Jason Sanford Greenberg **Department of Anthropology**
sanford@temple.edu **Temple University**

TEACHERS AS INTELLECTUALS, INTELLECTUALS AS TEACHERS; THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN TWO ISRAELI COMMUNITIES[1]

> Every relation of hegemony is necessarily a pedagogical relationship and is verified not only within a nation among diverse forces which compose it, but within the international and world field, and the complexities of national and continental civilization.
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> – Antonio Gramsci, "La Filosofia di B. Croce"[2]

Several years ago, as novice fieldworker, I observed, in an academically tracked history class in an Arab city in Israel, an event that both confused and elated me. It was, or so I thought, exactly what I had been looking for, a sign of resistance in the classroom. I later wrote of the event,

> Fighting his students' waning interest and growing restlessness at the close of a long hot day, [a high school teacher] while lecturing on the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, made an abrupt turn-about, and expressed his disgust with how the state sanctioned text book was biased against Arabs. The students, their interest peaked, began actively participating, suggesting other more pro-Arab readings of the events which led to the war.

I expected to witness similar events within Development Town schools, 'new towns' established in the 1950s for the settlement of Mizraḥim or Sephardim, the Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East[3]. I had assumed that since both groups, despite radically different political identities, share similar social and economic circumstances in Israel, their reaction to the curriculum would be similar. In fact, despite well-documented academic arguments of bias against Mizraḥi Jews in the humanities and social science curriculum (Alcalay 1993; Firer 1986;

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[2] *Quaderni*, Vol. III p.1638, cited and translated in Bernstein (1984:96).

[3] A recent wave of immigration has brought in many new immigrants from Central Asia and the former Soviet Union, changing the ethnic composition of the town.

Shohat 1988; Swirski 1990), I saw almost nothing which would indicate any sort of resistance on the part of these teachers to the state imposed texts or curriculum. However, in private conversation, many teachers acknowledged the presence of inconsistencies and prejudice, but thought that national interests were far more important than ethnic or regional ones. One teacher remarked, "Yes, it is true that the history I teach leaves out much of my family's experience [as Moroccans] and those of my students, but children are easily angered, and to turn them against our nation would be wrong".

Why, if Arab and Mizraḥi teachers face similar contradictions within the curriculum, do they resolve them in such different ways? What can this tell us about the position of two communities, both alienated from the state's economic and social mainstream, and what can it tell us about the position of the teacher within these communities? I argue that the way that teachers resolve conflicting interests and loyalties, making conscious and unconscious decisions between identities and priorities, choosing to value, say, national values over local, or vice versa, reflects their function and position within their community.

Teachers as Intellectuals, Intellectuals as Teachers

Antonio Gramsci's writings on intellectuals provide a much-needed framework for a fruitful discussion of the relationship of teachers to community. Few would regard teachers, particularly elementary and high school teachers, as 'real' intellectuals, since they rarely appear to fulfill the basic qualifications for the position; "to possess superior powers of intellect"[4]. However, the application of Gramsci's writings provides a framework that allows for a reconception of both the work and social position of teachers, explaining their contradictory location vis-à-vis the state, and local community.

On the subject of intellectuals, few authors have been more eloquent and thought provoking, or as contradictory and ambiguous as Antonio Gramsci. In an attempt to understand his own role as teacher and writer within the Italian Communist party, Gramsci contextualized the role of the intellectual within his theory of hegemony and the modern state. Gramsci's basic argument is that intellectuals are firmly rooted within a particular class, and their production is

[4] (Oxford University Press 1993: intellectual, Def. B 4)

labor that must be understood within the state's hierarchical social and economic relations. Intellectuals have the basic function of providing and creating culture, and consequently manufacturing or resisting hegemony. Thus, the role of those intellectuals is crucial, since no society could reproduce itself without the legacy of morality, ideology, and culture, and no revolution could succeed or survive without radically new modes of thinking.

Gramsci defines two forms of intellectuals and intellectualism—traditional and organic—the difference being their ties to their community of origin. Organic intellectuals remain a part of their community, intimately tied to their class and social group, striving to make sense of the world and their place in it, 'speaking' to and sometimes for their class (Gramsci 1971:5). Traditional intellectuals appear as an uninterrupted historical continuity (7) with no apparent social origin, since they are often 'assimilated' into other, more powerful classes or social groups. Hegemony over the state is gained, not by force or coercion, but by the assimilation of the traditional intellectuals and the ideological conquest of culture.

