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Ethnicity and National Memory: The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) in the Context of the Palestinian National Struggle

YEHOUDA SHENHAV*

ABSTRACT *The article examines the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) as a community of memory, operating within the realms of Israeli national memory, endeavouring to refurbish them but dismantling them instead. A central thrust of the analysis (which refers to the period 1975–1999) concerns the anomalous relationship between nationalism and ethnicity. WOJAC's aspiration was to operate in the national arena, to counterbalance the claims of the Palestinian leadership on the right to the Land and on the refugee question. But to its chagrin the State institutions construe its activity as ethnic subversion. The fluid transition from national to ethnic interpretation reflects the contradiction that underlies Jewish nationalism and its ambivalence towards practising 'Mizrahi ethnicity'. Deriving from this contradiction, and from the praxis of construction and dismantlement that characterizes the activity of WOJAC, a contingent examination is undertaken of analytical categories such as 'national identity', 'Zionism', 'history', 'place', and 'territory' in the Middle East.*

Introduction

Where do Jews from Arab lands who live in Israel visit their past? How do they make contact with their historical sources? On any given day dozens and hundreds of Israelis visit memorial sites such as the Diaspora Museum, the Centre for the Heritage of Babylonian Jewry, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, the Israel Museum: places of collective memory—Israeli and Jewish—that document, preserve, refurbish, and reconstruct the past. Do these sites allow for a variety of identities, a multiplicity of memories, or are they only vast malls for consumers of standard memory? How is the memory of the Jews from

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Arab lands in Israel shaped in an era when historical memory is manifested as national texts?

Pierre Nora views 'realms of memory' (*lieux de memoire*) as places where memory is institutionalized as memorial sites, monuments, textbooks, ceremonies, photo albums, museums, assemblies, or even public figures (Nora, 1992; see also Kritzman, 1997). Realms of memory compartmentalize spontaneous memory and demarcate it in isolated sites; private memory is appropriated and reformatted as an institutionalized configuration possessing a logic of its own, generally the national logic. In lieu of the concept 'realm of memory' I use, as an analytical category, the concept of a 'community of memory'.¹ A community of memory, as I will argue below, contains a multiplicity of voices, a cacophony of arguments and counter-arguments, testimonies, and facts that generate a dynamic memory, receptive to a dialectic of memory and forgetting. In contrast to a historiographic project that sets out to conquer the past, to tame and domesticate the unruly voices and squeeze them into one continuity, a community of memory is chaotic and unconquerable.

In this article I will use texts and documents produced by the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) over a period of 25 years, in order to examine the organization as a community of memory operating in Israeli national realms of memory. The article will show that even though the organization began its work along ostensibly familiar lines, the historical and cultural narrative it put forward did not succeed, contrary to WOJAC's desire, in achieving a synthesis with the Zionist-European national narrative. Moreover, I hope to show that even though WOJAC proposed an apparent national agenda (to counterbalance the claims of the Palestinian National Movement), its activity was deciphered in the 'internal' ethnic arena. The findings of the case study indicate the essential contradiction between ethnicity and nationalism in Zionism, while suggesting how that contradiction can be used to challenge the national memory in Israel.

The Status of Ethnic Memory in Realms of National Memory

The construction of collective memory is not necessarily a modern phenomenon. Ancient as well as modern cultures produced texts, built monuments, or collected items of display in order to create or remember their past (Geary, 1994). However, mnemonic practices became institutionalized and explicit as part of the project of modernity. Anthony Smith notes the secularization process undergone by collective memory and the Gordian knot that was formed between nationalism, history, and memory: 'One sign of the formation of the nation out of the protonation is the shifting of the center of collective memory from the temple and its priesthood to the university and its scholarly community'

¹ Pierre Nora proposes an analysis of the realms of memory and argues that they exist 'because there are no longer any *milieux de memoire*' (1992, p. 6). Nora does not explain what he means by the term 'milieu' or what reciprocal relations, if any, exist between 'milieu' and 'realm' (*lieux*). The analysis in this article makes use of the term 'community of memory', which, as I will show later, will enable the contestation of the institutionalized and frozen narratives of the realms of memory. 'Realms' and 'communities' are two autonomous sociological praxes between which dialectical reciprocal relations exist. For example, one can assume that certain voices from 'communities' evolve into realms in a process of institutionalization and routinization which induces forgetting. By the same token, one may reasonably suppose that some communities are engendered as a reaction to the existence of realms and in order to contest them. These reciprocal relations will be addressed later in the article.

(Smith, 1986). In the nation state historiography became a national project and, as such, also a locus of battles for representation and interpretation (Wilson, 1996). Professional historians began to furnish political legitimation for national memory and for ethnic struggles over identity and self-determination. The works of Hobsbawm (1992) and Anderson (1983) in particular have emphasized the fact that the national past is an imagined one that is selectively represented. Indeed, from the outset, the Zionist movement shaped the collective memory of the Israeli nation, forging and constructing images of the past regarding the nation's origins and its development over time.

The origins of Jewish national organizing lie in Europe and its political philosophy is European. Europe was the base of all the thinkers and activists who are considered the forerunners of the Jewish national movement. The delegates to the First Zionist Congress were virtually all educated, middle-class European Jews, who hailed from Eastern Europe (Russia, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Poland), Central and Northern Europe (Germany, Austria, England, France, Switzerland), and the US. Indeed, of the 246 delegates only one was from an Arab country (Algeria), and he too was of European extraction.² Furthermore, Jewish-national historiography sprang up in mid-nineteenth century Europe as a branch of modern European, and especially German, historiography (Piterberg, 1996). Even if Zionist activity existed in the Middle East, it was never expressed in the form of independent political organizing (e.g. Shohat, 1997a, 1997b).

During the Second World War, as the reality of the mass extermination of Jews in Europe sank in, the Zionist movement increasingly shifted its view to the Jews in the Islamic countries. In 1942 Ben Gurion presented to experts and to leaders of the Yishuv (pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine) his 'Plan for Mass Immigration' (Tochnit Ha'Million) which aimed to bring a million Jews to Palestine. In this project the Jews in the Islamic lands were accorded a central demographic role. In practice, the plan to bring Jews from Arab countries was not implemented until after Israel's establishment. In Israel the Mizrahim (Jews from Arab countries) were subjected to a process of de-Arabization. As Ben Gurion put it, 'We do not want the Israelis to be Arabs. It is our duty to fight against the spirit of the Levant that ruins individuals and societies' (Shohat, 1988, p. 6). The Arab past of the Mizrahi Jews threatened to affect the coherence of the homogeneous Israeli nation and to blur the boundary between Jews and Arabs. The thrust toward modernization that was implemented as State theory and practice served as a major rationale for creating a non-Arab 'homogeneous public'.

The negative status of Arabness among the Israeli-Zionist public induced the Mizrahim to cooperate with the Israeli modernization and de-Arabization project. Let us present a telling example.

In 1941 a 2-day pogrom (known as the *farhud*) was perpetrated in Baghdad. It was the only pogrom in the history of Iraqi Jews and it did not spread to other cities: it was confined to Baghdad alone. Historians agree that this was an exceptional event in the history of Jewish-Muslim relations in Iraq (see Cohen, 1996). It occurred a few hours before the British entered Baghdad during the Second World War, after the pro-Nazi Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Kilani had

² A list of the participants at the First Zionist Congress appears in Orlan (1964/1965).

fled the country, leaving a state of political anarchy in Baghdad. For unclear reasons, the British themselves delayed their entry into the city by 48 hours. According to some testimonies, it is possible that the British wanted passions to boil over in the city and actually had an interest in a clash between Jews and Muslims. Be that as it may, 160 Jews and an unknown number of Muslims were murdered while the political anarchy lasted. The Jewish leadership in Palestine reached the conclusion—which proved unfounded—that the after-effects of the *farhud* would facilitate its efforts to recruit Jews for Zionist activity. Iraqi Jews, however, did not cooperate with the Zionist agents and it was only in the 1950s that they were brought to Israel (Shenhav, 1999).

Notwithstanding the historical evidence, the Zionist historiography of Iraqi Jewry treats the *farhud* as a watershed event that occurred within the framework of the Holocaust. It is cited as proof that the life of the Jews in Iraq was intolerable, that they were persecuted by the Muslims, and that the inevitable result was their immigration to Israel. This is the narrative that is validated and ratified in the canonical academic literature and in texts produced by the officials in charge of the Israeli memory.³ Thus Shmuel Moreh, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, an Israel Prize laureate, and a leading activist of the Centre for the Heritage of Babylonian Jewry, writes in the introduction to the book *Jew Hatred and Pogroms in Iraq*: ‘Arguably, the *farhud* was the cardinal factor in the Jewish national revival in Iraq, as the Holocaust was the cause of Israel’s establishment. The Jews of Iraq immigrated to Israel as one person in protest at the pogroms, the betrayal, and the shame that the *farhud* brought on them’ (Moreh & Yehuda, 1992, p. 9).

The invocation of the Holocaust analogy is not accidental. It reflects the deep desire of the Mizrahim to be admitted to the Israeli civil religion in which the Holocaust plays a crucial role. Within the realms of memory of Zionist historiography the *farhud* is a site that ratifies the ‘from the Holocaust to the revival’ narrative. The event has become a historiographic zero-point that has expropriated the rich, ages-old history of Iraqi Jewry in Iraq and subjugated it to the narrative of ‘negation of the Diaspora’ and to the list of ‘disasters that have afflicted the Jewish people since the destruction of the second temple’ (Raz-Krakotzkin, 1993; 1994).

Pierre Nora (1992) addressed the contradiction between the occupation with national memory and the ability to remember: ‘We speak so much about memory because there is so little of it left’ (quoted in Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 121). The obsession with preservation, with developing technologies of preservation, with organizing and cataloguing archives and then visiting them has the effect of inflating instrumental means of memory, producing memory that is routine and frozen. As a result, commemoration in the realms of memory is an act of obliteration that expresses the death of memory. Realms of memory bring time to a stop. They exist because there is no longer any spontaneous memory. We will use the term ‘community of memory’ in order to challenge the institutionalized memory that is stored and captured in the realms of memory.

