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# Day by day - protest by protest: Temporal activism and the feminist Mizrahi right to the city

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## ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic research conducted over three years (2010–2012), this paper suggests new analytical concepts reflecting two types of temporal activism aimed at exercising the ethnic and gendered right to the city: daily activism and anecdotal activism.

This analysis is based on a study of the activities of the feminist Mizrahi<sup>1</sup> movement Achoti (Hebrew for my sister). The findings show that there are more than one way and more than one space to fulfill the feminist and Mizrahi right to the city. It also argues that activism as a means to fulfill the right to the city produces a “third space” that is both temporal and temporary, and can be identified in both types of temporal activism.

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## 1. Introduction

This article addresses the different ways of exercising ethno-gendered right to the city by examining two specific types of what we call *temporal activism: daily activism*, and *anecdotal activism*. We have identified these terms based on an empirical study of the activities of feminist Mizrahi movement Achoti.<sup>2</sup> We argue that the combination of these two temporal types of activism in the movement's actions lead to the exercising of the ethnic and gendered right to the city. This ethno-gendered right is an extension of the Lefebvrian right to the city with emphasis on feminist and Mizrahi (ethnic) aspects: two identity issues that are relatively underemphasized in the original conceptualization of the right to the city (Fenster, 2005a, 2005b; Fenster & Misgav, 2015). The first type of activism – daily activism – takes place in the movement's center in downtown Tel Aviv on a regular basis. This includes sociocultural activities such as meetings, exhibitions, public lectures, and parties, which create daily contacts and support among the movement's members, some of whom are neighborhood residents. The second type of activity involves anecdotal activism such as the

Levinsky protest encampment activities established by Achoti Mizrahi activists as part of the summer 2011 social protest in Israel.

The social protest in Israel was part of the wave of protest that swept the world in 2011, starting with protests against the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (Ram & Filk, 2013; Rabinowitz, 2014), and followed shortly afterwards in Europe, particularly in Spain and Greece. The official agenda of the local protest movement was the high cost of living and housing. It started in Tel Aviv in the upscale Rothschild Boulevard area, where young Ashkenazi activists encamped in protest against housing prices. This was followed by the Levinsky camp – the case study that demonstrates the “anecdotal activism” in this paper – and other Mizrahi encampments in the urban periphery (Marom, 2013; Monterescu & Shaindlinger, 2013; Misgav, 2013; Leibner, 2015).

This encampment in Levinsky – led by Achoti's feminist Mizrahi activists – was avowedly antithetical to the main encampment in Rothschild Boulevard. It challenged the mainstream sociopolitical and spatial discourses of mainly Ashkenazi demonstrators on issues of housing and social inequalities, and was accordingly dubbed “the protest within the protest” (Fenster & Misgav, 2015).

The paper begins with a description of Achoti feminist Mizrahi movement, its roots within the general Mizrahi feminism movement in Israel and its activities in the community center in southern Tel Aviv. It then presents a conceptual discussion of the two key theoretical concepts: the right to the city and activism followed by a short methodological section. The next section presents the Beit Achoti's activities highlighting the suggested two types of activism: daily and anecdotal

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<sup>1</sup> Mizrahi and Ashkenazi are ethnic divisions within Jewish society in Israel. The former are those born in Asian or African countries, and the latter in Europe or America – and their descendants. These differences are not purely geographic, but have significant cultural, socioeconomic and power implications.

<sup>2</sup> The full name of the movement is “Achoti – for women in Israel”.

activism. The paper concludes with some insights as to how the two temporal types of activism fulfill the right to the city.

## 2. Achoti – the feminist Mizrahi movement

In 2000, the first movement of Mizrahi women was established: Achoti – for Women in Israel. Founded by Mizrahi activists, this movement was envisioned as an organizational platform that would operate in the socioeconomic and cultural fields to promote the status of women of Mizrahi origin and other marginalized groups and increase their visibility in the Israeli public and political discourse (Keshet & Alon, 2014). It represents the emergence of a Mizrahi feminist activism within the local feminist (mostly Ashkenazi) movement in the mid-1990s. Achoti proposed a new analytic approach that highlights the combined oppression suffered by Mizrahi women: gendered, ethnic and often also class-oriented (Shiran, 1993, 2002; Lavie, 2011, 2014). In fact, Achoti encompasses activities on numerous fronts: masculine Mizrahi oppression, Ashkenazi oppression of Mizrahi men and women; and economic oppression, as most activists (and Mizrahim in general) are members of the lower class (Shiran, 1993; Dahan Kalev, 1999).

Achoti is also active for and with Palestinian women, including Israeli-Palestinian joint seminars, writing activities, reading classes, etc. By that, Achoti activists protest against the problematic situation in which they themselves, as part of the Jewish society, are the Palestinian women's oppressors. This is a manifestation of the problematic post-colonial situation, which influences the movement's discourse, together with the feminist discourse developed in the west, especially nonwhite feminism. This postcolonial and nonwhite feminist influence may be seen as part of a global, multicultural feminist project (Shohat, 2003; Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

Achoti started out as an employment-related movement organizing joint community action that speaks the social justice language and helps deal with women's exploitation in factories in Israel's socio-geographical periphery. Their first flagship project, called Women Workers Year, addressed the difficult socioeconomic situation in Israel in the mid-1990s, due to the government's newly adopted neoliberal and global economic policies (Benjamin, 2011; Dahan Kalev, 2012; Lavie, 2014; Ram, 2007). The project's initial objectives included expanding the ranks of feminist women to include workers and other women living in the periphery who were less involved with the feminist community. Achoti's activists hoped that these workers would thereby be exposed to new information and ideas usually espoused by women of higher socioeconomic status (Dahan Kalev, 2007).

