Israel and the Exile of Intellectual Caliber:
Local Position and the Absence of Sociological Theory[1]

■ **Gad Yair**
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

■ **Noa Apeloig**
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

ABSTRACT

Jews have played a decisive role in the history of sociological theory. Paradoxically, Israeli sociologists – who came from similar Jewish social backgrounds, and shared the same intellectual traditions – have not left a mark on general sociological discourse. This study sets out to solve this paradox and explain why Israeli sociologists have had a negligible impact on the development of general sociological theories. Israeli sociologists have proved to play no significant role in the development of general sociological theory because they exhibited a specific mode of thought: (a) their theoretical questions were contextual; (b) their cognitive interest was to solve practical problems; (c) their theoretical perspective reflected national priorities; and (d) they exhibited a fragmented mode of thought. The article argues that the extreme local position of Israeli sociologists in the collective Zionist project propelled them to adopt the aforementioned intellectual features and therefore marginalized their contribution to general sociological theory.

KEYWORDS

Israel / locals / sociological theory / state

Introduction

Jews have played a decisive role in the history of sociological theory. Among the founding fathers, Marx, Durkheim and Simmel occupy a central position. Later developments in European thought were led by other

Jewish scholars: the members of the Frankfurt School, Alfred Schutz, Marcel Mauss, George Gurvitsch, Claude Levi-Strauss, Raymond Aron, Karl Mannheim, Basil Bernstein, Norbert Elias, and Zygmunt Bauman – to name the prominent thinkers. In the American context, Jewish sociologists have also had a major impact on the development of theoretical ideas and sociology as a whole. Theoretical schools were developed or led by scholars like Luis Wirth, Robert Merton, Edward Shils, Daniel Bell, David Riesman, Lewis Coser, Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, Peter Blau, Alvin Gouldner, Howard Becker, and Immanuel Wallerstein. These Jewish intellectuals developed new theoretical paradigms and tested the limits of extant ones.

Their Israeli counterparts came from the same background, shared the same modernist intellectual traditions, and had close working ties with European and American sociologists. Like some of the above, Israeli sociologists also emigrated from Eastern Europe, or like the others, were second generation émigrés. Paradoxically however, the Israeli mode of thought diverged from the generalist theoretical orientation exhibited by Jewish thinkers. Notwithstanding their common origins and modernist intellectual traditions, Israeli sociologists have not developed general theories nor encouraged young scholars to do so. Therefore, Israelis have not left a mark on general sociological theorizing.

The absence of eminent theoretical Israeli sociologists is manifested in several indicators: none of the Israeli sociologists – including S.N. Eisenstadt – appear in major compendiums of sociological theories (Ritzer, 2000; Turner, 2000); no Israeli sociologist has had a book written about his or her theoretical ideas; no Israeli scholar was ever associated with a general sociological theory; and ideas of Israeli sociologists are not taught in courses of sociological theory, even in Israel.

This study sets out to solve this paradox and explain why the mode of thought of Israeli sociologists marginalized their contribution toward the development of general theories. In doing this, the study explicates the pre-academic and pre-intellectual roots of theorizing and deciphers social conditions under which the development of general sociological theories is undermined. The study focuses on the unique mode of thought of Israeli sociologists and shows that it was based on a pragmatic orientation toward theoretical ideas. When they developed theoretical ideas, they were contextual and conditional. This pragmatic attitude limited Israeli sociologists in developing new theoretical ideas. This is why theoretical innovation was left in exile.

The Sociology of Israeli Sociology

The sociology of Israeli sociology has been highly debated during the past decade. Following the descriptive and reflective studies of the history of sociology in Israel (Matras, 1982; Weller, 1974), recent studies have offered critical perspectives on the ideological biases of Israeli sociology during the first

decades of statehood (Kimmerling, 1992; Ram, 1995), raising issues of 'post-zionism' (Cohen, 1995) and inviting counter rebuttals (Lissak, 2003). Other scholars have commented on the peripheral position of Israeli sociology in terms of promotions and publication outlets (Ben-Yehuda, 1997), and on the silencing of micro-level perspectives (Shamir and Avnon, 1998). None of these studies, however, focused on the particular modes of thought that characterize Israeli sociologists, be they institutional or critical, post-zionists or conservatives. The current study therefore provides a new vantage point to evaluate the achievements and shortcomings of Israeli sociology.

Theoretical Background

The study is contextualized within a broader research movement that strives to understand the conditions under which knowledge is produced, and the relationships between social contexts and scientific ideas (Camic and Gross, 2000; Collins, 1998). In recent years sociologists have focused on the social and cultural roots of sociology in general and sociological theory specifically. This interest has received attention in the study of the origins of sociology (Eisenstadt and Curelaru, 1976), in analyses of the impact of cultures on sociological theory (Levine, 1995), and in studies which assessed the influence of academic departments on sociological orientations (Camic, 1995).

The starting point of this orientation is commonly attributed to Durkheim, who suggested that 'logical life has its first source in society' (quoted in Lukes, 1973: 441), and more explicitly to Mannheim, who asserted that the sociology of knowledge should 'analyze the relationship between knowledge and existence … [and] … the ways in which social relationships … influence thought' (Mannheim, 1936: 237–9). According to this approach, the social positions that actors occupy in a social structure affect their thoughts and perspectives.