³ It is difficult to find academic criticism of this genre of historiography. Among the few who have taken issue with it are Swirsky, 1995; Shiblak, 1986; and Shenhav, 1999; however, this critical literature is sporadic and has little expression in the internal Israeli academic discourse. There are, however, personal testimonies that contest the establishment version, such as Naeim Giladi, ‘The Jews of Iraq’, *The Link*, 31, (April–May 1998), pp. 1–2.

The term ‘community’ presupposes memory that is carried by living groups, and as such is constantly developing, being produced and challenged, amenable to a continuous dialectic of remembering and forgetting. Memory in the community is nourished by a variety of sources, some blurred, which are interconnected, comprehensive or tenuous, private or symbolic. Memory in communities of memory reacts to all forms of transmission, to all the screens on which it appears, to censorship or to implications. This is a convenient arena for rendering memory controversial, for the challenge and contestation of its component parts and its sources. The difference between communities and realms of memory is that within the former memory can be updated and exist within history. The existence of communities of memory obliges us to rethink the connection between the historiographic project that aspires to a totalization of the past, and collective memory, which is splintered and fragmented.

This article treats the WOJAC as a community of memory. WOJAC which was established in 1974 in order to assist Israel in the national arena—to counterbalance the claims of the Palestinian National Movement—will be defined as a ‘community of memory’ in an attempt to examine how far that community challenges the exhibits in the Israeli realms of memory. This is a singularly promising test case precisely because WOJAC was established with the goal of inserting the Mizrahi memory on the map of the Zionist-Israeli national collective memory and not in order to challenge that memory. Nevertheless, WOJAC’s ambition to invoke claims at the ‘national level’, were constantly denied as an ethnically subversive voice. This fairly consistent practice provides a vantage point to examine the anomalous relationship between nationalism and ethnicity in the Zionist context.

The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC)

The WOJAC functioned for approximately 25 years (1975–1999). In 1975, the then vice-chair of the Knesset, Mordechai Ben-Porat summoned representatives of the various associations of Jews from Arab countries to a meeting in Tel Aviv. There, it was decided to establish WOJAC.

Throughout its existence, the organization was supported by the Foreign Ministry and the Jewish Agency. During the years of its existence, WOJAC held international conventions in Paris (1975), London (1982), and Washington (1987), as well as four conventions in Israel; it also established branches in various locations around the world, including New York, London, Rome and Zurich. WOJAC ceased to function in July 1999, due to the termination of Foreign Ministry and Jewish Agency support.

WOJAC was extremely conscious of documentation; all conventions were recorded and transcribed, Executive meetings were summarized in print, and the organization produced hundreds of documents, including letters, booklets, books and articles. This rich collection of material was stored in an office in Tel Aviv, and at the beginning of 1998, the process of moving it to the Central Zionist Archives began. At this point I approached the organization’s Executive and requested access to the material. A copy of the entire archive was placed at my disposal in March 1998.⁴

⁴ As the WOJAC material has not yet been transferred to any official archive, the documentation in this article is based on the notation system used by the organization.

Ben-Porat, who became one of the leading forces behind WOJAC, had an impressive record of Israeli public service. He had worked in the ‘organization for illegal immigration’ (*ha-Mosad l’Aliya-bet*) and had been the primary architect of the operation to encourage Jews to leave Iraq and immigrate to Israel. In 1950–1951, he served as the head of the Or-Yehuda Council, and established and chaired the Centre for the Heritage of Iraqi Jewry. He had been a Knesset member for years, and later served as Minister without portfolio in the government of Menahem Begin and as a Mosad emissary to Iran. Some WOJAC activists were Mapai Knesset members, like Matilda Gez, Ben-Tziyon Halfon, and Menahem Yedid. Later, other activists joined the organization, including Shimon Avizemer (Association of Yemenite Immigrants), Ora Shveitzer, Malka Hilel-Shulevitz and Professor Ya’akov Meron (an official of the Ministry of Justice). At points, WOJAC included researchers and academics, such as Dr Maurice Roumani (who was also the organization’s Executive Director), Professor Yehuda Nini, Professor Shimon Shitrit, Dr Shalom Zaki, Professor Shmuel Moreh, Dr Nissim Qazzaz and Professor Rafael Yisrael.

Despite its support of WOJAC, the Israeli Government was less than enthusiastic about the establishment of the organization. When Mordechai Ben-Porat approached then Foreign Minister Yigal Alon in 1974 (Rabin’s first government) and told him about the idea of establishing the organization, Alon openly expressed his concern that it would be an ‘ethnic organization’. ‘We know you and trust you’, Alon told Ben Porat, ‘but what will happen if it falls into the hands of someone who exploits it for ethnic mobilization?’ (Personal interview with Mordechai Ben-Porat, 16 March 1998; see also the 2nd Convention of the World Executive, 11 September 1979, p. 10). Yigal Alon was troubled primarily because the organization was established at a gathering that included representatives of the associations of Jewish immigrants from Arab countries.

Despite the minor misgivings, it was generally accepted that WOJAC had been established as a tool to assist the State of Israel and the Israeli Foreign Ministry in the national arena (Meeting of the WOJAC Actions Committee, 11 March 1976, p. 13). Upon the establishment of WOJAC, Ben-Porat posited that the State of Israel had not made effective use in the past of Jews from Arab countries, and argued that this past was instrumental in the political arena in which Israel was active. The organization’s Executive formulated three major political assertions, all of which were intended to offset the main three claims of the Palestinian national movement:

- (a) that of the historic nature of a Jewish national and religious presence in the Middle East (the Primordiality thesis);
- (b) that the Middle East had witnessed a *de facto* mutual population exchange of Arab refugees and Jewish refugees (the Population Exchange thesis);
- (c) that the property of these Arabs and Jews could be counterbalanced due to the population exchange (the Property Exchange thesis).

These three positions, which were formulated in the mid-1970s, gained additional validity after the peace treaty with Egypt and the beginning of the debate regarding the Palestinian refugees. According to the members of WOJAC’s Executive, these assertions would enable Israel to argue for the legitimate rights of the Jews in the Land of Israel (the historic nature of the Jewish presence in the Middle East), against the legitimacy of a Palestinian right of return (*de facto*

population transfer) and for the denial of Palestinian demands for compensation for property that had been confiscated by Custodian of Absentee Property. Members of the organization's Executive established a direct linkage between the establishment of WOJAC and activities of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Years later, Dr Jaques Barnes declared: 'We are the Jewish answer to the PLO ... to the right of return ... that is why we exist' (4th National Convention, Tel Aviv, 16 December 1993, p. 48).

Ben-Porat argued numerous times in various ways that one of the primary factors motivating the establishment of the organization was the need to incorporate the history of the Jews of Arab countries into the national collective memory: 'I am not comparing what we experienced—the Jews of Arab countries—to the experience of our brothers in Europe. We were luckier. Still, the pain is felt by all of us together, and our subject should have been utilized' (2nd Convention of the World Executive, 11 September 1979, p. 4a). WOJAC's work focused on imagining the past and making use of this imaginary past for the crystallization and establishment of Jewish nationalism in the Middle East. Explicit regard for issues of memory was present throughout the discussions of WOJAC, due, among other reasons, to the involvement of professional historians in the organization. At the third National Convention, one of the leaders of the WOJAC Executive, Shlomo Tusia-Cohen, explained that 'History was meant to eternalize a situation for [the sake of] memory' (3rd National WOJAC Convention, 5 April 1990).

The story of WOJAC—an organization that functioned in domains with fluid boundaries—is far from homogenous. The organization does not speak in one voice, rather in a number of voices. While attempting to construct a Zionist historical narrative, these voices simultaneously challenged this narrative and created its own antithesis. As a 'community of memory', WOJAC did not function within a well-constructed site with a known trail; it functioned, rather, as a heterodox, creating a spontaneous challenge to the familiar established algorithms of the rule of collective memory. WOJAC put forward new versions of the past that ruptured the coherency of the traditional Zionist narrative and threatened to blur the distinctions between the internal ethnic sphere and the external national sphere of action. Representing this spectrum of voices enables us to challenge existing teleological national narratives and to bring their 'objective possibilities' to the surface.

As argued above, in the process of imagining the past of Jews from Arab countries, WOJAC put forward three Zionist political assertions. Each one of these assertions was meant to serve the political interests of the State of Israel. But, as will become clear below, each one disrupted the Zionist dialogue and deconstructed its traditional basic assumptions. This unintentional deconstruction was an obstacle for the further survival of WOJAC. In the next sections I will present the voices which pertain to these theses.

The Primordality Thesis: Splitting Up the Imagined Community

The thesis asserting 'the primordality of the Jewish entity as a nation and as a religion in the Middle East in general and in the Land of Israel in particular' was formulated in order to emphasize 'the fact of our right to this land' (1 February 1976, p. 5) in response to the claim of 'legitimate rights' advanced by

the Palestinian national movement.⁵ As Mordechai Ben Porat put it: ‘... We want to prove that we are part of the Middle East. We are not foreigners. We lived here before the arrival of the Arabs, before their conquests’ (Beit Sokolov, 6 June 1975). To that end, Oved Ben Ozer explained, it is necessary ‘to implant the awareness of the Jews’ historic and legitimate rights in this region, and their presence here for more than two thousand five hundred years, before the Arabs and before the rise of Islam’ (WOJAC letter to Foreign Ministry, 30 July 1989).

