

Finally, workers of the world unite

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By Jamie Levin

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Borochov Street ends one block shy of Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, where earlier this month police dismantled a tent city that had been occupied by social-justice activists. The goals of the protesters were as diverse as the people who came out each week to support them. From 30-somethings decrying the cost of housing, to stroller-pushing parents demanding better child care, to Facebook members complaining about a recent rise in the price of cottage cheese – the protesters voiced a common economic theme. Though the protest leaders have promised that their efforts have only begun, and the tents still stand in other cities, a summer of nationwide protests has largely come to an end.

While the street that bears the name of Dov Ber Borochov does not intersect directly with the protests, his early Zionist writing does. Borochov was a founder of the Poalei Zion movement, a precursor to Mapai and Mapam (today's Labor and Meretz parties, respectively). In 1905, he published a dense pamphlet entitled "Nationalism and Class Struggle," in which he argued that the Jews were an impediment to class revolution in Europe. A committed Marxist, Borochov argued that the class structure of European Jews was distorted. Unlike the populations among which they resided, Jews were over-represented in such fields as commerce and trade. This inverted class pyramid could only be righted, according to Borochov, through migration to Palestine.

Along with the Arab residents of Palestine – Borochov anticipated that Jews and Arabs would be allied in the process of economic development – Jews would take up jobs in all fields of endeavor, in proportion to their population. No longer would they be relegated to banking and mercantile activity, as they had been in Europe. In what came to be a familiar Zionist narrative, Jews would fill the ranks of a proletarian society, tilling the land and working in industry.

In so doing, Borochov wrote, two impediments to the overthrow of capitalism would be removed. First, in creating a society in which Jews occupied the full range of economic strata, antagonism would develop between different classes of Jews for the first time, sowing the seeds of revolution in Palestine.

Second, after the Jews quit Europe, class consciousness could be raised among the European proletariat without the inevitable distraction of anti-Jewish racism. Separated, working-class Jews and Gentiles would join forces in their fight against the global injustices of capitalism.

And so it came to be. Jews established a state, and in so doing filled the full range of economic strata for the first time in modern history. However, class antagonism did not immediately arise, so goes the prevailing wisdom, for at least two reasons. First, surrounded by enemy states, Israeli Jews were united in the common cause of defense. Second, the early years of the state were austere and social welfare was robust. The gaps between rich and poor were modest. Or, as is often heard, Israelis were equal in poverty.

Then came the so-called economic miracle – in part a product of the optimism surrounding the peace process of the early 1990s – but it has not been kind to all Israelis. Economic liberalization accompanied by cuts in social welfare has created extraordinary gaps between rich and poor. While the country is awash in recently minted millionaires, fully 20 percent of Israelis live today below the poverty line. A far cry from a land once dotted with egalitarian moshavim and kibbutzim.

And so, whether or not this summer's throng of protesters knew it, their actions were anticipated by Borochov over 100 years ago. For perhaps the first time, there was a subject other than the peace process, the settlements, or religion that galvanized Israeli public opinion. Right and left, secular and religious, and – not to be overly sanguine – Jew and Arab came out together because of their dissatisfaction with the disparities that have become a quotidian feature of Israeli life. And the protesters stayed, week after week, because they feel alienated from political institutions that deny them the ability to foment change.

These protesters are not alone. From Tel Aviv to Athens to Manhattan, hundreds of thousands have mobilized in recent months over their dissatisfaction with capitalism and their disenfranchisement from elitist politics. Borochov reminds us that demands for better government, better wages and better social welfare are related even when they occur in disparate parts of the globe.

The first local victory – a reduction of the price of cottage cheese – appears to be modest. Less modest is the appointment of the Trajtenberg committee, which has urged a reluctant government to act in the face of growing social distortions. But Borochov gives us hope that people not consumed by petty differences can be allied in their efforts to achieve a more equitable world.

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