

**J14 in Tel-Aviv:  
A Different Kind of Protest Movement?**

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**Are the demands of *indignados* of all countries fundamentally the same, or does each movement have its distinctive style? For Sylvaine Bulle, Israel’s J14 movement must be understood as a critique of the state of exception.**

The outbreak of revolt in Israel constitutes a political turning point. The J14 movement,<sup>1</sup> also known as the “social justice movement” or the “tent protests,” comes after a long period of apathy and political stupor in Israel. The intensity and speed with which it has spread have astonished the entire political class, from the government to the Labor Party by way of the Peace Bloc. The military institutions and the religious parties were caught off guard. Of all the global protest movements, J14 is among the most striking and dynamic.

The housing crisis and the rising cost of living, which have affected all levels of society, are the revolt’s immediate causes. At the initiative of young residents threatened by real estate speculation, a first camp was pitched last June on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel-Aviv. This action, on the very spot where David Ben-Gurion announced the creation of a democratic Jewish state, triggered a vast occupation movement. By July 2011, ninety camps had been set up across the country, followed by a wave of demonstrations. Last September, one of the largest ones brought out over 500,000 people (followed by 2.5 million on October 29) protesting rising rents, the housing shortage, economic policy, budget cuts, and labor market flexibility. Astonished by the movement’s strength, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proposed a series of measures recommend by a committee of experts chaired by Manuel Trajbenberg.<sup>2</sup> But the government’s proposals did not disarm the movement. By the

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<sup>1</sup> The movement began in Tel Aviv on July 14, 2011—hence its name. See the Hebrew J14 site at [j14.org.il](http://j14.org.il).

<sup>2</sup> Manuel Trajbenberg is an Israeli economist with no political affiliation who is respected in academic milieus. As After the hearings requested by the government, the committee recommended the accelerated construction of 2.5 million housing units and rent control, as well as free education beginning at age three. The committee also recommended increasing taxes on capital.

fall, the tent camps had largely disappeared.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the people's assembly, the symbol of permanent occupation, now lies at the heart of the movement.

Protest, occupy, debate: at first glance, J14 resembles recent protests in Europe (the 99%, M15 in Spain, Occupy London) or in the United States (Occupy Wall Street). It embraces the same radical critique of economic liberalism and the privatization of the state. Like other global revolts, particularly in Arab countries, J14 has experimented with a distinctive insurgent style, including the use of tent camps to occupy public space and, thanks to social network sites, the proliferation of micro-movements that have made the movement a “happening” and allowed it to grow. Yet J14 also has specific demands related to the Israeli context, in which the patriotic state (i.e., attachment to the Israeli nation and national sovereignty) occupies a special place.

### **A Zionist Social Revolt**

As in the Spanish, American, and European democratic protest movements, J14 embraces a radical critique of the state, which has become inseparable from neoliberal economic rationality.<sup>4</sup> The group sees a clear connection between capitalism and the crisis of institutions. Israeli neoliberalism manifests itself in the Netanyahu government's alliance with and subservience to Israeli oligarchies, which the current government respects more than such “pillars” of the state as the military. The group denounces corruption and the depletion of resources by eight “tycoons”—the eight wealthiest families who control the country's most important assets (including the gas, media, real estate, and financial sectors). Against the alliance between the state and capitalism, “the people want a new state of Israel: one based on social justice.”<sup>5</sup>

Like similar movements, the group is comprised of heterogeneous and distinctive forces that have united to form a community of revolt. The protestors hail from various horizons: young people, previously apolitical students, military officers and *refuzniks* (i.e., officers who refuse to service in the Palestinian Territories), mothers and fathers, workers and managers whose purchasing power is declining, European and Eastern Jews, secularists and

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<sup>3</sup> Except, that is, for a few camps formed by victims of the housing crisis in Tel-Aviv's suburbs. The Rothschild camp was evacuated on September 14, despite the fact that Tel-Aviv's mayor had authorized the occupants to stay.