The first years of Achoti's activities were marred by debates on the nature and focus of activism, as well as on the target audience and the desired location of the movement's activities. Some of Achoti's activists demanded reaching out not only to lower-class women workers, but also to artists and other women of higher education (Dahan Kalev, 2007). They also wanted to write the feminist Mizrahi history and enrich their dancing, poetry and fine art skills with Mizrahi cultural influences (Dekel, 2014). It was eventually decided to budget such activities as well, and they became increasingly central in recent years.

Today, Achoti's activities are directed at both educated and disempowered women, addressing Mizrahi identity and class and cultural issues. The movement's center is located in Tel Aviv's downtown, rundown neighborhood of Neve Sha'an. Formerly populated mainly by low-class Mizrahi immigrants, in recent years this neighborhood has attracted African refugees and asylum seekers, as well as migrant workers from all over the world. The immigration of African refugees and asylum seekers results from the neoliberal economic policies adopted in Israel since the mid-1980s, and more extremely since the early 2000s. These policies have severely widened ethno-class gaps within Israeli society (Ram, 2007). During the mid-1990s, they pushed labor-intensive factories located mainly in Israel's mainly Mizrahi socio-geographical periphery out of the country. At the same time, cheap Palestinian labor has been replaced by migrant workers, mostly

from third-world countries, practically all of whom settled in southern Tel Aviv around the Levinsky Park area (Ram, 2007; Tzfadia & Yacobi, 2011). In the last decade this area has served also as a magnet for African refugees and asylum seekers, mainly due to the government policy of sending captured refugees and asylum seekers to the Levinsky Park and the surrounding area (see Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher, 2012 for elaborations)

The center – Beit Achoti (Hebrew for My Sister's Home) – includes an art gallery, cafe and library, and hosts symposiums, exhibitions and various activist groups. One such group, for example, is dedicated to providing lower-class women with empowering resources such as education. Beit Achoti is also a center for organized protests, as well as a community center that offers immediate assistance to locals, such as older Mizrahi women or refugees of both genders.

## 3. The right to the city

French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1992) has developed the concept of the right to the city as part of his research on the key role played by space in urban life under capitalism. In conceptualizing the right to the city, Lefebvre seeks to challenge the formal and legal status of citizenship by basing it on a normative definition of inhabitance as a right granted to all city dwellers. He also lays down two other rights: the right to appropriate urban spaces and the right of city dwellers to live, play, and work in any urban space (Purcell, 2003). In addition, he states that city dwellers have the right to play a central role in city politics (Staeheli, 2008; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008; Dikeç, 2001).

Harvey (2008) analyzes the right to the city in relation to the use and allocation of surplus or urban goods and argues that cities are essential for the extended accumulation of capital activities. Neoliberalism, he suggests, has given a different meaning to the right to the city, referring exclusively to the right of the elitist minority that dictates surplus production that meets its demand. Thus, the right to the city depends on collective power to reshape urban processes (Routledge, 1996), and includes the complementary right to difference, defined as “the right not to be classified forcibly into categories which have been determined by the necessarily homogenizing powers” (Lefebvre 1976:35, quoted in Dikeç, 2001). However, as Dikeç notes, Lefebvre's emphasis is on the “be” rather than the “different”. Accordingly, his definition is only loosely related to the notion of power and control, failing to challenge power relations (Mitchell, 2003).

Particularly relevant for our purposes is the fact that Lefebvre's definition ignores *gendered* power relations as affecting the exercise of the right to the city (Fenster, 2005a). Indeed, as argued by Fenster (2005b), the *public* right to the city cannot be thoroughly investigated without examining how women and others achieve the right to use and participate in *private* spaces, especially at home, and in that, challenge private/public patriarchal boundaries to exercise their right to the gendered city.

The distinction between private and public is relevant to this paper's case study, since Beit Achoti is an example for an autonomous activist feminist space that challenges definitions of private and public, and is mainly used as an arena for unique encounters by people of diverse identities, whether activists or not. This point is worthy of note, as Achoti is grounded in both ethnic and gendered identity. Thus, most activities of both daily and anecdotal activism bring together a wider variety of identities not necessarily limited to what is commonly perceived as Mizrahi feminism (feminism of Mizrahi women only). This turns Mizrahi discourse into a “site with wide margins”, meaning, a larger and flexible zone of identities that manifests the (flexible) borders between citizenship, nationality, race and diaspora, as first theorized by Lavie and Swedenburg (1996), and later were referred to by others as third ‘time-space’ (Misgav, 2014; Shenhav, 2006). Following these writings, we suggest the notion of temporal and temporary third space constructed throughout the feminist-Mizrahi activism, in both daily and anecdotal activism during the 2011 protest.

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