The new sociology of knowledge criticizes Mannheim's approach for having an 'image of the relationship of knowledge and social position [which is] reductionist, and … too thin a conception both of knowledge and of social positions or interests that affect knowledge' (Swidler and Aditi, 1994: 306). Such criticisms (Camic and Gross, 2000; Swidler and Aditi, 1994) claim that Mannheim ignored local, contextual features and failed to follow his basic theoretical insight, which necessitated him to move closer to the empirical world, namely to the concrete settings where science is actually made. Recent studies in the sociology of knowledge have thus pointed to the importance of contexts and local conditions for the understanding of scientific developments and ideas (Camic and Gross, 2000).

Adopting this strategy, this article assesses how the 'local' position of Israeli sociologists has affected their modes of thought. Following Simmel (1950), structural analyses have contrasted the social role of the local with that of 'the stranger' (Levine, 1979; Pels, 1999; Schutz, 1964; Tiryakian, 1973). Based on

this comparison, it is commonly argued that the local's perspective is oriented to the 'in group' and bound by its worldview (Merton, 1972). Locals' imagination is limited by the natural, taken-for-granted reality they are part of (Schutz, 1964); their perspective lacks an external Archimedean point of view, and therefore falls short of being critical (Bauman, 1990). Locals' intimate knowledge of and full absorption in societal institutions puts blinders on their ability to appreciate foreign perspectives or external interpretations of 'their' society. As Rose Coser (1991) suggested, the 'greedy' nature of local gemeinschaft, and the vested interest in a social structure, make it difficult for 'locals' to develop a skeptical point of view and analyze social life from a general perspective.

Based upon the general insight of the sociology of ideas, namely that social positions affect modes of thought, this study claims that a comparative analysis of the different social positions and collective consciousness of Jewish and Israeli sociologists provides a key to the paradox that motivates this study. Despite their common cultural background, these scholars developed divergent modes of thought that reflect their position as strangers and locals. Due to their position, these scholars developed different theories that determined either their centrality or marginality in sociology.

The Study

The analysis of the Israeli mode of thought is based on a study of the history of the Department of Sociology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The authors interviewed 17 Israeli sociologists,[2] some of whom were central to the department and the development of sociology in Israel in general. The respondents related to their academic careers, research projects and modes of working. To supplement the interviews we read their major publications. We also analyzed archive data about research projects and curricula from 1949 up to 1990.

The Israeli Social Context and Early Israeli Sociology

Historical and biographical evidence shows that Israeli sociologists developed a deep commitment to the Israeli society and cooperated with state institutions. The first members of the Department of Sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (inaugurated in 1925) – Arthur Rupin, Martin Buber, Roberto Baki, and Arie Tartakover (who were faculty members during the 1940s) – were active members of the Zionist movement. For example, Rupin, whose early academic specialty was the Sociology of the Jews, was a major figure in the procurement of national lands from Arabs; he planned and organized a major Israeli bank; and designed collective economic arrangements. Actually, all four members of this proto department espoused an ideology of a 'serving elite', a

spirit which continued to flourish amongst the following two generations (who were younger than their predecessors by 40–50 years).

The following 'founding' generations were even more local than their predecessors – and in a sense, more intellectually bound to Israel. The first students in the Department of Sociology began their studies in 1949, a year after the Israeli War of Independence. A significant number of them had combat experience in underground units which opposed the British mandate, or took an active part in what came to be the Israeli Defense Force (Etzioni, 2003). Members of this cohort were highly committed to national goals. For them, territorial claims were not theoretical concepts; rather, they felt that the borders of Israel – geographical, social and ideological – are stamped and sealed at these very historical moments. Their Zionist roots to the land were strengthened by the immense price in human life that Israelis paid in those days.

Furthermore, other students of this cohort came from the very heart of the Zionist ideal: the Kibbutz community. Since they elected to live their life in this collective utopian community – they felt strongly connected to Zionism (Talmon, 1972). Some of them even felt that their academic studies constituted a deviation from the expected ideal of pioneering sacrifice to the collective. They therefore justified their studies as a personal investment that would have to be repaid to Israeli society. These ideological commitments decisively affected their academic orientations. As one of them explicitly stated during the interview, 'We did not feel as a part of state institutions but rather as enlisted intellectuals. We saw ourselves as part of the modernization processes and wanted to encourage the absorption of immigrants out of practical interests.' Another stated that 'the spirit of the time motivated us to lend a helping hand to the community' with a 'pioneering' mentality.

Notwithstanding the strong commitment to local social problems, the young Israeli sociologists, under the leadership of S.N. Eisenstadt, were nonetheless aware that a parochial sociology, which would focus solely on Israel, would have no long-lasting international impact. They realized that the adoption of a fully local contextual orientation would cut them off from international scientific discourse (Kimmerling, 1992) and marginalize them as individual scholars. Therefore, they developed an academic 'positioning' strategy (Van Langenhove and Harre, 1999) that would allow them both to focus their studies on the evolving Israeli society and to gain wide recognition in international professional circles. As a non-dated document describing the department stated:

> The common thread running through the different studies was the emphasis on the link between general theoretical problems and the case study of Israeli society. Theoretical and comparative emphases were used to curtail possible parochial tendencies inherent in small-scale Israeli analyses. (Sociology and Anthropology in Jerusalem: 3)

This strategy combined a thorough in-depth analysis of local case studies with a comparative perspective that would address topical sociological

problems to interest a wide readership abroad. In the local setting, they wished to develop a practical social science that could assist decision-makers in solving basic problems in the project of nation building. However, to gain legitimacy from the international community, they situated their local studies within comparative frameworks that touched upon societal basic issues. As S.N. Eisenstadt wrote in the early 1950s,

> From the outset it was the aim of the Department to carry out research projects which could be of both theoretical and practical value, especially in view of the great importance of social planning for Israel. (1955: 7)

The Benchmark for Comparison

In this section we analyze the typical mode of thought entertained by Israeli sociologists. The benchmark for comparison is an extraction of the typical mode of thought exhibited by general sociological theorists, amongst them the prominent Jewish thinkers. While the latter have different presuppositions and disagree on theoretical assumptions about social structure and social action (Alexander, 1987), they nonetheless espouse *a general mode of thought*.

