

Zionism is colonialism without a motherland; it is a colonialism of the missing motherland, or the longed-for “land of the Fathers.” It never conceives of Palestine, or the Land of Israel, as a territorial protectorate, a mere natural resource to be exploited, or as a cultural outpost, but rather as a site of auto-colonization, the proper locus for the enactment of a future nation-state, and, above all, a platform for the reversal of the condition of the Diaspora and the transformation of the figure of the Diaspora Jew.

The powerful grip of the Rural on Zionism is embodied in its astounding productivity; in the century between the 1880s and 1980s, no less than 700 new villages, rural towns and garden cities were built in Israel by and for Jewish immigrants (about 250 before Israeli Statehood, and 450 after). These numbers may affirm that Zionism was the only national movement to seriously propose building a modern society on an essentially anti-urban infrastructure, but they do not entirely reveal the ideological and spatial intricacies behind this ostensibly autochthonous disposition.

We may begin deciphering these intricacies by mentioning Zionism’s distinctive agrarianism; unlike other new-world rural colonization movements (in North America, South America, Australia, etc.), Zionist colonization was not based on family farms and individual pioneering, but rather on an array of newly invented communal forms (mostly without direct historical precedents) operating as communes or cooperative associations, something akin to the “miniature commonwealths” coined by the Puritans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in America. As these forms evolved, they generated a profusion of efficient spatial strategies and innovative architectural typologies.

Unlike the Puritan settlements, or almost any known utopian endeavor, the Zionist communes never operated, nor were they perceived, as isolated, sectarian, separatist, ex-territorial, or hyper-spiritual communities. Quite the

contrary, they were conceived and designed as a burgeoning spatial network, spread across the countryside and controlling most (over 90%) of the centralized agricultural product. Although at their peak, these rural communities constituted no more than 8% of the local Jewish population, they were backed by powerful political, economic and cultural organizations, including industrial and financial institutions, distribution networks, educational and cultural organisms, media and newspapers, sports and recreation groups, youth movements, and paramilitary forces.

In spite of the experimental and rather eccentric nature of their social contract, they never posed a contentious paradigm of otherness to the normative social and political structure. Paradoxically, these settlements, especially the manifestly collectivist, communist, or Marxist among them, embodied the ethno-national avant-garde and provided a patriotic model of pioneering Zionism. In this sense, they functioned not only as exemplary mini-commonwealths, but also as “imagined communities”<sup>6</sup> *par excellence*: the pastoral collectivist settlement, with its premise of egalitarianism and mutual accountability, reflected Zionism’s self-image as the ingathering of the exiles in the arcadian Land of Promise. Such metonymic affiliation between the idealized social cell and the allegorized national body is certainly one of the most profound—and perplexing—of Israel’s founding myths.<sup>7</sup>

In his seminal study of the Israeli Labor Movement, with which practically all Jewish rural settlements of the twentieth century were affiliated (until the post-1967 religious-Zionist settler movement), historian and political scientist Ze’ev Sterhell deconstructs this movement’s epic synthesis of socialism and nationalism. He opens with an expression of grave doubt: “Was equality a genuine goal, however long-term, or was it only a mobilizing myth, perhaps a convenient alibi that sometimes permitted the movement to avoid grappling with the contradiction between socialism and nationalism?”<sup>8</sup>

Sternhell's conclusion strikes the commonplace Zionist narrative at its most cherished and transformative:

The pioneering ideology, with its central principles—the conquest of the land, the reformation of the individual, and self-realization—was not an ideology of social change; it was not an ideology that could establish a secular, liberal state and put an end to the war with the Arabs [...] the labor movement was not equipped with a conceptual framework that permitted it to move beyond the national revolution it had led and presided over with such conspicuous success.<sup>9</sup>

The inherent incongruity of a nationalist-socialist hegemony would ultimately confuse and rip apart Israeli society in decades to come, but during the formative pre-state period and in the early years of the state, it was this, precisely, that was the secret formula of that “conspicuous success”—or, as philosopher Martin Buber put it in 1949, “the exemplary non-failure”—of the Zionist collectivist settlements.<sup>10</sup> Buber considered these settlements to be non-failures in relation to the history of failed utopian experiments, and he offered two main explanations for their proliferation and sustainability. First, they were established in a sparsely populated country that lacked a social-class infrastructure, and hence faced no resistance from an existing, already stratified, society. Second, as the spearhead of a national-territorial project, they assumed disproportionate symbolic power and expediently embodied a national ethos.