The narrative presented here imagines a past consisting of several components. The most important of these is the affinity of the Jews from the Arab countries with ‘the region’, a perception that splinters Jewish ethno-national unity by adducing different pasts for Iraqi Jews and European Jews. Although the source of the cultural and political rights of the Jews ‘in the region’ lies in a pre-Islamic (Hellenistic-Christian) world, those rights were not affected even with the rise of the Arab empire to greatness or afterward. In this narrative, Jewish culture remains dominant ‘in the region’ even under the Arab conquest in the modern era. As opposed to the classic Zionist account, in the ‘exilic era’ the Jews are described not as a stagnant community but as an almost Promethean progenitor of the culture of the Middle East. Relations with the Muslim world are portrayed in narrative association with the ‘Golden Age’ that existed (or existed ostensibly) until the expulsion from Spain. However, in contrast to the Spanish Golden Age, Jewish culture in the Middle East remained vigorous after 1492 and, indeed, continued to exist in the modern era. It bears noting that this narrative does not offer a precise definition of ‘the region’ or ‘the territory’ where the Jews’ legitimate rights are guaranteed. Instead, there is an allusion to ‘the old Jewish Yishuv’ which existed continuously in the Land of Israel, particularly in the Jewish centres of Jerusalem, Tiberias, and Safed. However, the Sephardi community is not explicitly mentioned, nor is a distinction drawn between different Jewish communities such as those of Baghdad, Alexandria, or Marrakesh. It is not clear whether the Jews have rights in the Land of Israel by virtue of being residents of Iraq (or Babylon for this purpose), Syria (or Aram-sobah for this purpose), or because of the continuous Jewish habitation in the Land of Israel itself. One is left with the impression of ‘the region’, ‘the Middle East’ as a blurred, abstract entity that is unamenable to concretization in time or place.

The primordially of the Jewish entity in the Middle East was cited by WOJAC as a ‘right’ contributed by the Jews from the Arab lands to the national collective and which, concomitantly, confirms their inalienable place within that collective. Ben Porat draws an explicit analogy between this ‘right’ carried by the Jews from Arab lands and the ‘rights’ that were contributed by the European Jews in the form of the Holocaust and the subsequent German reparations:

The Jews who are not from Arab countries—brought rights with them to Israel, and those rights are—one right, regretfully, was steeped in blood, *the right of the Holocaust*, [in] which 6 million were slaughtered and [which] constituted one of the bridges for the establishment of the State of Israel. *A second right that the Jews of Europe brought—the reparations*. With the help of the reparations the state could develop here. That is the contribution of Jews who came from Europe. We, the Jews from the Arab lands, say: We also have to bring our contribution as a second layer of rights from the

⁵ For an orderly presentation of this thesis, see: Roumani, 1983.

Arab countries to here. [sic] [emphases not in the original] (Seminar of WOJAC Information Centre, 1 February 1976)

This formulation, which ostensibly affirms the political right of the Jews from Arab countries 'in the region', derives from an attempt to be included within the national collective, but simultaneously forges a Zionist-isolationist discourse that responds to the argument that Zionism is European and as such has no affinity with the Land of Israel. This was given explicit expression by Dr Ya'akov Meron who sought to underscore the importance of the argument:

WOJAC's great innovation is ... that there is here a group of people who are inhabitants of the Middle East. An accusation against the State of Israel is that Jews came from Europe and took over an Arab state. So it seems to me that the only thing to be said which is politically useful, is to say that the Jews from the Arab countries are inhabitants of the Middle East [and] like all the other inhabitants of the Middle East possess political rights.... (Meeting of WOJAC executive, 11 March 1976, p. 16-A)

Meron points here to the different past of the European Jews and even more tellingly to the common history of the Jews from Arab countries and the Arabs of the Middle East. The attempt at inclusion is thus proposed by emphasizing the difference between Jews rather than what they share in common, a difference that will become increasingly estranged from the national story to the point where it evolves into a controversial discourse fraught with distinctly ethnic overtones. Moreover, the thesis of the primordality of the Jewish entity in the Middle East bears seeds that will sprout to contest the Zionist-European historiography. WOJAC's version of Zionism is based on a temporal-territorial continuum 'in the region', and as such is polarized into a conception of continuity (of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel) and a conception of non-continuity (of the negation of the Diaspora) as obliged by Zionist history. This approach has a triple expression: territory, history, and identity.

Territory

The Zionist meta-narrative emphasizes the connection to the ancient soil as part of the resurgent national identity. However, whereas for European Zionism the Land of Israel bore a transcendent status existing outside the East, WOJAC proposed a regional version of a movement within the Arab territory of which the Land of Israel is a part. If for Europeans the act of Zionization manifested itself as the transmutation of the 'old Jew' into the 'new Jew', in its Mizrahi version the Zionist movement does not constitute an unequivocal binary act because it involves neither transmutation of status nor concretization of territory. In the last analysis, the presence of Jews in Safed or in Baghdad accords them identical legitimate rights 'in the region'. If both Safed and Baghdad entail identical rights, then the move from Baghdad to Safed is neither intrinsically important nor genuinely transmutative. As Mordechai Ben Porat put it: '... We, at least 41%, ... have resided in the Middle East for at least 2500 years and we are part of the Middle East, we simply moved from one part to another' in 'the region' (conference at Vanleer Jerusalem Institute, 28 November 1978).

It is pertinent in this connection to cite a text by the Jewish-Israeli-Iraqi writer Shimon Ballas which recalls Ben Porat's 'movement within the region' thesis. When asked to describe his move from Baghdad to Tel Aviv in 1950, he replied:

'I came from the Arab environment, and I remain in constant colloquy with the Arab environment. I also didn't change my environment. I just moved from one place to another within it' (Alcalay, 1994, p. 189).

The Ben Porat and Ballas accounts undercut and refute the official story, which in the Zionist saga is known as the 'Ezra and Nehemia immigration'. The transition to Israel is almost meaningless, since the rights to it accrue equally from residing in 'Babylon'. The mental map of Zionism, like every national map, created a new, non-linear space of large places and small places, spaces hidden from the eye and symbolic borders. On the mental map of Zionism Jerusalem is a larger place and closer to Baghdad than vice versa. Ballas and Ben Porat do not adhere to the Zionist map.

Although the thesis of the Jewish people's primordiality does not detract from the status of the Land of Israel, it locates it within an alternative territorial continuum that exists outside the Europe-Zion dichotomy. It defines the political entities involved as homologous. As such, it contests the cosmology of the regional space in its European-Zionist version and exposes its reification. The 'primordiality of the Jewish entity' thesis disassembles and strips social objects and their memory from the immediate and ostensibly natural meaning that inheres in their representation within the Zionist consciousness. Ben Porat and Ballas have entirely different biographies. Ben Porat is a politician, an establishment figure and a dyed-in-the-wool Zionist; Ballas is a writer, an intellectual, and a dyed-in-the-wool anti-Zionist. Yet, despite their ideological differences, both find themselves putting forward similar arguments. Hence also the subversive potential of WOJAC, which came into being out of life's circumstances and a common past, not out of an *a priori* ideological position.

The demarcation of territory with a permanent, clear map is a necessary condition for shaping a State's spatial sovereignty (Anderson, 1983). The marking of the territory, signifying its transformation into a 'homeland', also implies dissociation from other spaces (Lustick, 1993). WOJAC's thesis is regressive with regard to the possibility of dissociation and renders spatial sovereignty ambivalent. The existence of the 'region' as adduced in the thesis of the primordiality of the Jewish entity blurs the boundaries and therefore also the importance of the territory. The singularity of Zionism, it should be emphasized, lies in the fact that it is distinct from the diaspora yet also represents it; Zionism's ability to represent the diaspora is conditional on that distinction, which is in part related to territory. Therefore the blurring of the territory subverts the Zionist monopoly over the representations of the collective belonging. It also confuses the (ostensibly) clear connection between the territory and the diaspora. Does being in the region (which has an unclear status *vis-à-vis* the Land of Israel) mean being in the diaspora?

History and Identity

The primordiality thesis undercuts Zionist historiography which is based on 'negating the diaspora' and on the Jewish people's 'return to history' with the revival of nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. Negation of the diaspora is a meta-paradigm that defined the self-consciousness of the Jews in Israel and shaped their conception of history and their collective memory (Raz-Krakotzkin, 1993, p. 23). According to this paradigm, the Land of Israel

(and the Middle East in general) played no part during the exilic period and had no history of its own. Consequently, the negation of the diaspora was also effectively the negation of the memory of the *galuti* (exilic, with a connotation of 'ghetto mentality') Jew, including the Mizrahi Jews, and of the Palestinian memory (Piterberg, 1995, 1996).

The thesis of the Jewish people's primordiality in the Middle East contests the 'negation of the diaspora' paradigm because it does not allow for the decline of redemption outside the Land of Israel and in fact posits a narrative in which Jews flourished and prospered in the 'exilic period'. It challenges the basic paradigm of Zionism which holds that the history of the Jewish people was 'frozen' and then the Jewish nation was reborn out of the negation of the diaspora. The primordiality thesis proposes a non-legitimate slice of time for Jewish-European historiography: all those generations that archaeologists and historians over-leaped. In short, it reintroduced what Zionist historiography wished to nullify.

The primordiality thesis also obliges us to ask whether the Mizrahim, whose diaspora is not negated, need to return to history at all. The answer is that they do not, because theirs has been a continuous history. The Jews of the Middle East, according to this thesis, did not go through the history of Europe and therefore need not return to it. This version also disassembles the uniform, shared history of all the Jews (a conception that entails the denial and repression of other cultures, notably Arab culture) that is posited by Zionist historiography.

WOJAC's members maintained that their history was the genuine one and did not oblige any historiographic move of return. In contrast to the Eurocentric conception, according to which the history of the Eastern Jews is obscure or was subordinated to the Jewish-European memory, a more independent narrative is presented. The primordiality thesis undercuts the historiographic balance of the united attempt to present a uniform history. It holds out the possibility of escaping the dichotomy of 'East' and 'West', 'progressive' and 'backward'. It portrays the Middle East as generative, creative, and progressive.

Acceptance of this version means imagining a nation through separatist 'raw materials' (not State-fomented); it shatters the (ostensible) binary polarity between Jewishness and Arabness and posits continuity instead. In other words, it proposes a historical model that is not in conflict with Arabness and that contests the de-Arabization project of Jewish nationalism. It is a model that allows other voices to be heard, too, such as that of the writer Sami Michael: 'We viewed ourselves as Arabs of Jewish extraction, we felt even more Arab than Arabs ... We did not feel we belonged to a place but that the place belonged to us'.⁶ However, the thesis of the primordiality of the Jewish entity and of movement within the region propounded by WOJAC would be contested by another thesis put forward by the organization in the form of the exchange of population argument.