A full analysis of the social position and modes of thought of Jewish sociologists in Europe and the USA is not possible here. Ample evidence, however, shows that the social position of the 'stranger' and the historical sense of 'temporariness' have encouraged Jewish sociologists to evince general modes of thought. As Simmel stated in his famous essay, 'The Stranger' (1950), this position is structurally characterized by the juxtaposition of remoteness and nearness, of permanence and temporariness. He argued that the weak ties the stranger has with locals effects:

> no commitment which could prejudice his perception, understanding and evaluation of the given … he is freer, practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective; he is not tied down in his actions by habit, piety, and precedent. (Simmel, 1950: 405)

Many scholars reiterated Simmel's thesis, namely that strangers, intellectuals and post-colonial people occupy a unique position which produces an objective, disinterested, rational and neutral mode of thought and a calculative attitude (Bauman, 1990; Elias and Scotson, 1994; Kurzman and Owens, 2002; Levine, 1979; Pels, 1999; Tiryakian, 1973).

Indeed, possessing a collective consciousness that is most aptly described as 'the homeless mind' (Berger et al., 1973), Jewish sociologists sought profound understandings of the functioning of society. Their unique position as a homeless people motivated them to develop general sociological ideas that challenged prior intellectual achievements. This is why they left a strong mark on the discipline.

The Israeli Mode of Thought – Specific Locals

The following analysis uses this benchmark to look at Israeli sociologists' theoretical modes of thought. Table 1 presents the two typical modes of thought in terms of four different intellectual criteria – the questions these scholars posed, their cognitive interests, their theoretical perspectives and the coherence of their theoretical mode of thought.

The Theoretical Question – Universal versus Contextual

General theorists seek universals and invariants, at the individual, social or cultural level. They ask universal questions and generalize across local cultures, ethnic identities or specific historical times. Sociologists who embark on their investigation from such questions strive to understand the general laws that explain human motivation and social behavior, and the recurrent mechanisms that operate in society. This theoretical mode of thought can be exemplified by the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, leader of French structuralism (Pace, 1986). In his specific studies of kinship, mythologies and totemism, Levi-Strauss was interested in universal questions about the human mind. As he suggests, 'Ethnographic analysis tries to arrive at invariants beyond the empirical diversity of human societies' (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 247).

In contrast to this interest in universals, Israeli sociologists were driven by local contextual questions. A contextual question is situated in a specific culture, society and historical era. It is driven by a desire to gain an intimate understanding of the local context. It is not surprising that under the 'hot' conditions of state-building, Israeli sociologists were reluctant to entertain universal theoretical questions and gravitated toward contextual ones. Therefore, when they adopted general theories they always injected local contextual interests in them.

Studies of the Israeli *kibbutz* attest to this tendency toward a local perspective. The kibbutz constituted one of the major research foci for Israeli sociology, precisely because it was deemed a unique utopian ideal that all Israelis should aspire to. Martin Buber – first chairperson of the Department of Sociology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem – was the first scholar to study the kibbutz, reaching the conclusion that it was 'an experiment that did not fail'

Table 1   An ideal typical analytical comparison of general versus specific modes of thought

Intellectual features	General (stranger, Jewish)	Specific (local, Israeli)
The theoretical question	Universal	Contextual
The cognitive interest	Deep understanding	Problem solving
The theoretical perspective	Scholastic point of view	National priorities
Theoretical coherence	Integrative	Fragmented

(Buber, 1947). At the apex of the Cold War, the kibbutz was perceived as an ideal that other societies should learn from: a true meeting ground between individualism and communal life (Etzioni, 1996; Kahane, 1975a).

The general theoretical problem in kibbutz studies was to explain the continuity of utopian communities, namely 'the analysis of the processes of differentiation and "routinization" in a revolutionary and collective movement' (Weintraub, 1963: 11). This statement of the problem was indeed general and comparative. However, due to their position, the young Israeli researchers focused their empirical investigation on local, contextual conditions of specific communities and political movements (Talmon, 1972). The researchers' driving interest was contextual, namely to see how a particular political movement coped with issues of reproduction and the social viability of a newly developed and highly esteemed utopian project. Their comparative studies referred to other types of collective settlements. However, the comparisons were usually used to shed light on the uniqueness of the Zionist kibbutz. Notwithstanding their scientific ethos, the researchers felt that their duty was to help Israeli communal frameworks to maintain their success. As Shemaryahu Talmon wrote in the preface to his wife's life work published posthumously, 'The research was meant continually to observe and record the dynamics of kibbutz life, and possibly to formulate guidelines for further development of collective-communal organization' (Talmon, 1972: xi).

