch with reality: its cynicism is completely blind and its blindness is completely insane. Political discourse is sound and sober only when people speak about how to retain power, remain in office, or outpace their rivals. Politicians have lost even the little credibility they used to have. Greed, corruption, and avarice are shamelessly expressed everywhere. Hence, when one looks at Israeli politics, one can see no traces of utopian consciousness, as well as no reflective thinking of any other kind.

JL: When utopianism can arrive in the form of Gush Emunim's dreams of dispossession of Palestinians—or from

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the Islamicists dreams of a Palestine without Jews—how can we take advantage of its political potential while avoiding its pitfalls?

AO: Utopian discourse is an art of imagining the impossible as possible, of pushing the limit of the possible. From its inception it has been an ambiguous political tool with dubious morality. Plato's utopia is presented as the ideal city, the incarnation of good and justice, but it is a nightmare for anyone who does not accept the principles of Platonic ontology. If you don't share the socialist philosophical anthropology, you may mistake a socialist utopian community for a city of punishment, and in fact, this is precisely what happened to some socialist utopias.

Utopia has always been related to critique: Plato's critique of Athenian politics, More's critique of English nobility, socialist and Marxist critiques of capitalism, Zionist critique of Jewish life in exile, etc. This critique always had its anthropological, metaphysical, and moral assumptions. Critique shows what is wrong and assumes that things can be otherwise; it is already free from the reign of the real but is less certain about the possible. Utopian thinking pretends to know how to portray the good as logically possible but fails to (if we believe Marx), or rarely shows how to get there. In both cases, however, moral sensibility and the difference between good and evil are both assumed and articulated by critical and utopian discourse. The only way to avoid pitfalls of utopianism is by insisting on questioning its moral judgments and sensibilities. If utopia pushes the limits of the possible, it does so for the morally and the immorally possible alike. Therefore utopia can never come at the beginning of any serious moral or political thinking; it may come, if it should come at all, only later, after a certain moral ground has been secured.

JL: Much of the contemporary political utopianism you mention in Israel originates in critiques of ethno-national or religio-national identities; these find political translation. Radically visionary economic and class critiques, though, have little prominence outside of limited academic circles. Why did such social criticism decline?

AO: I completely agree with the first part of your statement: critique is not necessarily linked to utopian thinking, there is always an inadequacy in the translation of ideas to practice, and critique alone does not suffice to launch a political program. In fact, in itself, it is inadequate even as a theory, which should be playful and daring about the limits of the possible (what is thinkable, imaginable, etc.) no less than political action. I am less certain about the critical basis of contemporary utopianism. I suspect that it is often the other way around—critique originates in some utopian vision. For example, the vision of the land of Israel as an "Arabian" land comes first; criticism of policies that fail to meet this objective, and of political and social movements that oppose it, comes later. The same was true for many years of some versions of the vision of Peace Now.

But the really hard and important question is how to explain the decline of what you call "radically visionary economic and class critique." Frankly, I don't know, but I may try some hypotheses. Besides the shift to the Right and the triumph of neo-liberalism in most Western countries—which have their own sources—there are some local reasons. The first relates to the prominence of the Occupation in Zionist ideology. The Occupation has been the major project of the Israeli state since the early 1970s; it has polarized the political and ideological sphere, and the debate over its legitimization and ways to consolidate or dismantle it has overshadowed everything else.

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The second hypothesis, corollary to the first, is the role of nationalist categories and distinctions, which in themselves have been necessary for representing the Occupation, legitimizing it, or even justifying those who took part in the Occupation despite their disapproval of it. Within this scheme, class differences have been articulated in ethnic and national categories, while ethnicity and religious affiliations have become ways to express one's national identity and acquire recognition as "a good, faithful national subject." Even now, when the destruction of the welfare state and the forsaking of the lower classes is visible and undeniable, social movements that have been struggling against the dominant economic ideology of all Israeli governments since the late eighties are unable to overcome the nationalist barrier or to think about social and economic stratification of Israeli society as a cause, and not only as a result, of national and ethnic differences.

JL: How do you evaluate the present contest between secular and religious efforts to define family, social, and national life?

AO: In Israel today, secularism, as a worldview and a political position, is mainly embodied in a chauvinist, almost racist political party (Shinui), the politics of which is a politics of hatred, fear of the other, and oppressive nationalist

homogenization. It demonstrates all the disadvantages of the intolerance of French Republicanism without any of its universalist advantages. The very presence of this secularist discourse of hate forces one to distance oneself from any position that assumes that the separation between church and state should imply one form of citizenship; it also makes one more careful about the very distinction between secularist and religious positions.