The Population Exchanges Thesis: Zionism or Refugeism

WOJAC adduced the population exchange thesis primarily in order to contest the claim of the Palestinian national movement to the right of return. The description of the Jews from Arab lands as refugees was not unreasonable in the light of the

⁶ From an interview in the army weekly *Bamahaneh*, 22 March 1989, p. 23.

fact that the term ‘refugee’ became a central concept in the historical and sociological discourse and in international law after the Second World War.⁷ Thus, for example, UN Security Council Resolution 242, of November 1967, referred to ‘a just settlement of the refugee problem’ in the Middle East, though in the 1970s the Arab States sought explicit mention of ‘Arab refugees in the Middle East’. The US, through its ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Arthur Goldberg, opposed this. Under Israeli pressure, a working paper drawn up by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1977 ahead of the possible convening of the Geneva Conference, stated that a solution would be found for the ‘refugee problem’ without specifying which refugees. WOJAC ultimately failed in its attempt to win acceptance of the term ‘Jewish refugees’ and therefore resorted to a campaign to block the use of the term ‘Arab refugees’ (see also joint WOJAC-Information Centre seminar, 1 February 1976).

It is important to remember that the refugee exchange thesis, which presupposed the existence of antagonistic relations between Jews and Muslims, was not fully compatible with the primordiality thesis. The latter concept sought to demonstrate that Jews lived under the protection of Islam for thousands of years, whereas the refugee thesis emphasized the opposite.

Professor Ya’akov Meron, a Justice Ministry official and one of WOJAC’s most articulate spokesmen from its inception, put it most bluntly. He took the unequivocal position not only that the model of Jewish–Muslim relations was distinctly antagonistic, but that the Jews were in fact expelled from the Arab countries (Meron, 1992).⁸ The Zionist saga, he argues, gave rise to romantic labels such as ‘Operation Magic Carpet’ and ‘Operation Ezra and Nehemia’, which underscored the positive aspect of Zionist immigration to Israel and overshadowed the fact that the Jews emigrated because of ‘an Arab policy of expulsion’ (Meron, 1992, p. 37).⁹ Meron’s approach thus contradicts the Zionist literature and undercuts its basic assumptions. Refugee status produced by a coordinated Arab expulsion diminishes the importance of Zionist activity to remove the Jews from the Arab countries. Even the more moderate position, holding that the Jews in those countries were caught up in turbulent events and became refugees due to historical circumstances, contests the classic Zionist account by all but eliminating the role attributed to Zionist consciousness as a reason for Jews to move to Israel.

Meron’s thesis shed a problematic light on reports by Zionist activists in Arab countries and on the tremendous difficulty they encountered in their efforts to bring the Jews to Israel. The genre of Zionist underground literature emphasized the elements of escape, of Jews being smuggled out, and of mystery—they do not so much as hint at the possibility of expulsion.¹⁰

⁷ WOJAC consistently placed this concept in an international context. For example: Malka Hillel Shulewitz and Raphael Israeli, ‘Exchanges of populations worldwide: The First World War to the 1990s’, in Shulewitz (ed.) (1999), pp. 126–141.

⁸ This argument appeared in the Israeli press even before Meron advanced his thesis (e.g. Shimshon Ehrlich, ‘Jewish refugees vs. Palestinians’, *Ha’aretz.*, 22 September 1974, p. 9), though the latter’s formulation was couched in scholarly, scientific language.

⁹ It is important to note that Meron’s expulsion thesis is exceptional even among the Zionist researchers of Iraqi Jewry (e.g. Meir, 1993, 1995; Gat, 1989), among researchers of Jews in Islamic lands in general (Stillman, 1996), and of course even among the more radical scholars (e.g. Shiblak, 1986).

¹⁰ Nevertheless, such works are nourished by the thesis of antagonistic relations between Jews and Muslims and in turn nourish it with additional confirmations and testimonies.

Indeed, the expulsion-refugee thesis within WOJAC generated strong sentiments and reactions. Already in May 1975, at a meeting of representatives of immigrants' associations, Knesset Speaker Yisrael Yeshayahu stated, '... We did not want to call ourselves refugees. We came to this country before the establishment of the state, too ... We had messianic aspirations; ... we wanted to see the building of the Temple ... We wanted to restore our days as of old' (29 May 1975). Yeshayahu here points to a fundamental contradiction between the claim of Jewish primordiality and the refugeeism argument.

The major dissenter from WOJAC's refugee argument was the Tunisia-born Knesset member Mathilda Gez: 'I am afraid of [taking] a certain direction that could trip us up; we are not only talking among ourselves and we are not only talking to the Gentiles. There are another 12 million Jews dispersed in the diaspora. If we appear as refugees, how can we go before them and talk about immigration based on the Zionist idea ... Do I have to deny my Zionism today because of my rights to Tunisia? Absolutely not ... So I do not want us to blur the issue ...'. Gez, then, declined to discard the Zionist, pan-Jewish interest and viewed the Jewish diaspora through a proto-Zionist lens, that is, as potentially Zionist until the anticipated *aliyah* to Israel. She also addressed the contradiction between this all-embracing perception of the world and the 'narrow' interest of her claims to Tunisia. Moreover, Gez shed light on the anomaly generated by WOJAC's attitude, which produced particularist arguments. WOJAC, she believed, brought about a separation between the interests of the entire Jewish diaspora and the interests of the Jews from Arab countries: '... in regard to the separation of this organization from the Sephardi organization, this is certainly the case ... In my opinion, the focus should be Israeli so that we can argue with the Palestinians ... If I have to defend a Jew who is in Brazil, or in North America, then we have missed the opportunity' (Beit Sokolov, 6 June 1975).

Ben Porat admitted that the Foreign Ministry was not pleased with his references to Jewish refugees in the Middle East: 'I will not say that I met with any great enthusiasm from the Foreign Ministry or from the government concerning the proposal. Their reply was: It is a two-edged sword ...' (seminar with Information Centre, 1 February 1976, p. 4). Ben Porat presented the dilemma in its entirety in the search for a compromise formula: 'We must not say that the Jews immigrated to Israel only on account of the suppression ... But on the other hand we must also not say that it was only on account of the yearning for Israel. Jews immigrated to Israel, so both of those elements played a part in their immigration to Israel. We must ground it historically ... that the Jews arrived in Israel as refugees ... went through the agonies of absorption ... We want to ground it in documentation, how the Jews who arrived in Israel, how they lived in transit camps, ... in order to prove that it was not only the Arab refugees who lived in camps, as they describe it, but that our Jews [also] suffered greatly' (6 June 1975).

It should be noted that the dichotomy between 'refugeeism' and 'Zionism' raises a discourse that is locked into the Zionist rhetoric. The point is that the refugee argument, while obliterating the Zionist memory, in other senses subordinates itself to another Zionist perception: of the Jews in the Arab countries as passive (a claim made by the Israeli emissaries, for example). The Zionism-refugeeism dichotomy leaves only a narrow space for memory. If a Jew is active (i.e. a Zionist), he forgoes his separate memory in order to become part

of the hegemony, if a Jew is a refugee, he forgoes the possibility of being active. The discussion thus falls into a trap between Zionism and passivity and the activist, regional, non-Zionist option is lost.

The refugeeism question was placed on the political agenda of the WOJAC executive in March 1976. Titled 'Setting the Ideological Campaign', this item stated: 'A decision must be made regarding the definition of whether they left the Arab countries as displaced persons, refugees, or by force of yearning for Zion' (2 March 1976). Meeting on 11 March, the executive discussed the subject at length. Ben Porat opened by acknowledging the limitations of the classic Zionist argument. His compromise formula re-contested the notion that the Jews in the Arab lands were 'proto-Zionists': '... No one will persuade me ... that if I had given them the choice of coming with a proper passport, [and coming] whenever [they] wanted with their property, that 120,000 would have come from Iraq or that all the Jews of Egypt would have come ... The persecutions played a part here. They definitely expanded the matter ... gave rise to the question of the yearning' (11 March 1976, p. A-7). Shimon Avizemer accepts the argument about the limitations of the Zionist case, but also contests the logic of the refugee thesis: '... When we will say refugees, that might conflict with the theme of the organization. So what do they want from the Land of Israel? Refugees can go anywhere ... Let us forget about the motive for the departure ...' (meeting of WOJAC executive, 11 March 1976).

Opposition to refugeeism would intensify. Ora Schweitzer, the chair of WOJAC's Political Department and an organizer of the Paris conference, reported to the executive that the head of the Jewish community of Strasbourg had received threats stating that if he raised the refugee issue the community would boycott the planned meeting with the organization's members. Shlomo Hillel, who was active in the Zionist underground in Iraq and was the architect of the mass escape action known as 'Operation Meikelberg', said years later: 'I do not regard the exodus of Jews from Arab countries as refugees. I do not accept that. The Jews in the Arab countries came because they wanted to come ...' (conference at Tel Aviv University, 6 June 1998).

