

INTRODUCTION

Innovation in Israel

• • • *Between Politics, Society, and Culture*

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The past decade has witnessed a growing number of theoretical and empirical studies analyzing the components of innovation; the ways in which it filters into political, social, and cultural systems; how it accelerates; what drives its existence; and its advantages and disadvantages (Seeck and Diehl 2017). This special issue, a joint initiative of the Israel Political Science Association (ISPSA) and *Israel Studies Review*, seeks to examine innovation in the Israeli political and societal sphere. Rooted in different disciplines, the articles are diverse yet connected to the political world, offering a distinctive preliminary mosaic that highlights the theme of innovation in Israel as it unfolds between politics, society, and culture.

Innovation is considered vital for organizations' rapid adaptation to changes and for achieving strategic advantages; it is even thought of as critical for their very survival (Jiménez-Jimenez et al. 2008). It is thus crucial to explore the interdisciplinary character of attempts to instill innovations within politics, society, and culture, since they often lead to rapid changes, encouraging unprecedented endeavors at an unprecedented pace (Storey et al. 2016).

Innovation is a practice that transforms a new idea into a product, process, or organizational structure aimed at improving and streamlining performance (Albury 2005; Dorsman et al. 2015); boosting organizational productivity (Shearmur and Poirier 2017); maximizing its utility (Borins 2001); and adapting it to a changing environment (Carmeli et al. 2010). Innovation processes focus on useful and implementable new ideas for creating public value (Bloch and Bugge 2013) and on attempts to leverage technological changes to solve public problems and apply government



policy (Haley 2016). It is a turning point, after which previous patterns are no longer applicable and acceptable (Shmueli et al. 2015). These new ideas may change significantly and develop further, but ideally they will remain resilient over time (Bloch and Bugge 2013; van Acker and Bouckaert 2018).

Initially, innovation research focused on private organizations (Hamel and Getz 2004), disregarding phenomena in broader political and societal systems (Albury 2005). However, in the past few years, stronger interest in creating innovative modes of action in all spheres relating to the public sector has become discernible (Hamel and Getz 2004). The desire to respond to complex societal and political developments in the modern era—alongside the duties imposed upon political systems to cope with problems of the current intensive period, set policies, and provide social and other services—has expedited developments of political and social innovations (Moulaert et al. 2013; Tucker 2014).

Different works of research demonstrate the complexity of implementing innovation in public systems in the broadest sense of the word due to a variety of reasons, such as the natural character of public institutions, which operate in a setting of weak competition, and a low perception of danger for their survival (Agrawal et al. 2017). It is also due to bureaucratic processes that slow down and hinder the introduction of and motivation for innovative processes (Albury 2005). Adopting these procedures in the public sector is driven by the need to improve services and enhance value in terms of the public benefit (Lee et al. 2012). Most studies in political innovation focus on processes connected to the central government. Only a few turn the spotlight on innovations in other broad spheres, such as the services provided by local government, even though they heavily impact citizens' quality of life (Moulaert et al. 2013; Tucker 2014). Ultimately, innovation is a feature of every field of life, and research must undertake to engage with all of them.

Two articles in this special issue highlight inner organizational innovations that affect the heart of local government's endeavors. Each one, in its own way, examines from a specific perspective the mechanisms of furnishing local services.

The research performed by Lihi Lahat and Yekoutiel Sabah examines the incremental changes that have occurred over the years regarding personal social services. At a specific point in time, the authors assert, the supply patterns of these services had significantly deviated from their traditional practices via various governmental organs, transitioning toward the hands of NGOs and other third sector associations. In their article, Lahat and Sabah clearly illustrate the slow, almost unnoticeable progress that has grown into a truly radical change, affecting the character of social services so as to render them unrecognizable, to the extent

that a regulatory response had to be initiated. The authors propose an innovative three-stage regulatory model for health services that involves mapping, the design of regulatory instruments, and their implementation and evaluation.

Addressing a more general spectrum of municipal services, Yoram Ida, Amir Hefetz, Assaf Meydani, Gila Menahem, and Elad Cohen suggest an innovative mechanism of a defined and binding ‘basket of services’. If their proposal were to be adopted, it would be an innovative event in itself, since it is widely known that in Israel the basket of services (of whatever kind) that local authorities must provide to their citizens has never been defined. Drawing on the ‘new localism’ theory, the authors here discuss a distinctive and non-intuitive way of thinking about the basket of services for each local authority in Israel in a way that will reduce the prevailing inequality that is explicitly manifested. Hence, unlike the article by Lahat and Sabah, this article proposes to implement a radical change to be enforced on local authorities by the regulating authority—the Ministry of the Interior—with the aim of improving matters for the residents and assuring them a minimum level of services, wherever they live.

