

# IS SIEGE MENTALITY A HEGEMONIC BELIEF IN ISRAEL? A COMMENT ON BAR-TAL & ANTEBI

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The paper by Bar-Tal & Antebi identifies a particular type of belief - The Siege Mentality - and shows how beliefs of this nature are important in understanding the Israeli people's view of "the rest of the world". The Siege Mentality in Israel is presented as a consequence of the persecutions and pogroms experienced by the Jewish people throughout history. Today this belief is maintained by means of cultural, educational, and political institutions and it is shared by over 60 percent of Israeli Jews. Finally, the authors suggest several consequences of this belief, mainly for a better understanding of the Israeli reactions towards the Palestinian people and the Arab States.

Bar-Tal & Antebi's paper is a good example of how to describe a collective belief, and also a stimulating illustration of the importance of "group's beliefs in the understanding of group's behaviours". As the authors point out: "An attempt to determine whether the world is actually hostile toward the particular group is irrelevant to the understanding of this group behavior. When group members believe that the rest of the world has negative behavioral intentions towards them, they react accordingly".

My comments will necessarily be brief, and therefore I have selected two points which, in my opinion, are open to some criticism. The first point is related to the choice of the Ethos concept to describe the relation of the Jewish people with the Siege Belief. The second point discusses the hegemonic character of this belief in Israel.

## Collective Beliefs and National Ethos

The Siege Mentality is presented as a strongly rooted belief in the mentality of the Jewish people and consequently a "part of the Israeli Ethos". The concept of "ethos" was widely used during the 50's within the context of the theoretical movement usually referred to as "personality and culture", within the modal personality and the national character approach and also within the "pattern variables" perspective (e.g. Inkeles & Levinson, 1968). Today the concept is still in use, for instance, in the field of research into political culture following the tradition of Almond and Verba's (1963) approach. In all these perspectives the concept of ethos refers the "tone", the "Zeitgeist", the "Weltauschaung" or the "world view" of a culture (De Vos & Hippler, 1968). Despite the differences in the concept's theorization, it is possible to consider that its core involves two central ideas: the stability of the Ethos, which is presented, at least metaphorically, as a basic disposition; and the strong association between the Ethos and the "long history" of a society as well as of the individuals (the early socialization). It is clear that Bar-Tal & Antebi try to use the concept of Ethos within another approach: "Siege Mentality is not an inherited disposition or a stable trait, but a temporary state of mind that can last for either a short or long period of time, depending on the group's perceived experiences and on the educational, cultural and political mechanisms which maintain it" (page 48). However, these theoretical elements do not seem to be sufficient to remove the seminal meaning of the Ethos' concept. On the other hand, the strategy of the text

clearly underlines the role of the Jewish people's "long history" in the creation of the Siege Mentality.

As I see it, the paradigm of the "thinking society" or the social representations approach may represent an alternative to the structural sociocultural and psycho-cultural approach in the study of mentalities and political beliefs (Vala, 1986). This perspective not only makes superfluous the proto-concepts of disposition, trait or state of mind, but also proposes a "retour à l'événement" or, at least, in the language of the history of mentalities, a dialectic procedure linking the brief and the long history (Vovelle, 1986). For instance, in the present case, the "Diaspora", the "Final Solution" and the "Intifada".

### **Siege Mentality as a hegemonic representation**

In the context of the social representation perspective, the way the authors describe Siege Mentality allows us to characterize this belief as a kind of *hegemonic representation*.

The hegemonic representations "prevail implicitly in all symbolic or affective practices. They seem to be uniform and coercive. They reflect the homogeneity and stability that French sociologists had in mind when they called those representations collective" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 221). As Bar-Tal & Antebi show, the Siege Mentality as expressed in Israeli literature, films, education and press, is held by political leaders and by the different forms of institutional power, and is shared by the majority of the population. The Siege Mentality is then presented as a dominant belief in a double sense: it is a belief held by the institutional power and by the majority of the population. However, if we try to understand this belief as a conflictual representation within Israeli society, we realize that, in fact, only sixty percent of the population seems to hold the idea "that all the world has negative intentions towards the Israeli people". About 40 percent of the Israeli Jews share more moderate positions or are non-believers in the Siege Belief. They are, very probably, less prone to discrimination against the Palestinians and Arabs, resisting the pressures toward conformity, and not agreeing with the idea that "all means are right to secure the existence of the State of Israel". It would be interesting to know, for example, how believers and non-believers discuss the Middle Eastern Peace Conference and the "Intifada". How they argue and how the Siege Belief functions as an organizer of such arguments.

The lack of consensus about the Siege Belief can also be seen within élites and political leaders. In fact, they attribute different meanings and explain differently the history of the persecutions suffered by the Jewish people. For some of them, those persecutions can be seen as an expression of the "Jewish fate" (p. 56), for others as a "complex" ("a Masada complex, a pogrom complex, a Hitler complex", p. 56), for others, yet, a consequence of the "uniqueness and the wondrous mission of our nation" (p. 56). Behind the same belief are hidden different realities with different consequences when one looks to the past or to the present. Thus, isn't Siege Mentality only apparently consensual, both at the level of the élites and of the general population?

When studying a social representation in our societies, the hypothesis that these are different and conflictual representations about the same object, is probably today heuristically more valuable than the hypothesis that an object is represented in an hegemonic way. In fact, there are representations that are coercive, hegemonic and not discussable. But there are also discussable and, indeed, discussed representations. Its consensuality within the groups is constructed and deconstructed side by side with the conflictuality which crosses the social relations and the strategic activity of individual and group actors.

In our societies the social differentiation strategies accompany or, often, transform themselves into oppositions or clear conflicts between groups. These differentiations and conflicts are maintained by different representations about the social structure. In this way, to describe a social representation and its social function, means to connect it to the representations about the social structure and the consequent social identities. On the other hand, to understand the dynamic of a social representation means to articulate it with the processes of social influence and social identity, trying to relate these processes with the dialectic of the long and brief history of individuals and groups.

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