In this sense the Palestinian narrative is simpler and more lucid than the fragmented, confused Mizrahi narrative. Even though Israel claimed that the Palestinian leaders called on their people to flee in the 1948 war, Palestinian historiography is united around the refugeeism narrative. Contestation of the refugeeism thesis comes from two additional sources: the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) discourse and the Arab world. For example, in response to arguments put forward by WOJAC, the anti-Zionist Haredi newspaper *Yated Ne'eman* wrote:

This talk about 'Jewish refugees who were expelled from Arab countries' as opposed to 'Arab refugees who were expelled from the Land of Israel' was grating to our journalistic ears. For decades we were accustomed to heroic stories about the illegal immigration, about Zionist underground in Iraq, Syria, and North Africa, about longings for Zion in Yemen, about Israeli emissaries, about 'the state-in-the-making', which aroused yearnings for Zion to the point where the Jews were ready to give up all their property and their past if only they could go up to Zion. We heard about astonishing operations of 'Magic Carpet' (from Yemen) and 'Operation Ezra and Nehemia' (from Iraq) and operations of illegals ('Egoz') from North Africa. We knew about entire communities that were held 'hostage' and were only released under heavy Zionist

pressure ... However, because of the political struggle in which Israel is involved, it appears to be more convenient, as a persuasive argument, to portray the nearly one million Jews who arrived in Israel upon the state's establishment as refugees who were compelled by force to leave their places of habitation. In other words: that the entire *aliyah* was simply the absorption of deportees.¹¹

The refugeeism discourse also generated reactions from the Palestinian and Arab world. A report compiled by the Research Division of Military Intelligence that was sent to WOJAC in June 1975 forecast that at the forthcoming Arab summit meeting the PLO would submit a proposal to allow Jews from Arab States to return to their home countries—which turned out to be partially accurate. The report stated: 'The Arabs place a special emphasis on the situation of the "Arab Jews" in Israel, and there are many expressions of commiseration and solidarity with them. The accepted Arab viewpoint sees the Jews from Arab countries who are living in Israel as a population that suffers discrimination because of its Eastern origins and lives in harsh economic conditions. This, according to the Arabs, demonstrates concretely that Israel is racist not only outwardly but inwardly as well' (Intelligence Branch/Research 660/0550, 1 June 1975). In January 1979 Radio Baghdad, in a Hebrew-language broadcast, called on all Jews of Iraqi origin 'to return home', promising that they would be able to live as citizens with equal rights in Iraq. The broadcast claimed that people of Iraqi origin suffered discrimination in Israel at the hands of the Ashkenazim and that this injustice would be rectified when they returned to Iraq (29 January 1979). With these comments Radio Baghdad broke the Zionist taboo and smoothly shifted the discussion from the national discourse to the internal Jewish ethnic discourse. That taboo would also be broken by the Israeli establishment itself, which would in part ground its attitude toward WOJAC's activity in the ethnic arena.

Even though WOJAC set out to bolster the Zionist thesis and assist Israel's battle against Palestinian nationalism, it accomplished the opposite by rendering the Zionist position fragile and fluid. Moreover, although it invoked the term Zionism, WOJAC actually replaced old content with new and undermined the term's supposedly immutable meaning.

The Property Exchange Thesis

When WOJAC began functioning in the 1970s, it adopted the theory of 'accounting' developed by the Israeli Government during the 1950s (Shenhav, 1999). This theory forestalled any possibility of individual claims for compensation, and made use of the assets of Jews from Arab countries as if they were State-property, at the disposal of the State of Israel. According to this theory, the submission of private property claims of individuals to the Egyptian Government (within the auspices of the peace agreement) would weaken the State in future negotiations with the Palestinians. When WOJAC demanded compensation for the property of Jews from Arab countries, it did not mean the monetary compensation of Jews from Arab countries themselves. It was advancing, rather, a demand for rights to this property, in order to use them to counterbalance

¹¹ S. Fried, *Yated Ne'eman*, 31 December 1993.

claims made by the Palestinian refugees against Israel. In the words of the attorney Shlomo Tusia-Cohen:

We believe that the day will come when [the sides] will sit down to discuss the claims of refugees and Arabs that were displaced, in a practical, decisive manner. A counter-claim for property left in the Arab countries will already exist, as a sort of counterbalance that will be [in place] when the time comes to meet. (3rd National Convention, 5 April 1990)

Or, as WOJAC Chairperson Oved Ben-Ozer declared: ‘We are deeply convinced that the State of Israel—as the defender of the life, rights and interests of Jews throughout the world—has full moral right to be charged with responsibility for the property left by Jews in their countries of origin’ (18 July 1993). According to his argument, the State of Israel represented not only its own citizens, but the entire Jewish people. The dowry that WOJAC offered the State of Israel was free use of the property of all Jews from Arab countries (not just those who were Israeli citizens) in order not to compensate the Palestinians for the injustice done to them in the 1940s.

In November 1992, WOJAC drafted a letter to Jews from Arab countries in preparation for negotiations with the Palestinians. In part, the letter read as follows: ‘In light of the political developments, compensation for Jews from Arab countries is likely to be brought up for discussion in the near future. In order to facilitate our organization’s preparation, we have decided to turn to the public ...’ (Internal letter, 16 November 1992). But, due to the policy of vagueness regarding property value estimates, the organization’s Executive changed its mind and called off the initiative. Ben-Porat expressed his reservations about exact figures with the following warning: ‘We must be careful about numbers, gentleman. People can talk privately, but the Executive of the organization must not come out with numbers at the present time’ (4th National Convention, Tel Aviv, 16 December 1993). WOJAC members were concerned that their concrete estimates would encourage Palestinian counter-claims, and that these would become part of the agenda at a time when, and in a situation for which, Israel would be unprepared. It was, therefore, an equation of mutual deterrence, as Ben-Porat confirmed: ‘It is better to leave it as an overall illusion’. We know for certain that, until today, a serious process of registration of this property has not been undertaken, and that estimates kept in the safe of the Ministry of Justice (the Division of Arab Law) are based on the registration of 3000–4000 families at most’.

In 1999, when interim negotiations with the Palestinians were underway, another attempt was made to register Jewish property. This time, the effort was a joint-initiative of the Prime Minister’s Office and the World Sefardic Federation. This body formulated a property registration questionnaire and sent thousands of copies to synagogues of *Mizrakhi* Jews in North America, Europe and Israel. The form was accompanied by the following explanation: ‘As representatives of Jews from Arab countries, we request that you take part in the completion of an essential project, the goal of which is to gather information about Jewish property in Arab countries. This information will serve as the basis for counter-claims in the future final negotiations between Israel and the Arab states’.¹² The Palestinian reaction to this effort was quick to emerge. In response

¹² See also Dayan, Aryeh, ‘Give a Synagogue, Take a Mosque’, in *Ha’aretz*, 23 September 1999; Peter Hirshberg, ‘Private Property. Keep Out’ in *Jerusalem Report*, 27 September 1999, pp. 16–23.

to the form distributed by the Federation, Daud Barakat, the Palestinian coordinator for negotiations on the refugee issue, asserted: 'There is no linkage. Israel will need to negotiate directly with Lebanon, Morocco and Egypt. We do not represent these states'.¹³

The sharpest challenge to the property thesis, however, came from within WOJAC, from members who were not Israeli citizens. Three of them, Professor Yehezkel Haddad from New York, Rafaele Falah from Rome and Na'im Dangur from London, gave voice to a different opinion than that of the Executive, at times responding in open rebellion. They argued that the State of Israel had no right to use Jewish property in Arab countries for its own political purposes, by covering-up the fact that some claimants were not Israeli citizens. The arguments of these non-Israeli Jews are reminiscent of Dr Nahum Goldman's protests to Ben-Gurion regarding the German reparation payments (*ha-Shilumim*), when he asked the Israeli Prime Minister not to speak in the name of the Jewish people, rather only in the name of the State of Israel. Ben-Gurion regarded Israel's claims against Germany as an opportunity to establish the State's sovereignty not only over its own citizens, but over the entire Jewish people as well. These arguments are also similar, in certain respects, to the voices of Jews living in Europe (primarily Eastern Europe) that opposed the representation of their interests by WJRO (World Jewish Restitution Organization), which was established by the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish Agency.¹⁴

The issues of rights and citizenship came to a head at WOJAC's fourth national convention in 1993. Yihezkel Haddad expressed his position on the question of citizenship: 'We have a problem that there are close to one million Jews from Arab countries that live outside of the State of Israel ... some of them came to Israel and then left the country, giving up their Israeli citizenship. Others went directly—like the Algerians, who all went to France. These people also have rights, and the State of Israel cannot control this issue ...' (4th National Convention, Tel Aviv, 16 December 1993, p. 36). Haddad had already experienced a run-in with WOJAC members in 1978, when he met Egyptian President Anwar Sadat on his own initiative, contrary to the position of WOJAC (Haddad had, at that point, been a member of the organization's Executive). Haddad wanted to take advantage of the momentum of the peace process with Egypt in order to create a new reality. Because of this visit, Haddad was reprimanded by the WOJAC Executive (Executive meeting, 1 June 1978). Haddad reconciled himself to this rebuke, and tried to justify his actions by explaining that he had not actually met Sadat about the issue of compensation, rather in order to obtain his principled acknowledgement of the rights of Jews from Arab countries in their countries of origin. Haddad's explanation did not satisfy the Executive; he left the meeting angrily, and the Executive subsequently resolved to dismiss him from the forum (Protocol of Executive Meeting, 20 August 1978). In 1999, when the issue was again raised in preparation for final status agreements with the Palestinians, Haddad repeated: '[Israel] has no legal right to represent the Jews from Arab countries that live outside of Israel, and it has no right to link our claims to those of the Palestinians'.¹⁵

¹³ *Jerusalem Report*, 27 September, 1999, p. 17.

¹⁴ For a debate between WJRO and the leadership of the Polish Jewish community, see: 'WJRO vs. The Jews of Poland', *Ha'aretz*, 25 October 1999, p. 1a.

¹⁵ *Jerusalem Report*, 27 September 1999, p. 20.

Na'im Dangur, a resident of London and also a member of WOJAC, began to publish sharp criticism of WOJAC's thesis of counterbalancing claims in the early 1990s. He accused Israel of making cynical use of the property of non-Israeli Jews in order to further aims that were not their own. In an August 1993 letter to Ben-Ozer, Dangur stressed that Israel had no right to treat this property as if it were its own. After receiving no response, Dangur warned that he intended to consult attorneys both inside and outside of Israel (Letter from Dangur, 16 August 1993).

In a letter to the WOJAC Executive in October 1993, just before the coming convention, Dangur wrote the following: 'The Jews have an argument for the division of assets in the Middle East ... WOJAC must make it clear that compensation will be paid to individual Jewish refugees and will not be used solely to counterbalance the claims of the Palestinians' (5 October 1993).