<sup>4</sup> See Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *La nouvelle raison du monde*, Paris, La Découverte, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> This language comes from the beginning of the J14's manifesto (in Hebrew).

the ultra-Orthodox. In this respect, J14 and its assembly are the flip side of “empire,”<sup>6</sup> to use Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s term—that is, the oligarchs known as “tycoons,” who hold Israel’s greatest fortunes (in finance, media, and public services).<sup>7</sup> They are also the flip side of a political model based on the unifying role of the state, achieved through military service, national sentiment, and political sovereignty.

Here we see the J14 movement’s first particularity: its critique of national sovereignty. It is well known that an obsession with external sovereignty shapes Israel’s national priorities, as an important share of the Israeli state budget is devoted to security and the military, notably for interventions in and the surveillance of the Palestinian Territories, as well as the defense of the settlements. More substantially, the importance given to national security is tied to the essential notion of a human community united by destiny and organized around a state that protects the homeland from foreign enemies. This fixation on foreign threats, bolstered by recent wars (in Gaza and Lebanon) and the administration of the Palestinian Territories has been a national obsession for five decades. It has shaped laws and institutions at the expense of internal solidarity. It has helped to anesthetize politics. The movement is a refusal to let democracy be hijacked by geopolitical concerns and, in particular, by the “situation”—the term that Israelis use to refer to the Palestinian and Arab-Israeli question.

“We are all occupied” proclaims one of J14’s slogans. In other words, Israeli politics creates walls—between Israelis and Palestinians, but also between Israelis themselves. The goal, to use the words of one participant, is to restore social security instead of national security, to stir people up and to place ordinary economic concerns once again at the heart of national political debates. One of the movement’s goals is to end the state of exception<sup>8</sup>—in other words, to create a state and a people that would no longer be subject to military sovereignty and religious interests.<sup>9</sup> The Palestinian question was, incidentally, quickly sidelined by the movement, both in the tent camps and during assemblies. This assertion of a cognitive and emotional disjuncture between the Palestinian problem and social justice is seen as one of the movement’s strengths. This is all the more true in that the “big quiet,” the term

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> The term “tycoon” plays on its similarity to the work “*Tiqun*” (an anarchist movement) and the expression “*Tikoun Olam*” (the social foundation of spirituality in Judaism).

<sup>8</sup> One could compare Israel’s policies to the Schmittian conception of sovereignty based on decision rather than deliberation, the distinction between friend and foe, and the limiting and protective function of the Nomos.

<sup>9</sup> Religious interests wield increasing power in decision- and investment-making bodies (public service concessions, mixed-capital or privately owned real estate companies, etc.).

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu uses to characterize current Israeli policy (that is, “neither war no peace”), achieved by building a unilateral border with the Palestinian Territories, satisfies a large sector of Israeli public opinion.

The movements’ participants declare: “the people demand justice” (*Haa’m Doresh tzedek hevrati*). The success of “people’s” demonstrations from September to October is due to this political reorientation, which anti-Zionism and the Peace Bloc had long kept out of sight. The occupying group accuses the Peace Bloc and pro-Palestinian non-governmental organizations<sup>10</sup> of overlooking issues of social justice. This is all the more true in that opposition parties, including the Labor party and the Peace Bloc, do not seem in a position to challenge decisions made in the name of military and national sovereignty, nor to offer a credible alternative to the state’s neo-liberal governance.

It would thus be a mistake to identify the Israeli revolt as an anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian, or even anti-colonial movement. J14 with its people’s assembly is a national *sabri* movement, which places social justice at the top of its agenda. Its actors are trying to work from within society to found a new politics based by listening to the concerns of all its components. The assembly offers a forum to all kinds of subjectivity, without equalizing them or restricting any points of view.

### **A Social, Not a Cultural Struggle**

As was the case with the Spanish *indignados*, the people’s assembly is the movement’s living organism. It is an alternative and open public space that facilitates experimentation with different models of democracy, including those based on deliberation. A second specificity of the Israeli protests pertains to the cultural or even religious character of social question, as it is addressed through the assembly. In Israel, social differentiations are largely based on ethnicity. The Mizharim (Eastern Jews), who are often less privileged economically than the Azkhenazim (Europeans), see themselves as the victims of discrimination. Similarly, Arab Israelis do not recognize themselves in a representative democracy in which national policy gives Jews priority over non-Jews. In the period following the creation of the state of Israel, Israeli political activism was primarily involved in various minority struggles, including Jewish and Arab feminist movements, the rights of Arab

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<sup>10</sup> Including Shalom Arshav, Tayyush, B’tselem.