Sternhell offers a more skeptical account of the origin and potency of these settlements, claiming that “collective settlement was a pragmatic rather than an ideological choice.” Without mincing words, he writes that the settlements, “which were set up on a national land with the aid of national funds,

constituted a pragmatic Zionist solution to the problems of conquering the land, lack of work, and the need to absorb the immigrants; it was not an ideological solution aimed at eliminating inequality or combatting private property.”<sup>11</sup>

Sternhell’s harsh critique of Zionism’s socialist rhetoric does not overlook the genuine Vitalist nostalgia feeding its romance with the Rural, as is illustrated in a quote from Chaim Arlosoroff’s 1919 essay “The Popular Socialism of the Jews”:

The European American civilization has made the life of humanity mechanical. Everything has become technical. The whole life of humanity has become one great machine: not an organism, but an organization. Urban civilization and the division of labor—these are the two pillars of the modern temple of idolatry.<sup>12</sup>

Such textual yearnings help Sternhell contextualize what he regards as Zionism’s pseudo-socialist agenda, within a larger civilizational teleology:

The condemnation of the city and the cult of a return to nature, to the simplicity, authenticity, and rootedness of the village, was always one of the myths of radical nationalism, not of socialism. Socialism was oriented toward the modern world, industrialized and urban.<sup>13</sup>

Rurality, for Sternhell, is a well thought-out Zionist plot, going deliberately against the grain of the actual pattern of urban migration. He clarifies:

The myth of a return to nature was nurtured by the labor movement even in the 1920s and 1930s, when Jewish society was already an urban society. In fact, Jewish Palestine under the British mandate was one of

the most urbanized countries in the world: eight out of ten Jews lived in cities.<sup>14</sup>

Sternhell's depiction of the Jewish community in Palestine as exceedingly urban is not inaccurate, nor is his implied argument about institutional efforts to avert spontaneous urbanization through concerted settlement efforts. Indeed, the utilization of "Zionism's corps of planning experts"<sup>15</sup> to implement the doctrine of centralized decentralization was and remains a common practice, which will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to land-occupation strategies, and in the next chapter, with regard to Israel's 1950 master-plan.

Sternhell's demystification of the collective settlements, portraying them as pragmatic rather than ideological, is supported by several critical sociologists and political scientists.<sup>16</sup> It is also instructive insofar as one can presume that the commune offered the young immigrants flocking to the country without their families through the Zionist organizations not only a comforting surrogate family, but also a substitute religion, social circle, and homeland. To be sure, the communal framework gave them a momentous survivalist advantage in adapting to local conditions and in better competing with local Arab labor; to such an extent that many of the communes evolved out of organized groups called "labor battalions.

Sternhell's critical account has two considerable shortcomings, however: First, his strict dissociation of the labor movement's anti-urban tendency from its socialist ideology is questionable. At the very least, he disregards the urban/rural and industrial/agrarian dialectics that are so fundamental to Marxist discourse and, indeed, so formative for the architecture of the Jewish collective settlements, as will be discussed here. Second, his focused examination of the Labor Movement overlooks the fact that the Zionist pastoral

scene-of-origin was drawn well before the 1920s and the ascent of the Labor Movement and its apparatus.

As for the first issue, it should be emphasized that anti-urban sentiments have historically spanned the entire ideological spectrum—from Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on Virginia* of 1784, a vision of an agrarian liberal democracy devoid of cities (and, subsequently, the writings of Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Poe, and Wright); through Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* of 1847, with its critique of the way “the bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns” and Engels’ call for the abolition of cities in his 1872 essay “The Housing Question”; up to Mao Zedong’s mobilization of millions of Chinese youth “up to the mountains and down to the villages” in the framework of the Rustication Movement of the 1950s and Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Urban studies scholar Shlomo Angel, in his analysis of urban expansion in developing countries, claims that communist countries consistently translated the anti-urban attitudes of Marx and Engels into policies that sought to limit the size of large cities, to prevent rural-urban migration, and to force urban populations into the countryside.<sup>17</sup> In this context, the Zionist colonization project, with its direct intellectual roots in Bolshevism, could be regarded as a pioneering pseudo-scientific Soviet-style de-urbanization project.

As for Sternhell’s historical reconstruction of Zionism’s romance with rural collectivism, the fact that he entirely overlooks pre-socialist Zionism’s pastoral tendencies invites us to stage an earlier scene of origin.

### 1.3: The Cooperative Village (*Moshav*)

We begin with the words of German-Jewish economist, sociologist, and leading theorist of agrarian settlement, Franz Oppenheimer, as they appear in the preface to his report titled: *Merchavia, A Jewish Co-operative Settlement in Palestine*, published in 1914:

As early as 1902 [Herzl] honored me with an invitation to co-operate in his great movement, as I was then, I believe, the only economist who had occupied himself ex officio with problems of settlement [...] I frankly declared to Dr. Herzl that his views about the possibility of colonization of Palestine in the way he proposed were impracticable [...]