By Gramsci's definition, teachers mostly fall into the traditional intelligentsia. However, as with many of Gramsci's writings and ideas, distinctions and definitions become nebulous, porous, and at times contradictory (Anderson 1976). I believe that Gramsci's distinction between the traditional and organic can be seen as a framework or characteristics for understanding intellectuals, not a fixed typology. Teachers are never completely traditional or organic. Rather, they are, like their contradictory functions in society, a composite. The contradictions inherent within the work of teachers—divided loyalties and uncertain roles—are never completely resolved. However, at times, teachers are able to resolve and express these contradictions, thereby acting as organic intellectuals.

ISRAELI TEACHERS: HISTORY AND HEGEMONY

In a very tenuous way, I will be arguing that, at least in Gramsci's terminology, it is possible, and at times likely, for Palestinian teachers in Israel to function as Organic Intellectuals. On the other hand, it is much more difficult for Jews, as teachers, to remain tied to their community. The reasons for this are to be found within the historical development of Israel, and current political-economic structure of the Israeli State. I do not mean to suggest that all Arab teachers remain

organically linked to their community, nor do I argue that all Jewish teachers are alienated from theirs. Rather, that it is more *likely*, due to their differential incorporation into the Israeli state.

Teachers in History

In the *Yishuv*, the pre-state Zionist colony in Palestine, Hebrew teachers were key intellectuals, speaking for and about the goals of the Zionist movement, as witnessed by the major role they played in the legitimization of Hebrew (Bentwich 1965:14-15). However, after the establishment of the state school system in 1953, it was clear that the Hebrew teacher was no longer expected, or wanted to be an intellectual. In this transformation, as a group their allegiance passed from community to state, mostly severing the ties that bound them to the local. Today, the minor, and essentially irrelevant role Jewish teachers play outside the school is indicative of this change[5]. This disconnection from community is particularly palpable within the Mizraḥi schools. By end of the Mandate, the once well-established community schools of the Mizraḥi Jews, had been absorbed by the Zionist school system[6], and local Mizraḥi teachers were replaced by Ashkenazim (Swirski 1999:51-52; Greenberg 2001). On the other hand, Arab teachers, who had been quite marginal characters within their communities previous to the establishment of state education, were suddenly in a central position, particularly since the majority of Palestinian intellectuals had fled or were expelled during the 1947 War. Thus the role and position of Arab teachers, who at the end of the 19th century were beholden to religious hierarchy (*‘ulamā*) and local notables (*a‘yān*), radically shifted after the *nakba*, the catastrophe of 1947.

The causes of these shifts are to be found within Mandate and early State education policy (Greenberg 2001). Beginning with the *de facto* establishment of the Mandate in 1917, all education was shifted from a disconnected hodge-podge of community-run one-room schools, to two parallel and centralized bureaucracies[7]. In this transformation, control over the schools, and

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[5] Swirski suggests that, “the primary agent of Israelization was the one clearly ‘Israeli’ institution created in 1948—the Israel Defense Forces”, the educational system had failed since it “left intact the major dividing line, that of religiosity” (1999:112). Consequently, the role of teachers was made redundant by that of the Israeli Army.

[6] These schools had failed for lack of funding. According Eliahu Eliachar, any attempt to raise money for these community schools was blocked by “the various Jewish national funds [who] persisted in preventing any separate appeals by Sephardi representatives” (Eliachar 1983:178).

[7] In fact, this began to occur slightly earlier among the Jewish schools established by European concerns, such as the French *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, or the German *Lämmel* schools.

not inconsequently, over the teachers, shifted from the local to the newly established and centralized Department of Education or Zionist National Council (*Va'ad Leumi*). Paradoxically, this meant that Arab teachers, despite being beholden to the bureaucracy of an alien state, remained part of their local community, experiencing the same conflicts and contradictions as anyone else. The loyalties of Jewish teachers were also radically shifted, however in the opposite direction; from community to nation.

Thus, in the middle of the 20th century, a large group of Arab traditional intellectuals (teachers), who were bound to local notables, were torn from them by the violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and changing location of power and capital. At the same time, the organic intellectuals of the European Jewish settlers, the Zionists, were assimilated by the new state and bourgeoisie, to become part of the traditional intellectuals.

Teachers in the Public

Arab teachers, particularly local ones, play a role within their community quite different from their peers in the Development Towns. The position of the Arab teacher is a public role, and Arab teachers, particularly *former* teachers, play major roles within the culture and politics of their communities. In any Arab town hall, one would be hard pressed to find an elected official or bureaucrat who had not, at sometime in their lives, been a teacher. Community activists, and youth workers are all current or former teachers. In town meetings, the majority of speakers are current or former schoolteachers. In the development towns, however, teachers are conspicuously absent from public life. Local politicians or bureaucrats are rarely former teachers. Community activists, and social workers begin their careers straight out of college, rarely pausing to teach for at least a few years, as do most educated Arabs.