In response to claims of Israeli officials that the Government had invested many billions in the absorption of the Jews of Arab countries, and therefore had the right to make use of their property, Dangur retorted sharply: 'They certainly did not invest those billions in me'.¹⁶ When WOJAC Chairperson Oved Ben-Ozer announced the dissolution of WOJAC on 14 July 1999, Dangur responded: 'I am sorry to hear about the dissolution of WOJAC. This step was unavoidable, as, for the past 15 years, WOJAC has unjustifiably feigned acting in the interests of Jews from Arab countries, while it was actually a mere tool in the hands of the Israeli Government'.¹⁷

Rafaelo Falah, a member of WOJAC, a resident of Rome and President of the World Association of Libyan Jews, was another rebel within the organization. Falah met Libyan President Mu'amar Qaddafi in February 1993, in the presence of former Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti.¹⁸ Falah reported that Qaddafi intended to set up a joint commission consisting of representatives of Libya and Italian Jews that had left Libya, in order to discuss the issue of paying monetary compensation to Libyan ex-patriots for property that they had left in the country.¹⁹ On this occasion, the Libyan Ambassador in Saudi Arabia, Muhammad 'Alī Ya'ūsh stated: 'There is no room to establish linkage between Palestinian compensation and compensation for Jews that left the Arab countries in which they lived'.²⁰

WOJAC's leadership had two reservations regarding the separation of Jewish and Israeli interests. Firstly, such a separation threatened to weaken Israel's political position of not being represented by diaspora Jews, rather only by Israeli citizens. Secondly, it had the potential to create a Palestinian analogy, which would open the door to similar individual claims by members of the Palestinian diaspora. Yehezkel Hadad confirmed this: '... As a person living in the diaspora ... I want to point out the dangers of raising the arguments and rights of Jews that do not live in Israel. This was brought to my attention by Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin in private conversations, and by Yossi Hadas and Moshe Raviv as well, in extremely private conversations. They fear that our persistence regarding the diaspora issue could open a Pandora's box that would

¹⁶ *Jerusalem Report*, 27 September 1999, p. 18.

¹⁷ *The Scribe: Journal of Babylon Jewry*, 72, September 1999, p. 17.

¹⁸ *Yediot Akharonot*, 18 April 1993.

¹⁹ *Yediot Akharonot*, 17 December 1993.

²⁰ *Hamodi'ah*, 16 December 1993.

allow all the Palestinians living outside of the country to make similar claims' (4th National Convention, Tel-Aviv, 16 December 1993, p. 41).

Another test of WOJAC's stance took place during the Gulf War in 1991. Professor Yoram Dinshtein, President of Tel-Aviv University and an expert in international law suggested taking advantage of the opportunity by adding-on compensation claims of individual Jews for property confiscated in Iraq in the 1950s. Both the Foreign Ministry and WOJAC were opposed to this proposal because it threatened to weaken Israel's negotiating position. Dinshtein later explained:

The missed opportunity came with the Iraqi defeat in the Gulf War ... I suggested attempting ... on such a festive occasion, to include at least some of the Jewish claims ... (not) Israeli citizens, but there was most certainly a reasonable chance of adding claims of citizens of the coalition countries that fought against Iraq The opportunity was missed ... We had a chance then of including at least part of the compensation owed to the Jews of Iraq ... and, as you know, opportunities do not repeat themselves. (Tel Aviv, 16 December 1993, pp. 140–141).

The battle over property rights was not, and is not, an economic battle alone. Possibly, it is not an economic battle at all, as the majority of participants in the discussions and debates clearly recognized the extremely slim chances that Arab countries would compensate its former citizens. It was a symbolic process that reflected the complex relationship between 'Jewish identity' (*Yehudiut*) and 'Israeli identity' (*Israeliyut*). The distinction between these two poles, which actually represent the transition from a 'Jewish people' to an 'Israeli' people, was blurred by the classical conception of Zionism. The power of Zionist practice and historiography was derived from the non-historical use of both of these poles, which nourished and validated one another, in a process of obfuscation and clarification. The objection of non-Israeli Jews to the symbolic use of their property was regarded by the Israeli Foreign Ministry and WOJAC as both threatening the jurisdiction of the State and sharpening the distinction between the two poles.

From their own perspective, however, these non-Israeli Jews were struggling to create a private memory not confined to the frozen narrative of the Israeli 'districts of memory'. In other words, an Iraqi Jew living in London or New York announced that he was unwilling to have his personal history told exclusively in the formative language of the State, while, at the same time, he wanted to be part of it. This challenge disrupted the anomaly of Jewish nationalism and its blurring of the distinction between people and nation, and between nation and citizenship. It was a battle over memory.

To summarize, we have seen that the three theses formulated by WOJAC in the national field were problematic. In no case was WOJAC successful in articulating a clear and uniform position. On the contrary, it engendered a discourse that undermined several of the sacrosanct tenets of European Zionism. Because of their structurally hybrid place in Israeli society as Jews whose origins lay in Arab countries, WOJAC's spokesmen rejected the common foundation on which Jewish-European historiography and Zionist ideology were established. However, the problematic character of WOJAC's approach lay not only in its contestation of the national narrative. WOJAC operated simul-

taneously on another front as well: the 'ethnic' front. In other words, WOJAC's activity was deciphered by the State as ethnic, not national, in character.

From the National Back to the Ethnic Realm

The public discussion in Israel has traditionally rested on a distinction between two forms of parallel discourse which should never meet: the ethnic discourse and the national discourse. The former is perceived as intra-Jewish (i.e. the division between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim), the latter as a pan-Jewish national discourse. The compartmentalization into two rigorously separate categories of the ethnic and the national discourse has accompanied Zionism since its inception. As Shafir explained, Zionism was constituted 'as a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cross political ones' (Shafir 1989/1996, p. 8). The ethnic discourse was perceived as a threat if it contested the idea of Jewishness as a distinct, *sui generis* ethno-national category. In other words, ethnic discourse is permitted as long as it is defined as an intra-Jewish discourse and perceived as an ephemeral phenomenon that poses no threat to national solidarity.²¹ This was one of the reasons that the alliance between the 'Black Panthers' social movement of Mizrahi activists and the far-left 'Matzpen' group in the 1970s was viewed (by the establishment) as a significant, almost strategic, threat to Jewish society.

The division of academic labour also confirms the distinction between the national and the ethnic field. Whereas historians are occupied with the external-national question, the internal-ethnic question is addressed by anthropologists and sociologists who treat the ethnic division as a given fact that obviates a possible conjoining of the two fields. Thus, for example, when the historian Benny Morris analyses the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem, he does not mention its connection with the Jews from Arab countries (Morris, 1987). When anthropologists analyse the heritage of the Mizrahi Jews they consider this a subject distinct from the national question (Deshen & Shokeid, 1984). When Yosef Meir discusses the immigration of the Yemenites who were brought to Palestine by Shmuel Yavnieli in 1910–1911, he does not cite the relevance of this to the Palestinian issue (Meir, 1983), as Shafir does later (Shafir 1989/1996). Israeli historiography, then, is based on a cultural classification system that 'sees to it' that the 'different' forms of discourse are channelled into separate intellectual-political-cultural tracks. This system disables the possibility of contesting the cultural and political arrangement.

This division of labour depoliticizes the 'ethnic' issue and nullifies the possibility of addressing Mizrahi history and Palestinian history with similar tools, even though both those groups were forced to cope with the European-Zionist meta-narrative. The analysis proposed by WOJAC as a community of memory operating within the national and ethnic alignment enables the creation of a new point of departure. Its point is that the 'Mizrahi' question cannot exist as an exclusively intra-Jewish issue, just as the distinction between the external and the internal is an ideological construction in itself.

²¹ Even within the intra-Jewish discourse ethnicity is shunned as an organizing factor at the political level (Herzog, 1986). However, it did not represent an existential threat as long as it did not undermine the ideological coherence of Israeli-Jewish nationalism and as long as it was considered a temporary phenomenon that would disappear upon completion of the 'melting pot' process.

WOJAC's analysis reflects the schizophrenia that marked the organization's activity, as every attempt it made to reconstruct the materials of the past in the national discourse forced it to tread deep into 'ethnic mire'. On the one hand, WOJAC appealed to the 'ethnic' of its members in order to support Israeli nationalism; but at the same time, it encountered powerful forces of denial that shunned this 'ethnicity'. This cultural trap is the result of the divided identity of the Jews from Arab countries and of the fact that they are the close-stranger of European-Zionist nationalism, the stranger with the power to estrange (Simmel, 1903/1950).

From the outset, WOJAC declared its unequivocal refusal to deal with internal ethnic issues. For example, in the executive meeting of 11 March 1976, a question was asked about the organization's association with the Sephardi Federation in Israel. The reply was definitive: 'The Sephardi Federation deals with internal matters. We deal with state-political matters. There is a complete separation ... They should not deal with state-political matters ... Each to its own part of the work ...' (p. C-15). However, the refusal to address ethnic issues could not be absolute, and the question occasionally cropped up on the agenda. In a lecture delivered at a WOJAC conference in September 1979, Dr Sami Smooha, a Haifa University sociologist, presented data about 'ethnic disparities' in Israel. Following his talk, Mordechai Ben Porat made WOJAC's position perfectly clear: 'Dr Smooha delivered a lecture with frightening data ... But that of course is not WOJAC's business. We committed ourselves from the beginning not to become involved in internal matters. That is our moral commitment within the WOJAC structure, and we will not deal with internal affairs. True, there is a frame of mind among us—both those from abroad and also the Israeli participants—that says that if this is the Israeli society, then let us create a pressure group in the State of Israel in order to change the situation. But I say again—that is not WOJAC's concern' (2nd Conference of the World Executive, 11 September 1979, p. A-3).

The transition from the national to the ethnic discourse can be described metaphorically as a shift between different screens of memory. WOJAC intended to display the Jewish-Arab memory on the national screen, but it was simultaneously projected on an additional screen: the ethnic screen. I turn now to illustrate how the theses adduced by WOJAC ostensibly in the national arena were also concurrently given an ethnic interpretation. The transition to the ethnic screen explains in part the reservations about the organization expressed by the Foreign Ministry and the Israeli establishment in general.