Both articles, in fact, find broad support in the literature that views innovation as a process that identifies new and unmet societal needs. The determination of those needs leads to developing and implementing new ideas, products, and public services with the aim of offering responses to urgent and complex demands. Implementing those ideas and solutions requires the creation of a means to evaluate effectiveness (Moulaert et al. 2013; Tucker 2014), with the objective of rendering public services more efficient and enhancing the value that the public sector produces for others (Lee et al. 2012). The researchers underscore the understanding that sees innovation as a pattern of planned activities aimed at enabling the organization to achieve its objectives in different ways, and thus consider it an important asset (Kour and Gakhar 2015). This common basis awards the two distinct perspectives tremendous potential for reciprocity that would allow researchers to complement each other’s work.

It is commonly assumed that innovation is relevant to every field of social endeavor and is likely to be reflected in processes or outputs, for services and products alike (Salge and Vera 2012). It deals with a range of tangible and intangible actions that include developing ideas (Arfeen and Khan 2009) about a product, service, or technology, and much more (Dorsman et al. 2015). It can create opportunities for new solutions, or for regular activities in fresh contexts. Innovation accesses organizations in diverse ways (Mulgan and Albury 2003), sometimes incrementally, with the adoption of small changes concerning services or processes that are familiar in other organizations or sectors.

In some cases, innovation is more radical, taking the form of promoting ground-breaking social processes. However, it can also take a more systemic shape of developing technologies or organizational forms that require fundamental changes within organizations, society, or the organizational culture. On the basis of that logic, innovation can also divert political, social, and cultural systems from the direction of their development toward completely new trajectories. For example, while integrating communication in political processes is likely to improve the development of democratization, such innovation may also, intentionally or not, encourage manifestations of populism and de-democratization.

In that context, Israel is an arena where innovation, whether planned or spontaneous, is always happening in reaction to a whole scope of acute events and challenges that are part of its everyday routine. Numerous wars, ongoing security-related incidents, and the absorption of waves of immigration—sometimes exceeding its capacity—are notable examples in the list of random, intensive events that characterize the country's public sphere. From the outset, the Israeli state that adopted democracy—a regime characterized by consensus over clear rules of the game—had accepted democracy's rules of the game only partially. Due to those obstacles, Israel has never endorsed a constitution, and the work of enacting basic laws has never been completed. This state of affairs requires persistent innovation of various sorts from both the leaders of the state and its citizens, and it has created fertile ground for creative thinking aimed at overcoming major national and existential challenges, including the need to heal major cleavages between groups and sectors within the Israeli society that have widened over time.

Different arrangements have been institutionalized over the years, and public policy has taken shape in a wide variety of areas. Concomitantly, though, many enclaves remain, and they have become arenas for negotiations between influential political centers, constituting a constant source of innovative thinking. This happens, for example, almost every time a government is formed. Laws receive tortuous rephrasing liable to change their nature, and new ministries arise from fragments of previous ones. Recently, coalition builders went a step further, seeking support for a prime minister facing criminal charges, without being fully aware of the legal consequences that might ensue. Reference to the High Court of Justice for judicial review in this matter yielded a ruling that, while it enables formation of a government, does not indicate the moral and democratic lacunae in Israeli legislation that must be dealt with.

These circumstances encouraged creativity and innovation in the form of a unity government in which a prime minister and an alternative prime minister currently serve alongside each other, with the latter constituting

a new role that is unparalleled in Western democracies. Israel has not yet worked out whether that role has the status of a minister or of a prime minister. While it may be hard to forecast whether such political creativity will ultimately reinforce democracy, we can certainly maintain that this kind of innovation is testimony to a political system and public sector that are based on frequent and unpredictable changes.

Readers will observe these processes in full force in the article by Sigal Ben-Rafael Galanti with Paz Carmel and Alon Levkowitz, which offers a historical examination of innovations implemented at the national level. Ben-Rafael Galanti and her colleagues analyze the changes that are made to the curriculum of the school subject of civics in Israel whenever political leadership changes in the country. When new parties achieve power, they claim, there is often discernible activity to adapt the contents of civics textbooks to match the ideology and spirit of the new regime. Over time, changes of this kind have intensified; they have become far more noticeable in recent years and tend to generate antagonism from various sections of the population, producing fierce debates. This process can be fascinating to observe. For example, two Religious-Zionist leaders, who are mentioned in the article, served as ministers of education at different times and for different periods—one in the years following the first political turnover of 1977, for 11 (non-consecutive) years, and the other very recently. Although they ostensibly represented the same party, there were significant differences visible in the content added to curricula and in the way the changes were implemented. The ever-changing content of civics studies seems to illustrate the fragility both of democracy in Israel and of democratization in the world today.