I think that the real opposition is between conservatives and fundamentalists on the one hand, and humanists on the other. Secular conservatives and religious fundamentalists may fight each other, but they share a belief in ultimate truths and a conviction that these truths are in their hands. Humanists may be religious or not and interested in the process and labor of secularization or not, but they share a suspicion of human pretensions to express absolute values and infallible truths and respect for the finite nature and fragility of human beings. Thus, for example, the transformations or redefinitions of the family, the community, and the nation offered by feminists, queer theory, and post-colonial theory are not necessarily secularist or anti-religious—though they definitely oppose certain religious traditions; in fact these transformations transcend the boundary between the religious and the secular.

Some of these experiments in new forms of the social are certainly utopian. Others may be new forms of oppression, but I don't think that in either case they reflect a particular religious or secularist position. The belief in the historicity of gender, for example, is compatible with a certain conception of God and the historicity of His Word and Law, whereas the national mobilization of the family is a modernist and mostly secular project. While religious movements try to mobilize the state in order to exclude and prevent certain sexual practices and the transformation of the family, it is nationalism rather than religion that seeks to determine the relation between the family and the state and to construct the family as mediation between the body of the individual and service to the nation. The nationalized family has become a place where the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the nation becomes acceptable, acquires its redeeming meaning, and where young boys and girls prepare themselves for the role of sacrificial victims.

In Israel, this role of secular nationalist in the formation of the family (of which the people who voted for Shinui take a very active part) seems to me much more significant and worthy of criticism than the religious opposition to the institutionalization of new forms of marriage. Utopia in this context would be fathers and mothers who conceive of themselves as the guardians of their children, who are obliged to protect them from the deadly projects of the state and struggle in order to find them safe haven when they are called to serve causes that have nothing to do with their welfare as individuals or members of the community. The mothers who established the protest movement against the war in Lebanon ("The Four Mothers"), and even more so the group of parents that proposes non-obligatory military service and tries to educate parents to redefine their relationship to the army ("New Profile"), are good examples of utopian elements in the work of social activists. Most of them are secular, it is true, but this is easily explained by the fact that religious boys and girls have legal and institutionalized ways to avoid the draft.

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JL: You appear to be circumventing the role of religion in Israeli society, apparently viewing it as secondary to and less damaging than Sharon-style nationalism. Other analyses would point to the current inseparability of religion and citizenship as a continuing source of inequality, disenfranchisement, and human rights violations.

AO: Yes, I do circumvent the role of religion in Israeli politics. There is no role for "religion" in Israeli politics, only for various and different religious parties and movements. Thus, for example, the nationalist-racist interpretation of rabbinic Judaism of the Gush Emunim and its descendents is not "religion," but a particular outcome of the modernization of halachic discourse and its displacement from exilic to sovereign national existence. And this interpretation would have been negligent without the willing cooperation of secular nationalists and the military state apparatus. It is not religion that makes me be ashamed of being Israeli today, but nationalism. Indeed, religious movements take much of the responsibility for the new form of Jewish racist nationalism, for the "Kahanization" of Judaism, but what is evil about their position is their nationalism, not their religion. I believe that these two can and should be differentiated. Think about the role of Shas, and how different it is from that of the nationalists—after all, it was Shas that in the early nineties made the Oslo Accord possible.

JL: Sixteen years ago you and others organized the long-defunct Year 21 group with an analysis and program seeking to end Israel's colonial occupation of Palestine. Year 21 definitely had the visionary consciousness of social alternatives that we discussed at the beginning. Now we are at Year 37. So can we return to the initial question and ask again "what happened?"

AO: I am not sure I can answer your final question. However, let me use this opportunity to say something about what happened to some of us intellectuals since 1987. In 1987, when we established the "The 21 Year" movement (just before the outbreak of the first Intifada), to name the Israeli presence in the Palestinian territories was the critique—to end the Occupation was the utopia. Today, both are inadequate.

Seventeen years ago we understood that the Occupation was not one more project that the state of Israel took upon itself, a project of the kind that going to the moon was for Americans or rebuilding Berlin has been for Germans, in which a government defines a mission for the nation. We understood that the Occupation was rather the mission that defined the State and structured its society, economy, and culture. Today, to speak about an Occupation is no longer adequate, because the domination of a whole people devoid of rights over such a long period (a period that is now longer than the time passed from the Balfour declaration to the establishment of Israel) has created a new regime in Israel-Palestine, a Jewish form of apartheid. It is not that Israel is a democracy with a certain problem called the West Bank and Gaza; it is rather the case that the Israeli apartheid regime contains a Jewish-democratic enclave.

One cannot simply put an end to this situation with a series of political decisions. The entire regime must be deconstructed. Most people on the Left think that this can be done by national separation. I doubt this vision. It is based on the same nationalism that I so much abhor. Today, utopia is to dream of a separation of nation from state, so as to avoid the separation of the peoples and the partition of the land. Utopia, for me, is to believe that within the framework of a just political arrangement, respect can replace humiliation and hatred, and that there are material, political, and economic processes that can somehow bring people to see this and turn their bloody destiny into a decent future. It is out of a deep sense of despair that I write this, precisely because I don't want to give in to the much more reasonable and much more comfortable desperate, dead-end analysis. ❑