Studies of Israeli youth movements were similarly driven by local, contextual concerns. Youth movements were highly ideological and entrusted with the task of engendering a pioneering orientation among the young. A comparative study of youth movements in other countries (e.g. the Nazi Wonderfogel, the British Scouts and the Soviet Komsomol) allowed Israeli sociologists to ask questions about the conditions in which different youth groups originate and analyze their functions in modern society (Eisenstadt, 1956; Kahane, 1997). However, a deep driving question that Israeli sociologists asked was local – how to make the youth movements more value-oriented, more educational, more Zionist. The fact that three members of the senior faculty in Jerusalem had been active leaders of different youth movements reflected their strong commitment to the local context. Two of them were involved throughout their undergraduate years in the operation of the movements in Israel and abroad. This intense involvement in leadership positions and curricular development roles was later converted into academic studies of informal youth groups and youth cultures (Kahane, 1975b; Shapira et al., 1979).

Cognitive Interest: Deep Understanding versus Problem Solving

Another feature that distinguishes general from specific theoretical modes of thought is the cognitive interest that drives the research, usually depicted as the contrast between pure and applied research (Coleman, 1990). A cognitive inter-

est that is driven by the quest to gain a deep understanding is an aim in and of itself. It is, in a sense, a pure interest. Although a deep understanding of social processes might be cognitively self-sufficing, it might also have practical applications and be politically relevant. However, in thinking through the theoretical problem, such applications are secondary and derivative. As Durkheim said:

> Science appears only when the mind, setting aside all practical concerns, approaches things with the sole end of representing them. Then, no longer being hurried by the exigencies of life, it can take its time and surround itself with all possible precautions against unreasonable suggestions. (1973: 4–5)

In contrast to this 'indifferent', pure interest, the cognitive interest of Israeli sociologists lay in practical social problems that necessitated immediate action. Their social position as locals and their strong bond to the Zionist state produced an ongoing preoccupation with the national agenda. Consequently, the major research projects focused on topics that emanated from what Israeli sociologists perceived to be imminent local social challenges. While they were aware of broader theoretical interests implicated in their studies, they were cognitively tied to practical problems.

Archive data, publications and personal interviews corroborate the argument that the cognitive interest of sociologists during the first decades of statehood was driven by practical social problems. Archive records, for example, show that 98 percent of the research projects were directed to studies of statebuilding: immigration, agricultural settlements, urban planning, youth movements, and the formation of a modern army. It is true that these topics were tackled with a comparative research perspective, e.g. studying immigration to Israel in comparison with agricultural workers in Europe (Eisenstadt, 1954). However, a major motivation was to propose solutions for important local, pragmatic issues, and the main focus of the study was the Israeli case.

For example, during the 1950s the Jewish population in Israel tripled. The social composition became heterogeneous, with immigrants arriving from North Africa and Near Eastern countries in large numbers (Eisenstadt, 1967). This unprecedented demographic change necessitated an immense effort by the government to integrate the immigrants into the evolving social structure, and prompting studies of de-socialization and re-socialization of specific ethnic groups and their 'accommodation' to the common Israeli identity. One interviewee recounted that Margaret Mead arrived in Israel during the heyday of these incoming waves of migration. During conversations with Israeli colleagues, she claimed that it is impossible to do away with the native culture of incoming migrants, and that the 'melting pot' policy is problematic. Countering her position, the Israeli sociologists responded that 'we need a modern army; therefore, the new immigrants have to acculturate'. This scientific interchange reflects the Israeli-local mode of thought and the tendency of sociologists to evince a 'problem-solving' cognitive interest during what they perceived as a 'critical period'.

Theoretical Perspective: Scholastic Point of View versus National Priorities

Another distinction between general and specific theorizing is related to the conditions in which scholars produce knowledge. The scholastic point of view – a perspective which allows scholars to create critical, universal and general theories – is produced under conditions of structural autonomy (Burt, 1992; Coser, 1991). The Jewish émigré Lewis Coser clearly described his position of detached sociology:

> Most, perhaps all, of my writings have been inspired and motivated by my life experiences … Given my existential location, it is not surprising that a large part of my writings have a critical thrust. Again and again, I have defined my own bearings in developing a critical distance from other sets of ideas and winds of doctrine. (1988: 70)

Such an aloof position vis-a-vis national interests and political agendas was inconceivable amongst Israeli sociologists. Studies of early Israeli sociology were mostly funded by governmental and national agencies, and all major research projects were undertaken with a full awareness of national interests and practical utility. An abbreviated list of the agencies that funded the studies testifies to this linkage with national interests: the Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency; the Arad Development Administration of the Ministry of Labor; various political kibbutz movements; the Israeli Air Force; the Land Settlement Department of the Jewish Agency; the Ministry of Education and Culture; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Social Welfare; the Section on Collective Farms, and on and on (Weintraub, 1963). These national agencies were obviously not interested in financing pure science or in advancing the careers of individual scholars. They contacted the Department of Sociology with requests for advice, assessments, programming and feedback about practical issues that required urgent solutions simply because it was the leading research institute in the country. This mutual dependency explains why the studies of Israeli sociologists were driven by national priorities.

Studies of the Israeli Air Force are a case in point. After the War of Independence (1948), Israeli leaders made the construction of a modern combat army a top priority. Being threatened by impending war, it was strategically decided that a modern air force must be built. This national priority was difficult to attain. The problem was that too many cadets failed to graduate the Air Force Academy. The commander of the Israeli Air Force asked Eisenstadt (with whom he had studied in high school) to help attain this national priority by identifying the traits of successful cadets and devising selection mechanisms for the Air Force. In response, several members and graduate students of the department took part in numerous meetings with officers, pilots and academic staff, and they even participated in a flight to understand the social role of pilots. After some time – and using diverse research tools, including sociomet-

ric techniques – they declared to have 'found the solution to the problem', and for many more years maintained working relations with the Air Force.