Israelis and, more recently, movements in favor of “invisible” minorities (such as Asian immigrants). These different struggles for cultural recognition testify to the existence of a diverse national citizenry embedded within Israel’s ethno-democracy.

The cultural question is thus an issue within the J14’s people’s assembly. This question complicates the movement’s views on direct democracy without dominating them. Moreover, just as it would be wrong to equate the Israeli revolt with anti-Zionism, it would be equally mistaken to view it as a subaltern struggle. Rather, J14 is a movement advocating a kind of social and political de-segregation that incorporates cultural difference. Its people’s assembly does not strive to consolidate society’s multicultural segments, as one might expect of a subaltern struggle, but instead seeks to break through the deeply entrenched boundaries that separate Israel’s communities. This priority given to social problems over cultural issues can be traced back to anthropological and moral principles that lie at the heart of Zionism. However, the belief in solidarity and the social contract that helped to found the nation state have gradually given way to multicultural society that is, admittedly, based on national rights, but which is in practice characterized by social separatism.

In this respect, it is no coincidence that peripheral citizens dwelling in the country’s poorest cities (like Ashdod, Afula, and Be’er Sheva), and particularly the *Mizrahim*, have joined the movement. They seek a redefinition of the very idea of social justice that underpins the social welfare state and want democracy to be recast. For them, a community of revolt appears in many respects the only plausible democratic framework at present. By joining the people’s assemblies, they are critiquing the right-wing populist parties that monopolize Zionist discourse (the Likud) and the parties that claim to represent them (like Shas). Similarly, the Arab Israelis’ demand for social equality is one of the movement’s more or less unspoken preoccupations, despite the fact that Arab Israelis are a minority in the assembly, (though they did participate in the tent camps in Tel-Aviv).

In any event, if the movement unquestionably allows for the expression of cultural and ethnic difference (in the case of Eastern Jews and Arabs), the cultural and ethnic question also amounts to a meta-critique of broader economic issues. Spatial and social segregation, as well as the abandonment of social welfare policies in housing,<sup>11</sup> health, and education, affect the

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<sup>11</sup> There are 80,000 homeless families, according to estimates by the J14 assembly’s national coordinating committee in October 2011.

Mizrahim and other citizens who face discrimination due to their origins, but also the middle class. The people's assembly thus expresses a demand for justice arising from different experiences, occurring in intimate and familiar settings—homelessness in particular, but also social exclusion and joblessness.

### **The Resurgence of Civic Space**

Through the expression of cultural inequalities, it is the liberal state itself that stands accused of abandoning the civic sphere and the national discourse of solidarity, segmenting society along social and cultural lines. By claiming that the economy is a matter of public concern and that justice is a common good, protest democracy has taken back a civic realm that was left empty by the retreat of the government and political parties. The religious question is in this respect a symbolic element that entered the discourse of protest, allowing it to broaden its critique. A number of Haredim (ultra-orthodox)<sup>12</sup> religious figures have joined the people's assembly, which is mostly secular. Religious citizens see the J14's constituent assembly's as a way of reconstituting the relationship between the public and political spheres. The involvement of the ultra-orthodox, as well as a number of Breslovers (modernist Hassidim), is destined to reformulate the social and solidarity contracts that lie at Zionism's foundation. Using ethical arguments, they occasionally denounce the participation of religious Jews in financial companies and the liberalization of the state. Cultural pluralism is accepted by the movement's different constituencies, including Arab citizens. For what is unique about the movement is its contribution to demarginalizing minorities and other groups within Israeli society—in other words, to weaving the bonds of the national community anew by restoring social bonds to their primacy over cultural and religious affiliations.