The thesis of the 'primordiality of the Jewish entity in the region' slid into the 'ethnic discussion' because it proposed that the Mizrahim have a claim to the Land of Israel simply because they are part of the region. This was perceived as a separatist thesis, as it heightened the fact that the European Jews were strangers in the region and accorded priority to the Mizrahim in fashioning Jewish nationhood. The argument was not couched explicitly in those terms, but cropped up in WOJAC discussions in various contexts during the organization's 25 years of activity. Thus, Professor Ya'akov Meron said, 'Once it used to be said, Palestine is Jews. Today, it is said that Palestine is Arabs. Well, I regret that. The first issue is legitimate rights.... One has to accord a legitimate right to the Jews from the Arab states.... Nowadays the Ashkenazim have to use the rights of WOJAC to justify the existence of [Jewish] rights in Israel ...'.

Responding to the reservations voiced by the Israeli Foreign Ministry to this argument, which it perceived as separatist, Meron added, 'I ... say that it is wrong to call this a trap.... I think this argument has to be put forward ... and it is also good for internal purposes. Mordechai Ben Porat had a meeting with the Minister of Justice, and we saw that even among people who have a son who is married to a woman whose extraction is from an Arab country—even he is afraid about where the rights of the Ashkenazim lie. Well, then, we also put the minds of the Ashkenazim at rest concerning that clause' (WOJAC Executive, 11 March 1976, p. B-7).

Meron was not seeking to foment cleavage but to argue for the Jews' rights in the Land of Israel, but his arguments were bound to be labelled 'ethnic'.

Fearful of the emergence of an ethnic discourse (and even more of a mixed ethnic-national discourse), Mordechai Ben Porat warned against separatist statements:

I want to speak in the name of the Ashkenazim as well ... What will happen if we get feedback and the Arabs say, We definitely recognize your legitimate rights to Israel ... but if there is someone smart among them, [he will say] You and I will live here, now let's throw all the Poles back. I think we have to be ready for such a possibility, and then we will be pushed into a very difficult position. You will get your legitimate rights to the Land of Israel, you have a right, they will tell us ... Our connection with the rest of the population in Israel is also essential, we must not appear to have a preferential advantage. I am only presenting a thesis here. I am not saying that this has the same weight as the legitimate rights to the point where they are annulled. But I am saying that we will be ready also to think about that aspect ... The Palestinians will tell us ... You are Jews from Arab countries, you too have a legitimate right to Palestine ... They will say that those who came from Europe have to be sent back. (WOJAC Executive, 11 March 1976, p. B-15)

Ben Porat, who wanted to repair the damage done by his colleagues, actually made matters worse by further unraveling the complex fabric: 'If we recognize that the Jews, and let us assume that only the Jews from Arab countries, have the right to self-determination, then no one, not even the PLO, has the authority to dictate ... the substance of their right ... So, if the Jews from Arab countries want to host Ashkenazi Jews, they can also host Ashkenazi Jews ...' (11 March 1976, p. B-16). Ben Porat's correction was influenced, among other factors, by a cautionary letter on this subject from WOJAC's representative in Switzerland, Gittel Littman: 'We have to avoid internal disputes which will enable the Arabs to make use of the rift between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. We have to emphasize the unity of the Jewish people and the Israeli society' (25 August 1975).

The primordiality thesis is not merely an abstract argument. Since it is perceived as a claim that strengthens the legitimate rights of the Jews in the region, and since those rights are realized through the Jews from Arab countries, it entails operative proposals, according to which those Jews should be in the forefront of the political arena. Indirectly, these proposals again introduced the ethnic discourse. As Ben Porat put it, 'Here we are trying ... to change certain customs in the State of Israel in order to offer more proof that we are part of the Middle East. What are those customs?—We will say it aloud, we have said it until now, and we will not let the matter rest in the future, either, [namely] that

the representatives of the State of Israel overseas should not be only of South African origin, or Anglo-Saxons or Irish, that among them should be some who are a bit dark-skinned, so they will be seen to truly be part of the Middle East ... That is proof regarding the matter of the Middle East' (seminar with Information Centre, 1 February 1976). Thus the national discussion collapses into the black hole of ethnicity, ruling out the possibility of focusing on State-political issues and locating the WOJAC activists, who are anxious about the emergence of the ethnic discourse, precisely in the midst of that discourse.

The refugeeism thesis, too, slid quickly into the ethnic field. Years afterward, Professor Ya'akov Meron told a conference at Tel Aviv University that in the 1970s he proposed to the Foreign Ministry that Shlomo Hillel should take part in the peace talks so that he could say to a refugee from Jaffa, '*Ahlan wa Sahlan*, I am a refugee from Baghdad'. The reply Meron received from the Foreign Ministry was: 'You are introducing ethnicity into Israel's foreign policy' (discussion on the question of Jewish property in Arab States, 10 June 1998). Moreover, the refugeeism concept led WOJAC to create a symmetry between the Jews from Arab countries and the Palestinian refugees. That gave rise, among other results, to the contention that in the 1950s the Mizrahim were absorbed in Israel in refugee camps and lived like refugees. One of the speakers at a joint seminar of WOJAC and the Information Centre of the Foreign Ministry stated: 'Only those who have experienced transit camps ... and those who saw the conditions in the transit camps from their outset ... can imagine and know that they were no different from the conditions in the Arab refugee camps. That means the same conditions, the same troubles in the camps, with one difference—that difference is the way people were treated. The State of Israel and the Jewish people treated their brethren in the right way. I do not say that all the Jewish refugees in the Land of Israel received the [optimal] treatment—we are still suffering from the results of the transit camps; there are serious phenomena in the country as a result of those hard days in the transit camps—but with all the mistakes, the Jewish people and the state did far more than the Arab people did for the DPs in the Arab countries' (1 February 1976, p. 3). At the beginning of the 1990s, Ben Porat echoed this: '... There was no difference between those transit camps and the refugee camps ...' (Third National Conference, 5 April 1990). To underline the symmetry he also called the refugee camps 'transit camps': 'Arab refugees left Israel. About 590,000 Arabs left Israel. Countering that, 600,000 Jews from Arab countries arrived. Those two camps, the two groups, lived in extremely difficult conditions in transit camps' (5 April 1990, p. 18). There is no doubt that these comments, though uttered within the framework of the national field, constituted harsh criticism of the Israeli establishment of the 1950s and later.²²

The lesson, then, is that the sources of the ethnic discourse lie in the Zionist national discourse, as the sources of the Zionist national discourse are embedded in the ethnic discourse. The two constitute one discourse and no attempt to draw a distinction between them can obscure the connection.

²² The expression 'refugee camps' was subsequently modified, but, as we saw, to preserve the symmetry, both the refugee camps and the transit camps were euphemistically referred to as 'hotbeds of distress'.

The Different Languages of the Discourse: The Reaction of the Israeli Establishment

Despite the seemingly productive dowry that WOJAC offered the State of Israel, the attitude of the establishment remained patronizing and suspicious. As Leon Tamman described it, 'The government treated us like infants, little children. When an infant cries, people give it a pacifier and say, Take the pacifier and be quiet. That is how we felt' (16 December 1989, p. 15). An analysis of the relations between WOJAC and the Israeli establishment reveals a Tower of Babel syndrome: parallel languages of discourse that never meet.

Upon WOJAC's establishment, Yigal Allon rightly feared the emergence of 'ethnic organizing' and Ben Porat promised (and meant it) that there would be no manifestation of ethnicity. Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, as we saw, also requested the organization to maintain a low profile. The ethnic aspect of the Foreign Ministry's concern was not unjustified. Ora Schweitzer, the chair of WOJAC's Political Committee, relates that 'the people in the Foreign Ministry called our activity a provincial interest'. She explains, 'You have to take into account the paranoia of the party functionaries ... Many people thought it was ethnic. Even some of our activists considered it ethnic ... Some tried to mix Sephardism into the WOJAC case ...' (personal interview, 10 March 1998). WOJAC tried to operate in the national field, but because of its composition, the background of its activists, and the content of its arguments it was unable to escape the ethnic label. Its 'ethnicity' was not deliberate but derived from the existence of a field of 'ethnic' interpretation which is non-dependent on the speaker, his/her motives, or his/her history. The link between nationalism and ethnicity set off warning lights, particularly in the Foreign Ministry.

Even before the Paris conference, two Foreign Ministry officials, Yosef Hadass and Shlomo Argov, warned against a public endorsement of the primordiality thesis. According to the ministry, the threat lay in a schismatic argument that linked Mizrahi (and not pan-Jewish) ethnicity with the rights to the Land of Israel. Arab politicians, too, contended that European Jews had arrived in the region and from outside and taken it over. The Foreign Ministry was also apprehensive that the Palestinians would feel obliged to respond to WOJAC's arguments. However, the organization ignored the ministry's demands and formulated the primordiality thesis as its principal argument. The Paris conference issued a call for recognition of the rights of the Jews from Arab countries, including their right to the 'natural wealth' of the countries in the Middle East, and their political and cultural rights in the region.²³ This statement prompted Farouk Kaddoumi, the head of the PLO's Political Department, to send greetings to the conference and urge the Jews from Arab countries to return there (i.e. to remain in the region). The Foreign Ministry's worst fears were thus realized and it immediately reprimanded the WOJAC executive. The frustration felt by WOJAC at the ministry's alienation was expressed by Yitzhak Ben Gad, a member of the organization, in an article he published in *Yedioth Ahronoth*: '... Unfortunately, or ironically, it emerges that the potential strength of WOJAC is clear to the Arab world and to many bodies in Israel and abroad, but is not sufficiently clear to our Foreign Ministry. To this day the organization continues

²³ 'That the appropriate share in the natural wealth of the Middle East countries be allotted to the Jews from Arab countries' and 'That the right of the Jews from Arab countries, including their political rights, be satisfied in full'.

to knock at the door of the Foreign Ministry ... but its efforts have not met with success'.²⁴

At a special meeting of the executive held on 10 April 1977, Dr Ya'akov Meron, the Justice Ministry official, reported on the rift with the Foreign Ministry that was caused by the Paris conference (A/R/ C13/70). It turned out that in the summer of 1976 Jewish organizations had held a conference in Jerusalem at which a ministry official, Max Varone attacked WOJAC's activity. The organization had known nothing about this until, some time later, its representative Norma Ballas chanced upon the conference protocol in the office of a Jewish group in New York. 'I must discharge a difficult and unpleasant duty', Varone had told the gathering. 'I wish to make it clear that the Foreign Ministry had doubts about the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries'. Meron went on to quote Varone as saying that the resolutions of the Paris conference produced undesirable results, notably: the call by Arab States to Jews to return 'home'; the closing of the way to return to Zion of all the Jews (i.e. including those of European extraction) in the wake of the claim of political rights by the Jews from Arab countries to the Land of Israel; the dependence of all the other Jews in Israel on the Mizrahim, as the claim to the Land of Israel was based on the continuity of Jewish habitation in the Middle East; and, finally, 'the demand by the Jews from Arab countries to receive part of the resources of those countries invites the PLO to put forward a similar counter-claim against Israel'. Summing up, Varone said that WOJAC 'is inclined to think that [it is] not only a counterweight to the PLO but also a separate entity parallel to the PLO'. The Foreign Ministry, he concluded, would not permit WOJAC 'to become a state within a state' (A/R/C13/70).