An interview with one of the top Israeli sociologists provided another clear example for the tight coupling between scholars and political parties. As he said:

> We formed the '77 Group' … It was a first reaction, within 24–48 hours, to the downfall of the Labor Party and the rise of Begin to power. Most of us were not party members … We wrote poor Shimon Peres, who had to reorganize the party, that we are not party members … but that he has us at his disposal in whatever relative advantage we have. We said we have no interest in positions or roles … that we are willing to help in public relations and even in ideological spheres, that we would help to reconstruct a new image for the Labor Party …

The correspondence between the Israeli national and political agenda and sociological research is also corroborated by archive data. As previously mentioned, most of the topics studied in the early days of statehood revolved around practical, state-building issues. Figure 1 illustrates that the number of faculty members involved in topics related to the nation-building project reached its peak during the 1960s, encompassing most of the faculty in the department. Since the 1970s, preoccupation with nation-building topics began to wane, reaching an all-time low during the 1990s.

The radical decline in the number of faculty members involved in studies of nation-building should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in the Israeli national agenda. After the 1967 war, the national agenda shifted from state-building to the Israeli–Arab conflict. Figure 2 shows that parallel to the aforementioned decline in nation-building topics, there was an increase in the number of faculty members studying topics related to the Israeli army, politics and national conflict. The number of faculty members studying this new national agenda more than doubled up until the 1990s – reflecting Israel's involvement in military actions in Lebanon and the aftermath of the first *Intifada* (1987).

The researchers involved in topics of power relations reshuffled the sociological attitude toward Zionism and the Israeli state but did not change sociologists' preoccupation with national priorities. Some of them criticized the dual labor market for Jews and Arabs (Shalev, 1992), others focused on the extreme living conditions in refugee camps in the occupied territories (Rosenfeld, 2002), while others analyzed post-Zionism (Cohen, 1995) and the politics of elites in Israeli society (Maman, 2001). Baruch Kimmerling (1992), the renowned critical scholar of Israeli sociology, studied the effects of militarism on Israeli society and criticized the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people long before the outbreak of the first *Intifada* (Kimmerling and Migdal, 1993). However, the shift from a pro-Zionist, state-building agenda toward a critical, post-Zionist agenda did not change the bond between Israeli sociologists and the local national agenda. Like their predecessors, the critical post-Zionist sociologists are preoccupied with burning national issues – although taking a radically different stance toward them.
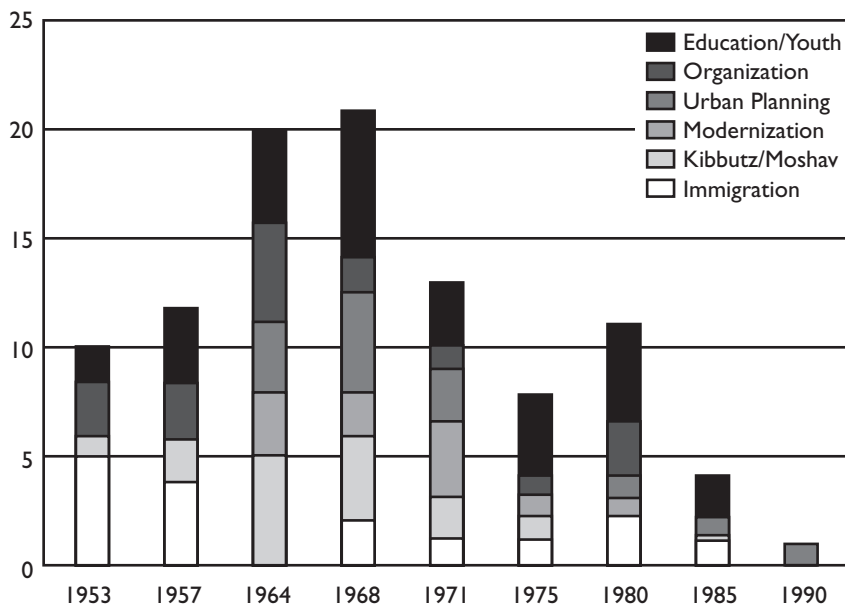
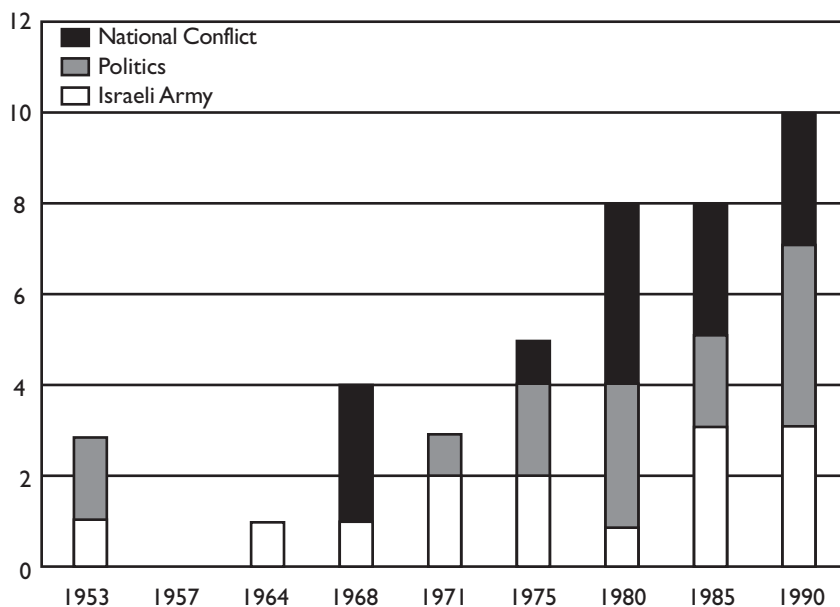**Figure 1**   The number of faculty involved in nation-building research