This 'pause' is the difference, and speaks not only to different understandings of the career and role of teachers, but also of the structure of ethnic employment in Israel. The main reason for being a teacher, particularly among Arabs in the south of Israel, is simply the lack of anything else to do. Most Arab teachers believe that their identity as Arabs in Israel put most

work out of reach[8], they are prevented, either through ‘security’ demands, or the lack of an appropriate infrastructure, from finding jobs which better suit them. Arab women also felt that they had little choice in the matter, not only because of the state, but also (Arab) societal control over women and notions of propriety. If opportunity avails itself, many teachers would move on, finding other work within the community; often in the local council or town hall. For most college educated Arabs, there is no ‘shame’ in being a teacher, it does not reflect upon the inability of the person to find a ‘better’ job. Rather, it reflects upon the failure of the state to provide one.

Although less than the Israeli Arabs, the Mizraḥim, particularly those inside the development towns, also face restricted employment opportunities and limited rewards for educational achievement[9]. Despite this, an attitude prevails wherein teaching is a sign of personal failure, a sign that teachers couldn’t find a ‘better’ job. While some of the mystique of teaching as community service remains, it is clear that most residents of the development towns feel little obligation to their community. Rather, most have as primary goal to leave town as fast as possible. Few, if any teachers, ‘graduate’ to become *bona fide* civil servants, or workers within their community.

The different attitudes towards teaching reflect remarkably different attitudes about the local community: Few regard development towns as desirable or hospitable places to live; the goal is escape. While many residents recognize that the sorry condition of the development towns is a direct result of governmental policy, most also blame the apathy and stupidity of the citizens. On the other hand, Arab attitudes towards their communities, while often critical of both Arab social and family structure, see government policy and negligence as the primary cause for the failure of their communities to thrive. The disdain and self-depreciation of the Mizraḥim towards their own communities is clearly reflected in the attitudes of teachers, while the loyalty of many Arab teachers towards their community is clear.

[8] There is a significant literature on ethnic employment patterns in Israel, suggesting that it is indeed the case that Arabs, as well as Mizraḥim receive fewer rewards from their education than Ashkenazi Jews (Al-Haj 1988; Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov 1994; Semyonov and Yuchtman-Yaar 1992; Smooha 1988).

[9] See: (Klinov-Malul 1966; Nahon 1984; Shavit 1990)

Unlike the Arab teachers, the majority of the Mizraḥi clearly identified with the state, feeling that, even if the history of Israel might suggest otherwise, Zionism and the Israeli state are on the same side as the students. This is not to say that there are not exceptions, but most Mizraḥi teachers were reluctant to admit to the existence of conflicting interests. Arab teachers on the other hand rarely saw the state as ally, and were more than happy to resist a curriculum that they felt was foisted upon them. It is simple enough to suggest that the differences between Palestinian and Mizraḥi teachers are resultant from ethnicity. However, I think that the real difference is due to the complex interaction between ethnicity and state, and in particular how different groups become historically, economically, and ideologically integrated into the state. It is this, in Gramsci, which makes up hegemony.

I have presented however, a remarkably 'clean' version of reality. Life and the state are messier; the clear-cut divisions I make between Arab and Jew, and Mizraḥi and Ashkenazi are not always so obvious. Among all groups, the divisions of class and gender as well as those of family, region and origin make ethnic, racial, and national differences all the more nebulous.

Concluding with Teachers

What can this tell us about the utility or applicability of Gramsci's theory of intellectuals in a world far distant in both time and place from that which he knew and described? There is a remarkable fluidity between categories or kinds of intellectual. The movement between traditional and organic intellectuals is not only, as Gramsci describes, a historical one involving the movement and assimilation of classes of intellectuals, but also an individual process of development and movement. The social, political, and economic conditions of Italy in the first half of the 20th century, which Gramsci describes, are vastly different from those of Israel in the early 21st century. Israeli class structure and social hierarchy is infused with racial and ethnic distinctions, with only a glimmer of Italy's "Southern Question". However, Gramsci's notion that the role of intellectuals within any given community, is determined, to a large extent, by their ability to understand, resolve, and express contradictions they face remains a powerful argument, and one which continues to provide cogent explanations where other arguments fail.

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