Innovation in the public sector concerns policies seeking economic progress and development, and supporting management strategies, services, processes, and technologies across organizations (Shearmur and Poirier 2017); providing services and products and developing administrative systems (Salge and Vera 2012); and encouraging regulation or legislation (Shmueli et al. 2015). These are alongside everyday innovation, which improves the routine activities performed by departments in municipalities and their employees (Shearmur and Poirier 2017). Innovations in public systems unfold in three spheres—the local, cross-organizational, and national—and focus on one or more of the following areas: changing policy, revising the policy-setting process, and initiating policies for fostering and disseminating innovation (Mulgan and Albury 2003).

Generally, innovation is characterized by operating a network in which each partner has unique resources (Bloch and Bugge 2013). The integration of knowledge and capacities in a variety of areas generates entrepreneurial activity, combining the use of capacities while creating new products and

services by means of new processes (Diaconu 2011; Hilgers and Ihl 2010). Due to the substantial complexity characterizing the public sphere, innovation is often based on the activity of complex networks composed of a broad range of actors from several sectors, with different sets of regulations.

This special issue includes three articles dealing with innovation through extra-organizational networks in a bottom-up structure. What the three studies share is the goal to observe the representational structure of different communities within Israeli society. Each article dives deep to explore a different community and a very different context; hence, the combination is riveting. The article by Rakefet Ron Ehrlich, Shahar Gindi, and Michal Hisherik examines a low-key form of organizing, quiet and unplanned, by Arab teachers—chiefly women. They found a remedy for their employment problems by teaching in Jewish schools. Relying on ‘disruptive innovation’, a theoretical concept from the world of economics, the authors portray a distinctive phenomenon in which Arab women teachers gradually find their place in schools in Jewish localities suffering from shortfalls of teaching staff in various disciplines, not limited to teaching Arabic. It is encouraging to see how social networks, unplanned and unmanaged, successfully drive innovative changes in relationships between the Arab and Jewish sectors of society, with an impact on the broader social order. It is equally fascinating to understand the mindset and the feelings expressed by the teachers—both those who are integrated and those who integrate.

No less fascinating is the article by Adi Binhas, which examines the relationships of the Ethiopian community in Israel. Binhas looked for the degree of innovation implied by the networks that the community’s members have operated over the years, through which they manifest their protest activities, some restrained and others much more vigorous, revealing a sometimes surprising integration into the mindset and behavior patterns of veteran Israelis. It is most stimulating to grasp the level of innovation that leaders instill in various forms of protest, including a successful attempt to promote their demands via international networks of protest groups from the African-American community in the United States—of course, before the outbreak of the George Floyd riots in May 2020.

The article by Osnat Akirav concerns parliamentary representation. It deals with the consequences of a 2014 law raising the threshold percentage necessary for a party to enter the Knesset to 3.25 percent on the structure of the party system, obliging ‘remnants of parties’ to unite in order to obtain or maintain representation in the Knesset. The phenomenon has had a unique and innovative impact on the discourse around elections. Because of difficulties in bridging divides, speakers for the united parties tend to conduct a less ideological discourse, which aids in reconciling con-

flicts, allaying tensions, and ‘centralizing’ at the level of the specific electorate of the joint party—all in hopes of crossing the qualifying threshold by proportional representation through a mixed electorate.

In comparison, the research conducted by Zvi Hadar, Fany Yuval, and Rebecca Kook explores the backgrounds and motivations that have drawn young adults into local political activities. It appears that they have found a unique way to propagate their agenda, that is, by launching election campaigns typified by fun, enjoyment, and entertainment, alongside political content. Here, too, a significant contribution is ascribed to internal networks between local parties from different authorities. By giving each other reciprocal support, they have created a wave of young parties, of the kind that democratic nations worldwide are desperately seeking. Israelis have found a distinctive way to attract the young cohort and to combine a serious agenda with a ‘cool’ election campaign, assisted by reciprocal support from sister parties.

In these ways, this special issue brings together innovation at different levels (national, municipal, intra-organizational) and in various spheres (communities, basket of services, personal services). It analyzes civics textbooks and diverse circles (Israeli Arabs, Israelis of Ethiopian origin, young people) and how they impact on the political discourse in Israel—creating a civic discourse that shapes the younger generation and prepares them for adult life as citizens. It presents the discourse of parties forced to build bridges and compromise in order to pass the qualifying threshold percentage; the discourse of young people, intent on having fun; and the discourse of protest based on difficulties in Israel, which wins support from activists and protest movements in other countries.

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