Figure 2   The number of faculty involved in research of power-relations

Theoretical Coherence: Integrative versus Fragmented Thought

A general mode of thought exhibits theoretical coherence and integration. An integrative mode of thought logically connects assumptions about individual action and social processes. It explicitly formulates assumptions about human nature and social action and consistently links them to structural or systemic phenomenon. The consistent conception of the interplay between individuals and society produces theoretical coherence across empirical domains. This mode of thought is accompanied by scholars' loyal attitude to a definite set of presuppositions that unifies their studies of different empirical domains.

A coherent mode of thought and a loyal attitude marks the theoretical corpus developed by most Jewish sociologists mentioned above. For example, Simmel assumed that there is nothing essential in human nature, as it is flexibly molded by different social structures (Simmel, 1950). Consequently, his studies show how the phenomenology of individuals resonates with their social positions, beginning from the 'isolated individual', through dyads and other small-scale groupings, culminating in the analysis of the metropolis. Simmel's consistent use of these assumptions unites his variegated corpus of different topics and analytic levels, thus presenting one of sociology's coherent paradigms (Levine, 1997).

In the Israeli setting, in contrast, scholars tended to exhibit a fragmented and playful attitude by testing theories without a priori preference to a single approach. They constantly tried to replace a given set of presuppositions with different ones, and assessed the consequences of this 'switch' for the analysis of concrete empirical problems. This playful attitude toward grand theories was evinced by frequent, pragmatic and context-specific theoretical moves.

Such playful fragmentation was evident either in disconnection between different studies and topics carried out by a single scholar, or in the eclectic use of different assumptions and theories about individuals and social processes within a single study. The fragmented mode of thought and playful attitude is exemplified by S.N. Eisenstadt, who has been an active researcher almost 60 years. Eisenstadt's work encompasses 18 different research interests. Early in his career he focused on issues of immigration. In the early 1950s he specialized in the comparative study of youth groups, followed by an intense period of modernization studies. Interspersed were studies of empires and bureaucratization. Since the 1980s he has been involved in studies of patron–client relations and multiple modernities. Although his work instituted a 'Jerusalem school of sociology', it was a school bound by methodological imperatives. From the 1950s through to the 1970s, the 'Jerusalem school' was known as 'the place where comparative studies are at their best'. All the aforementioned topics were indeed tackled by a comparative method. However, they lacked a single coherent theoretical framework.

The playful non-committed attitude toward sociological theory of members of 'the Jerusalem school' was conveyed during the interviews. In the interview with Eisenstadt himself he said that it is:

> more interesting to know where theories get stuck, to assess why they are stuck, to assess their limits … [A specific general] theory cannot explain enough of 'the rules of the game' … It is true for certain universal aspects, but very specific aspects, and you have to know its limits.

He described his interchange with prominent American sociological theorists as a 'ping-pong game'. While they advocated a single theoretical approach (e.g. Coleman and rational choice theory), Eisenstadt pointed out limitations in their approach, which stirred heated theoretical discussions. An overall assessment of Eisenstadt's enormous corpus published throughout the years leads us to conclude that despite its huge impact on the specific domains he investigated, Eisenstadt has not developed a coherent framework and there is no unifying theory which connects his diverse studies. His playful attitude vis-a-vis general theory reflects a fragmented mode of thought typical of Israeli sociologists.

Discussion

This study suggests that the ability of sociologists to theorize in general, universal terms – and thereby to either enter the pantheon of the greatest or fade away into oblivion – partly reflects their position in a social structure. The study formalized the distinctive features that characterize general sociological theories. It portrayed the features that allow a theory to go beyond the time and place of its origin, and drew a contrast between the latter and those features that shorten the life spans of theories and limit their applicability. This comparative study clarified the ideal typical distinction between the 'stranger' mode of thought (e.g. general, universal, and theoretically driven) and the 'local' mode (e.g. specific, pragmatic, and problem driven). In that sense, the study explicated some pre-academic and pre-intellectual roots of theoretical excellence.

It is commonly appreciated that general theoretical ideas in sociology were the product of a specific period starting in the 19th century and reaching maturity in the 1980s (Eisenstadt and Curelaru, 1976). We think that this period was ripe for general and universal sociological theories because it produced many stranger positions in Europe and the USA. The 20th century was a painful yet liberating period for Jews and Jewish sociologists. On the one hand, it was a period of growing legitimacy for them to take part in intellectual, social, and political circles in France, Germany, England, and the USA. On the other hand, it was a period of great suffering with collective experiences of pogroms and deportations which culminated with the holocaust. This experience intensified the Jewish sense of strangerhood, as it juxtaposed nearness and distance, integration and alienation. But it also provided them a unique position to think

through. As Mannheim suggested, the way people experience two cultures allows them to 'try to discover the constructive element which may be present in the very peculiarity of their own position in the world. (…) The peculiar virtue of the émigré is that he has the ability to think more easily of alternative solutions' (quoted in Woldring, 1987: 45). In the final analysis, the 'rise and fall' of general, universal theorizing in sociology may reflect the social and political production of structural positions in society that encourage or block the development of general modes of thought.