Varone's concern stemmed from the fact that the Eastern Jews had bifurcated Jewish nationalism. In the past, ethnic sectarianism, albeit undesirable, had manifested itself within a predetermined pattern and without undercutting Jewish national unity. The primordiality thesis undermined the national component by imaging the nation as being constructed on the foundation of only one segment of the Jewish people. Professor Ya'akov Meron set the matter in perspective many years later: 'Until the [political] turnabout in 1977, the Mizrahi communities were treated as a joke. And then came Mordechai Ben Porat and said he wanted to help the state ... That anyone would dare intervene in the [country's] external affairs was slightly comic and slightly dangerous ... Varone, who spoke before the Conference of Presidents [of Major American Jewish Organizations] and vilified WOJAC ... said that [some] people think it is possible to create a state within a state, an Israeli PLO ...' (personal interview, 18 March 1998).

WOJAC took fright at the report of Varone's speech. Ora Schweitzer thought the organization should tone down its activity since it was 'a tool of the state, with the Foreign Ministry as the chief authority ...' (22 August 1976). Menahem Yedid was upset that 'the organization is being treated as an alien element by the Foreign Ministry' (22 August 1976). Leon Tamman maintained that 'a negative position of the Foreign Ministry is liable to put an end to the entire matter' (executive meeting, 10 April 1977). Mathilda Gez said 'it should be made clear to the Foreign Ministry again that the organization was established

²⁴ Yitzhak Ben Gad, 'The Jews from Arab countries—the neglect and the damage', *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 9 July 1976, p. 18.

as an instrument for the State of Israel'. David Hacoheh suggested that 'the Foreign Ministry be requested to clarify exactly which points are in contention between the organization and the ministry'. Dr Tzemach urged that 'nothing be done to heighten the atmosphere of tension'. As late as 1992, attorney Shlomo Tussiya-Cohen could state: 'I reiterate the promise to the Foreign Ministry that none of us has any political ambitions, we have no ambitions for any personal advancement or anything like that' (meeting of executive members, Tel Aviv, 16 June 1992, p. 4).

Long before, the Foreign Ministry's Shlomo Argov told Ben Porat that 'the connection between the organization and the Foreign Ministry will be secret, so it is desirable to keep correspondence to a minimum' (executive meeting, 22 August 1976). In July 1977 a meeting was held with the newly appointed Foreign Minister, Moshe Dayan, following which the primordality thesis was downplayed and WOJAC's activity received an official endorsement, primarily with regard to the exchange of populations thesis. Now 'there are no differences and there is no argument', Dayan summed up (protocol of meeting with the Foreign Minister, 22 July 1977). In October 1977 Ben Porat showed Simcha Dinitz the agreement between WOJAC and the Foreign Ministry 'in order to remove any possible doubt about the organization' (Ben Porat report to WOJAC executive, 22 October 1977). In 1978 the Foreign Ministry rehabilitated WOJAC in the form of a letter sent by the ministry's director-general to 14 ambassadors (including the Washington embassy) proposing that they take into account the exchange of populations and property thesis in explaining Israeli foreign policy. However, WOJAC's status continued to decline over the years as far as the Foreign Ministry was concerned and it finally ended its days with a whimper in July 1999.

Conclusion: Mizrahism as a Site with Wide Shoulders

The community of memory I have described enables the hegemonic memory that is commemorated at the sites of Israeli memory to be estranged in two not unconnected ways. One is by estranging the story of the European-Zionist hegemony and its true relevance to the Mizrahim. If European historiography nullified the Middle East in terms of time and place, the Mizrahi narrative proposed here contests it from below. In particular, it renders fluid and blurred the question of who is a Zionist and what is a Zionist. Second is the estrangement of the constituent distinction of the Israeli-Zionist discourse between a national (external) discourse and an ethnic (internal) discourse. This enables a re-reading of the inter-ethnic relations and their removal from the arena of economic or cultural discrimination or the folklore arena into historiographic, philosophical, and political spaces. It proposes a historiography that refuses to be interwoven into a collective memory that is alien to it. WOJAC's activity demonstrates that the ethnic-Mizrahi element is potent as an organizing basis of the social reality and that the attempt to annul it is problematic. The Mizrahim, in attempting to Judaize the Arab-cultural space, introduce their Arabness and their estranged place in the Israeli collective. In certain senses, they represent the 'unconscious' of that collective, an 'unconscious' that blurs the concepts of time and space and refuses to sanctify taken-for-granted distinctions. They enable contraries and contradictions to coexist and to 'pollute' the dominant cultural-

political order. This conclusion is of particular interest in the light of the fact that WOJAC mobilized as an organization to include the Mizrahi history and memory within the political Zionism of Israel.

This paradoxical conclusion necessitates a reconsideration of questions relating to the essence of social criticism and the politics of protest. The classical critical tradition tends to divide the social arena dichotomously into critical groups and conformist groups according to a model of an *a priori* position in the political arena. WOJAC's 'non-critical' agenda on national issues, alongside the 'critical voices' that were simultaneously sounded, weakens the force of this kind of prior division. Consequently, a more complex analysis is called for of the conditions in which social action occurs.

The neo-liberal German sociologist Ulrich Beck offers a possible analytical framework for a different analysis of politics (Beck, 1994). Beck maintains that our tools of analysis are chained to the paradigm of the 'first modernity', which emerged in late nineteenth-century Europe. That paradigm accustomed us to think about politics in dichotomous terms and to map it within established structures that are also part of the same paradigm: political parties, trade unions, capital-based associations, parliaments, or courts. This type of politics revolved around similar dichotomies, such as left or right, capitalism or socialism, idealism or materialism, radicalism or conservatism, nationalism or anti-nationalism. The modernist approach does not permit us, Beck says, to examine politics with sharper tools or to identify it in other locales where it manifests itself. Instead, he proposes the concept of the 'late modernity' (or the 'second modernity'), which blurs the modernist clarity and refuses to yield to the categories of the old political map (see also: Bauman, 1991). Beck proposes an examination of the individualization processes of politics and the disassembly of the received hierarchies, along with organized politics. The politics of the late modernity is dense and replete with a multiplicity of participants and positions, politics-from-below, and sub-politics.

We need not accept Beck's hypothesis in full, as it is fraught with the danger of extreme individualism, possibly implying the nullification and redundancy of the ideological and moral map, which in fact is still of great relevance. Still, Beck's insight enables us to examine the activity of the social players through the prism of a multiplicity of interests, some of them fragmented, and through a consciousness that is not organized and is not coherently and uniformly adjusted. It proposes that the social division into political categories is inherently fluid and allows for additional organizing, fragmentation, multiplicity, and contradictions simultaneously.

Not surprisingly, this conclusion also leads us to a radically different theoretical polarity, that of the post-colonial discourse in culture studies. Homi Bhabha takes issue with the dichotomous approach adduced by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978). He argues that Said's framework of analysis, which is based on a binary distinction between East and West, replicates the mechanism of colonial rule and is thereby self-defeating. It is based on a homology with the object of the analysis and portrays the 'Other' as an object engendered by the colonial discourse. In other words, that framework analysis preserves 'the locations of the subject and the object forged by this discourse as permanent and stable' (Hever & Ophir, 1994, p. 141). Edward Said's work illustrates the deeply problematic status

of critical theory in post-colonial conditions. Bhabha would not only refute the validity of this binarism, he would also posit it as an ideological metaphor that overlies conflicts and conflictual relations that are amenable to additional strategies of action. In other words, 'opposition and cooperation are not mutually exclusive; they can be engendered from each other and nourish each other' (Hever & Ophir, 1994, p. 143).

In the context of our discussion, the attempt to create alternative voices to the Zionist discourse based on *a priori* definitions of the Zionist hegemony neutralizes the possibility of extracting a critical interpretation independent of that discourse. The analysis proposed here enables an escape from the binarism of opposition/cooperation (in the language of the Zionist discourse) and the extension of the critique into new space. It makes possible not only WOJAC's cooptation into the Zionist discourse but also the reverse: the cooptation of the Zionist discourse and its insertion into a new ideological space, the third space in Bhabha's terms (Bhabha, 1994). The third space does not obey the traditional political contour lines, such as the distinction between national discourse and ethnic discourse; instead, it simultaneously blurs and creates the boundaries between them. The third space proposes that Mizrahiness is not a categorical phenomenon in conflict with 'Ashkenaziness', but a political-cultural, and metaphysical, boundary line of which all the participants in the discussion are a part. And it is not a micro-thin line. It is a site of broad shoulders along a road where manifold, fragmented activity takes place that brings into being new spaces of thought and activity. Hence also the potency of the community of memory that releases itself from established realms and creates itself.

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