The Israeli revolt should thus be situated over and above the relatively limited horizons of postcolonial, anti-Zionist, and pacifist struggles. It appears to participate in a new democratic temporality, one that has been disclosed by the retreat of politics, in a democratic space that demands to be occupied.<sup>13</sup> It is effectuating a renewal of critique through a denunciation of the country's political economy. It has constructed the people's assembly as a parliament of individuals arising from far and wide. It is bringing together society's haves and the have-nots around a new vision of the common good: no longer the nation state, but social

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<sup>12</sup> One finds, for instance, figures like Adina Bar Shalom, the daughter of the Grand Rabbi Ovadia Youssef of the Sephardic Community and a member of Shas (the pro-government ultra-orthodox party).

<sup>13</sup> See Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique: XIXe et XXe siècles*, Paris, Seuil, 1986.

justice. This kind of experimentation in a new political culture draws on anarchist, utopian, Situationist, and even early Zionist forms of sociability. The aesthetics of revolt that it embraces also entails the use of visuals, objects, and semantics (notably that of the Torah), which it couples with social critique.

### **True Democracy, the Return of Class, or Revolutionary Populace?**

As with other global movements (the 99%, the *Indignados*, OWS), it can be difficult to distinguish between reformist and radical grammars of dissent. At the heart of these movements, one finds the same refusal of traditional political forms—specifically, of democratic representation—the same desire to reassert the will of the people, and the same rejection of the boundaries between activism and citizenship. J14 in particular draws a line between direct and representative democracy, between state paternalism and social self-transformation. By demanding the abolition of privilege, the end of the predatory economy,<sup>14</sup> the principle of equality between all citizens, and the supervision of resource usage, the revolt is articulating demands of a revolutionary nature that do not rule out violence, while challenging institutions and “tycoons” that are tied to the state. Similarly, accounts of individual suffering and existential ordeals<sup>15</sup> are characteristic of a revolt that is striving for political emancipation. Based as it is on the disclosure of a side of reality that political parties refuse to see, such critique seems little inclined to reformist negotiation. Finally, the abandonment of routine protests, such as the pro-Palestinian demonstrations that have occupied the public realm for years, testifies to the movement’s radical character.

For all these reasons, the revolt amounts to a meta-critique that lies outside the social order and which is incompatible with parliamentary democracy. Yet at the same time, these multiple grammars of revolt do not exclusively advocate the overthrow of the state by the revolutionary “populace.” For instance, the democratic and emancipatory process seems at times to be focused on the organization of a civic space in which different cultural spheres would converge. One might once again speak of a “multitude” of individuals united by the same ontology of precariousness within our postmodern Empire. One might, finally, propose the hypothesis of a return of social class, as J14 reflects a real social order in which economic, social, racial, and religious factors are combined. The movement might seek to inflect the

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<sup>14</sup> Theories of a conspiracy against the state rolled out by the Israeli press over the summer reinforced the movement’s radical character.

<sup>15</sup> On the role of critique and existential ordeals, see Luc Boltanski, *De la critique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009.

factors that structure society or to play a role in the renewal of the social welfare state, by defending the principles of solidarity and distributive justice that are constitutive of the social contract.

Revolutionary, utopian, “multitudinous”: could this form of democratic experimentation exist outside an institutional-political order and perpetuate itself as an ontology of a shared world? Though at first it was extravagant and exuberant, the Israeli movement seems increasingly guided by realistic principles. It seems strong enough to withstand the cynicism and interference of the media, government forces, and the existing political space. But it must aspire to truly reinvent critical and political institutions. The question now is whether J14 will be capable of establishing itself and of substantially redrawing the parameters of the political landscape, particularly relating to the question of social justice and the sovereignty of the Israeli nation-state, which symbolically “occupies” the minds of Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>16</sup> Discussions are already underway between the people’s assembly and generals in the military. It is here that, in part, the movement’s democratic promise lies.

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting here that protest movements (May 15) uniting various activist groups (like Al Herak Al Shababi Mustakel) have arisen in Palestine. These are nationalist but anti-governmental movements, inspired by the Egyptian revolt. They call for Palestinian unification and an end of international governance in Palestine. They are based on a radical critique of the new spirit of Palestinian liberalism (in other words, the liberal policies of the Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad and the principles of economic peace). But it is impossible to imagine a rapprochement between the Israeli and the Palestinian movements.