Based on this background, our study of Israeli sociology provides telling evidence for the effects of social context on sociological thinking. In a way, our conclusions were long anticipated. After the First World War, when a possible national home for the Jewish people was publicly discussed, Thorstein Veblen (1919) pondered the prospects of the Jewish contribution to modern science. He suggested that it is the unique social position of Jews as strangers in the Diaspora that explains their skeptical worldview, theoretical insight, and scientific leadership. Based on his analysis, Veblen suggested that from a scientific point of view it would be better for humanity that Jews remain in exile. He claimed that the pre-eminence of Jews in various modern scientific disciplines, and especially their key role in advancing theoretical thought, are a by-product of their unique position amongst the nations. Veblen suggested that it is the affinity between the skeptical attitudes of Jews in the Diaspora and the fundamental ethic of science (Barber, 1952; Shils, 1983) which explains their pre-eminence.

This study corroborates Veblen's prediction that the ingathering of Jews in their homeland would eventuate in the exile of intellectual caliber. The study of Israeli sociologists suggests that, due to their local position in their newly constructed, revolutionary and ideologically driven society, Israeli sociologists became extreme locals and resultantly entertained contextual and specific modes of thought. The mode of thought of Israeli sociologists was indeed tightly aligned with their position: their work emphasized the local context, evinced a pragmatic orientation to solve practical social problems, aligned scientific work with national priorities, and demonstrated a fragmented and playful mode of thought. This is why Israeli sociologists have played a minor role in the development of general sociological theory.

The study provides evidence that there is nothing inherent in Jews that drives them to develop general theoretical ideas. Israeli sociologists came from the same social and religious background as Diaspora Jews and therefore could be expected to evince a similar mode of thought. However, they did not. Their specific mode of thought reflected the new position they had in a committing social structure, one that was drastically different from that of their colleagues abroad. While Israeli sociology has lately experienced radical transformation in topics of interest, interpretive schemes, and theoretical orientations, Israeli sociologists have remained specific, contextual, and mostly comparative in their mode of thought. Their local position produced a mode of thought that could not allow them to contribute to general sociological theorizing.

Some critics of this study argued that general theories were the product of a modernist period in the development of sociology, which was characterized by universal and general ideas, whereas Israeli sociology began when this scientific mode of thought gave way to post-modern, post-colonial, contextual approaches. In other words, it was argued that the difference between general and specific modes of thought reflects disparate periods in the evolution of sociology. This claim is unfounded. Israeli sociology reached prominence early in the 1950s and maintained its position throughout the 1960s and the 1970s. General, universal and non-contextual theories were still being developed during these years (e.g. exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, social network theory, institutionalization theory, post-modern theory, etc.) and enjoyed an extensive influence in the discipline. However, even in the heyday of general theorizing, Israeli sociologists never attempted to develop such general, universal theories. Hence, one cannot use periodization arguments to explain the lack of original contribution from Israeli sociologists to the general theoretical discourse in sociology.

Finally, this study suggests that intellectual caliber is not the sole product of ingenious minds that strive to understand society, but also of the social position that scholars occupy in a social structure and their collective consciousness. Certainly, Israeli sociology had its share of high caliber intellectuals. However, it lacked the position that would drive these esteemed minds toward general theoretical innovation. This is why theoretical excellence remained in exile.

Notes

1   An early version of this article was presented at the Social Theory Workshop at the University of Chicago, April 2003, the International Social Theory Consortium, Tampa Bay, May 2003, and the ASA Annual Meeting in San Francisco, August 2004. The study was supported by the Eshkol Foundation.
2   Interviewees are: S.N. Eisenstadt, Chaim Adler, Rivka Bar-Yossef, Moshe Lissak, Eric Cohen, Reuven Kahane, Harvey Goldberg, Judith Shuval, Baruch Kimmerling, Menachem Amir, Amitai Etzioni, Miriam Korellaro, Ozer Sheild, Beverley Mizrahi, Ephraim Yaar, Shemaryahu Talmon, Nina Toren.

References

Alexander, J.C. (1987) *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Barber, B. (1952) *Science and the Social Order*. New York: Collier.

Bauman, Z. (1990) *Thinking Sociologically*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ben-Yehuda, N. (1997) 'Israel: The Dominance of the External: Israeli Sociology', *Contemporary Sociology* 26(3): 271–5.

Berger, P., Berger, B. and H. Kellner (1973) *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*. New York: Random House.

Buber, M. (1947) *Pathways in Utopia*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved (Hebrew).

Burt, R.S. (1992) *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Camic, C. (1995) 'Three Departments in search of a Discipline: Localism and Interdisciplinary Interaction in American Sociology, 1890–1940', *Social Research* 62(4): 1003–15.

Camic, C. and N. Gross (2000) 'The New Sociology of Ideas', in J.R. Blau (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Cohen, E. (1995) 'Israel as a Post-Zionist Society', in R. Wistrich and D. Ohana (eds) *The Shaping of Israeli Identity: Myth, Memory and Trauma*. London: Frank Cass.

Coleman, J.S. (1990) *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Collins, R. (1998) *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Coser, L.A. (1988) 'Notes on a Double Career', in M.W. Riley (ed.) *Sociological Lives*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Coser, R.L. (1991) *In Defense of Modernity: Role Complexity and Individual Autonomy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Durkheim, E. (1973) *On Morality and Society*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Eisenstadt, S.N. (1954) *The Absorption of Immigrants: A Comparative Study based Mainly on the Jewish Community in Palestine and the State of Israel*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Eisenstadt, S.N. (1955) *First Research Report 1950–1955*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Eisenstadt, S.N. (1956) *From Generation to Generation: Age Groups and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press.