At that time I had no relations with the Zionist movement, but I soon became a convinced adherent, and at the Basel Congress in 1903 I read a paper in which I outlined the process of colonization. During the next few years various negotiations took place between Herzl and myself. Shortly before his death we met in Vienna and it was almost half agreed that an Experiment Station should be founded in Europe, if possible in Galicia, a country farm conducted upon a cooperative basis, where experiences could be gathered and where the laborers should be trained who would then go out as pioneers to Palestine.<sup>18</sup>

In 1902, Franz Oppenheimer was already in search of a field experiment. His work should be seen in the context of a liberal-socialist intellectual tradition that had evolved in the light of the cumulative experience of German colonization in Prussia. The main objective of this colonization project was the Germanification of the Prussian regions, which were populated mostly by Poles, but it was also an experiment that addressed the larger problem of the exodus from the countryside to the cities. The Prussian settlement plan included two

main forms: villages (*Dorfsystem*) and individual farms (*Hofsystem*); between 1886 and 1906 the Prussian settlement committee erected 315 villages and 278 farms.<sup>19</sup> These were based on three operative principles: self-help or self-labor, public or national(ized) land, and mutuality or cooperation. These principles—adopted to varying degrees and in different constellations by nineteenth-century social reformers such as Owen, Proudon, Fourier, Spenser, and Lasal, as well as utopian writers such as Cabet, Bellamy, Hertzke and Herzl—found their crystallization during the 1890s in Franz Oppenheimer's plans for training farms that would gradually transform into self-sustaining cooperative settlements.

Herzl was well versed in the genealogy of reformist praxis and utopian writing, as he readily demonstrates in the didactic sections of his novel *Old-New Land*. A speech delivered by his protagonist, David, at the farmers' assembly, reads like an indoctrination lecture (and in fact sets the tone for the oratorical tradition that would characterize comrades' assemblies in Jewish collective settlements):

Don't imagine I am jesting when I say that Neudorf (New Village) was built not in Palestine, but elsewhere. It was built in England, in America, in France and in Germany. It was evolved out of experiments, books, and dreams. The unsuccessful experiments of both practical men and dreamers were to serve you as object lessons, though you did not know it. [.....] The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a curiously backward era [...] muddle-headed visionaries were taken seriously, while sober, practical men were branded as lunatics. Napoleon the Great did not believe that Fulton's steamboat was practical. On the other hand, the absurd Fourier easily won adherents for his *phalansteries*, which were intended to provide homes and workshops for several hundred families. Stephenson, the inventor of the railway, and Cabet, the dreamer of Icaria, were contemporaries. [...] Edward Bellamy outlined a noble communistic society in his *Looking Backward* [in which] all may eat as much as they



please from the common platter [...] After Bellamy's book came *Freiland*, a utopian romance by the publicist Hertzka [...] beautiful dreams. The scholars among you—and I know that in Neudorf today there are educated peasants—will understand me when I say that they were guilty of a *petitio principii*.

[.] It is among the English that we find the first traces of the cooperative social order, which we have taken over and adapted. German science, too, has added profound word here [...] The honest pioneers of Rochdale, as they are called, did much for you [...] When you go to your consumers' cooperative societies and buy goods of the best quality and at the lowest prices, you have the pioneers of Rochdale to thank for it. And if your Neudorf is a prosperous producers' cooperative, you owe it to the poor martyrs of Rahaline in Ireland. [...] There is nothing here in Neudorf that was not implied in Rahaline. The one difference is, that instead of Mr. Vandaleur [the landlord], we have a large association to which everyone belongs; that is, the New Society.<sup>20</sup>

Neudorf, then, is the allegorical image of the New Society; a village of the new; a futuristic platform for progressive ideas and technological innovations; and above all, an incubator for the re-incarnated Jew. Neudorf must be built, and at the time of writing *Old-New Land*, Herzl has already decided that Franz Oppenheimer will mastermind it. Herzl's choice will be formally adopted by the Zionist organizations after his death. By 1909 Oppenheimer was finally assigned a prototype to devise: Merchavia—his first (and last) concrete settlement—located at the heart of the Jezreel Valley.

Oppenheimer's theoretical "scientific planning" model mediated gracefully between the various liberal and socialist factions within the Zionist movement, by virtue of its careful balance between notions of mutuality and privacy. His

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