Class Consciousness in Israel*

HANNA AYALON, ELIEZER BEN-RAFAEL
Tel-Aviv University, Israel

and

STEPHEN SHAROT
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel

ABSTRACT

This study investigates dimensions of class consciousness (cognitive, affective, evaluative) in Israel and analyses their relationships to alternative and overlapping objectively conceived class classifications. Variance in a number of interrelated cognitive dimensions was found to be mainly associated with class classifications that focus on work-occupational situations, but none of the affective/evaluative dimensions were found to have a uniform relationship with any class classification. Israel is similar to many other industrial nations with respect to the pattern and strength of most class consciousness dimensions, but the political dimension is especially weak and this is related to the importance of the Labour political and union organizations in the control and regulation of the Israeli economy.

Class Consciousness in Israel

DISCUSSIONS ON CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS have rarely been part of the discourse on stratification and inequality in the sociology of Israel. Attention has focused on the "ethnic gap" between Ashkenazim, Jews of mainly European descent, and Mizrachim ("Easterners"), Jews from Asia and Africa, and disputes among Israeli sociologists have revolved mainly around explanations of this gap (Smooha, 1978; Swirski, 1981; Smooha and Peres, 1981; Hartman and Ayalon, 1975). Marxist analyses have made references to class conflict within Israel, but this theme has been subordinated to, or conflated with, ethnic conflict and the division between Arabs and Jews. The relative absence of class consciousness, which is assumed rather than demonstrated, is explained by nationalism, the centrality of ethnicity, and the uniqueness of the Israeli form of capitalism in the form of cooperation between the private sector and the bureaucracy of the Labour sector (Machover & Orr, 1971; Zureik, 1979).

* We wish to thank the Ford Foundation for the funding, received through the Israel Foundations Trustees, of this research. Authors are in alphabetical order to denote equal contributions.
On those few occasions when non-Marxist or non-radical Israeli sociologists have discussed class and class consciousness they have also emphasized Israel's "exceptionalism". Eisenstadt (1985), in particular, has pointed to the "unique" features of Israeli society in accounting for the assumed absence of class consciousness. He writes that the central theme in the development of the Israeli labour or socialist movement was a pioneering one; the emphasis on the creation of a new Jewish working class had strong national connotations. It was the leadership of the labour movement that attained the centre of economic and political power and the "usual European class divisions" between capitalists and workers were largely absent.

It is indeed the case that a most important factor in accounting for the failure of class consciousness to become politicized in Israel is the long-standing political and economic power of the Labour "establishment" made up of the Labour party, the Histadrut (the General Federation of Israeli Workers), and their related agencies. The Histadrut is much more than a federation of trade unions; it is a vast industrial, commercial, and financial empire which employs nearly one quarter of the total labour force. The Histadrut and the government, sometimes in cooperation, control a large part of the economy, and about two-thirds of all strikes in Israel occur in the public sector.

Israel is exceptional not only in the combination of trade union and entrepreneurial functions but also in the extensive control of the trade union organization by political parties. The centralized system in which trade union leaders are nominated by the political parties and elected in accordance with the support that the party receives in the union's elections has enabled the Labour party to combine political and economic control over a large proportion of workers. About ninety per cent of organized workers are members of the Histadrut, and the basic union cells of the organization, the Workers' Committees in plants and workshops, are chosen on a political basis. Political support also determines managerial appointments in the industrial and other economic enterprises of the Histadrut, and most key positions, whether in trade union or managerial roles, have been filled by members of the Labour party. Under this system there is considerable inequality in earnings, status, and power, but few workers are likely to perceive the Labour alignment or the Histadrut as organizations that support their class interests against employers or controllers of capital.

These unusual features of Israel's political economy are important in a consideration of class consciousness, but we contend that Israel's "exceptionalism" have been over-extended by sociologists, Marxist and non-Marxist alike. One problem here has been the tendency to ignore the multi-dimensional aspects of class consciousness and to consider only the presence or absence of its visible manifestations in politicised forms. Where, as in Israel, the politicised facets of class consciousness are weak, it has been concluded prematurely that class consciousness as a whole is weak or absent. We expect that the findings on certain dimensions of class consciousness, such as images of the class structure and feelings of class deprivation, will be similar in Israel