Eisenstadt, S.N. (1967) *Israeli Society*. New York: Basic Books.

Eisenstadt, S.N. and M. Curelaru (1976) *The Forms of Sociology: Paradigms and Crises*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Elias, N. and J.L. Scotson (1994) *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*. London: Sage.

Etzioni, A. (1996) 'The Responsive Community: A Communitarian Perspective', *American Sociological Review* 61(Feb.): 1–11.

Etzioni, A. (2003) *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kahane, R. (1975a) 'The Commited: Preliminary Reflections on the Impact of the Kibbutz Socialization Pattern on Adolescents', *The British Journal of Sociology* 26: 343–53.

Kahane, R. (1975b) 'Informal Youth Organizations: A General Model', *Sociological Inquiry* 45: 17–28.

Kahane, R. (1997) *The Origins of Postmodern Youth: Informal Youth Movements in a Comparative Perspective*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Kimmerling, B. (1992) 'Sociology, Ideology, and Nation-building: The Palestinians and their Meaning in Israeli Sociology', *American Sociological Review* 57(4): 446–60.

Kimmerling, B. and J. Migdal (1993) *Palestinians: The Making of a People*. New York: Free Press.

Kurzman, C. and L. Owens (2002) 'The Sociology of Intellectuals', *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 63–90.

Levine, D.N. (1979) 'Simmel at a Distance: On the History and Systematics of the Sociology of the Stranger', in W.A. Shaeh and E.P. Shimmer (eds) *Strangers in African Societies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Levine, D.N. (1995) *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Levine, D.N. (1997) 'Simmel Reappraised: Old Images, New Scholarship', in C. Camic (ed.) *Reclaiming the Sociological Classics: The State of the Scholarship*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1966) *The Savage Mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lissak, M. (2003) '"Critical" Sociologists and "Institutional" Sociologists in the Israeli Academic Community: Ideological Debates or Authentic Academic Discourse?', in T. Friling (ed.) *An Answer to a Post-Zionist Colleague*. Tel Aviv: Yediot Achronot (Hebrew).

Lukes, S. (1973) *Emile Durkheim*. London: Penguin.

Maman, D. (2001) 'The Organizational Connection: Social Capital and the Career Expansion of Directors of Business Groups in Israel', *Social Science Research* 30(4): 578–605.

Mannheim, K. (1936) *Ideology and Utopia*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Matras, J. (1982) 'Sociology and Its Own Society: Israel', Working paper 82–3. Ottawa: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University.

Merton, R.K. (1972) 'Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge', *American Journal of Sociology* 78(1): 9–47.

Pace, D. (1986) *Claude Levi-Strauss: The Bearer of Ashes*. London: Ark.

Pels, D. (1999) 'Privileged Nomads: On the Strangeness of Intellectuals and the Intellectuality of Strangers', *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(1): 63–86.

Ram, U. (1995) *The Changing Agenda of Israeli Sociology: Theory, Ideology, and Identity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Ritzer, G. (ed.) (2000) *The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Rosenfeld, M. (2002) 'Power Structure, Agency, and Family in a Palestinian Refugee Camp', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34(3): 519–51.

Schutz, A. (1964) 'The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology', in SA. Scutz (ed.) *Collected Papers*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Shalev, M. (1992) *Labor and the Political Economy in Israel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shamir, R. and D. Avnon (1998) 'Martin Buber and Israeli sociology', *Theory and Criticism* 12–13: 47–55 (Hebrew).

Shapira, R., Adler, C., Lerner, M. and R. Peleg (1979) *Blue Shirt and White Collar*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved (Hebrew).

Shils, E. (1983) *The Academic Ethic*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Simmel, G. (1950) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe: Free Press.

Swidler, A. and J. Aditi (1994) 'The New Sociology of Knowledge', *Annual Review of Sociology* 20: 305–29.

Talmon, Y. (1972) *Family and Community in the Kibbutz*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tiryakian, E.A. (1973) 'Sociological Perspectives on the Stranger', *Sounding* 56: 45–58.

Turner, B.S. (ed.) (2000) *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Van Langenhove, L. and R. Harre (1999) 'Positioning and the Writing of Science', in R. Harre and L. van Langenhove (eds) *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of Intentional Action*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Weintraub, D. (1963) *Third Research Report 1959–1963*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Weller, L. (1974) *Sociology in Israel*. Westport, CO: Greenwood Press.

Woldring, J.E.S. (1987) *Karl Manheim: The Development of his Thought*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Gad Yair

Received his PhD from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1994. Since 1995 he served as a Lecturer at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the School of Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Senior Lecturer with tenure, from May 2002. His academic interests are the sociology of schools and schooling, organizational theory, the sociology of learning, sociological theory and its history, and the theory–methodology nexus. Recent relevant publications include 'Ex-Cathedra: The Representation of American Society in ASA Presidential Addresses, 1906–1998', *Sociology* 35(2): 477–500, 2001.

Address: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel.

E-mail: msyairg@mscc.huji.ac.il

Noa Apeloig

Is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is mainly interested in social theory and modes of thought. She completed 15 months of fieldwork at Haskell Indian Nations University in the USA and is currently finishing her dissertation.

Address: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel.