**Hemi Sheinblat – "Catching America" "-The Americanization of Israeli Society 1958-1967**

**Abstract**

This study explores and recovers the accelerated processes of Americanization which took place in Israeli society and culture during Israel’s second decade, between 1958 and 1967. It systematically addresses a variety of aspects of these processes and examines them in their local and global contexts. It traces the intensive adoption and assimilation of practices and norms, which characterized a global consumption culture, originating from the United States. The study follows the movement, from the United States to Israel, of objects and commodities, institutions, practices and knowledge, which were perceived in Israel as belonging to the American culture of that period, their appropriation and the meanings which different groups, individuals and institutions, attributed to them. Furthermore, the study also traces the transforming images of the term ‘America’ in Israel and seeks to explain how these images affected the transformation and consolidation of local identities in Israel. This is, as far as I know, the first monograph to systematically explore the Americanization of Israeli society and set it in a local and global context.

The main argument of this study is that Americanization processes in Israel during its second decade accelerated processes of globalization and advanced consumption capitalism in Israel. These processes promoted and established a new materialistic culture of consumption, which was manifest in the circulation of new goods and artifacts, their daily usage, and advertising campaigns and in the overall relation to the new culture. These artifacts included private cars, electric home appliances such as refrigerators, air conditioners, radio transistors, mixers and also packaged frozen foods, etc.

In this manner what I term a new type of ‘consumption landscape’ was formed and shaped in a variety of sites, most of which were urban, and in the formation of ‘consumption knowledge’ and ‘consumption capital’ that were part of conducting action in these sites. My research argues further that the Americanization processes in Israel during this period were ‘consensual revolutionism’: initially these processes had differentiated between classes, had generational and gender-related contexts and subversive components, and challenged a dominant national model with a socialist and West European orientation. Later on it became a broader and more inclusive social and national process. A forming middle class, mainly urban, professional and mostly Ashkenazi, adopted components of American consumption culture in order to differentiate itself from other groups and to establish a modern US oriented identity, with consumerism as its central characteristic. Consumers purchased electrical household appliances, shopped in supermarkets, drove private cars and listened to pop and rock music or to radio advertisements, as part of their ‘self-fashioning’.

Rather than being passive and led by powerful capitalist forces, consumers, driven by their wishes and yearning for these consumption materials and practices, chose to adopt the new culture with varied local adjustments. The consolidation of these Americanization processes is evidence, amongst other things, to the growing cultural and social clout of the new middle class. Alongside these processes a decline occurred in groups with a socialist orientation, including the Kibbutzim, which were conceived as conservative and as hindering Americanization. American consumption culture offered new roles to women as pioneers in the new consumption sites and challenged understandings about the position of Israeli women and their role in the national enterprise.

Alongside consumers, this study examines commercial and cultural entrepreneurs that also had a role in consolidating the Americanization processes: industrialists, advertisement agents, broadcasters, photographers, garage owners, importers, representatives of international corporations, consumer’s organizations and labor unions. The Israeli government and its ministries expanded and deepened the consolidation of this consumption culture as well as making it more accessible to diverse groups in Israeli society. The government pursued this policy in a series of administrative and bureaucratic measures, including the facilitation of import of many appliances and goods, the encouragement of local industries and allowing advertising in the Israeli Broadcasting Corporation. Government policies and action stemmed from the desire to deepen the integration of the Israeli economy in the global economy and resulted from the global economic and cultural transformation manifest in the transition from ‘market of producers’ to ‘market of purchasers’, as this was understood by part of the Israeli leadership. These steps also tagged consumer culture as another characterization of progress and modernism of the society and the state and presented a different and more stratified national identity. In this manner, Americanization processes functioned in Israel initially as a source of social fragmentation but, within a short period, became a social unifying factor under the sponsorship of the state.

The present study however is not merely a project of recovery of consumption practices and Israeli identities during the second decade. It has the potential for a conceptualization and reinterpretation of the context and meaning of Americanization during the second half of the twentieth century. The study views Americanization as a manifestation of a new apprehension of modernity in Israel and as a process that affirmed the historic transition from European influence and orientation to an American model of assimilation. For many people America embodied what I term here ‘desirable modernity’. This term denotes the active adoption of practices and new premises, regarding society and culture, with consumerism as their central and organizing axis. The term refers to the activities and motivations of the various agents, who initiated and adopted this modernity, appropriating it for local needs. The use of the term indicates the active and dynamic ways in which historical agents defined and represented themselves in in relation to modernity. It also indicates that the stratification of identity discussed here has had both national and global components.

In contrast to the still dominant interpretations and analyses of Americanization as a manifestation of American-style ‘cultural imperialism’- a paradigm, or model of American influence on the world after 1945, or, alternatively, as obscure and amorphous cultural influences, Americanization is considered in this study as a process that is tangible and physical, that takes place in public and private spheres in a specific time and is carried on by historical agents. This study is thus, an attempt to historicize processes of Americanization. By doing so it contributes to the extensive research on this phenomenon.

I focus on the active adoption of components of American culture by Israeli consumers and their decisive role in the realization of these processes. They wished ‘to catch America’- the wealth, comfort and materialism that it offered them, and viewed it as a desired empire. Nevertheless, this research does not repudiate post- war American power: the hierarchical relations between a global superpower and a small, young and peripheral state were expressed in the Americanization processes in Israel, where the economic and cultural power of the United States had an expanding presence. In this sense, this desirable modernity combines the activities of the historical agents, their motivations for action and the social and global hierarchies, where they are placed.

The study examines transitions of material culture and daily habits in Israel during its second decade. This examination may also contribute to the corpus of research on Israeli society during the state’s first decades, which understudies material culture and consumption and their social implications, as well as the influences of global cultures on the Israeli society. By considering the global prism, my research may enrich the understanding of processes in Israeli society not just as products of local and national ideological debates or politics, but also as part of international processes that are specifically relevant to Americanization in Israel. These processes include the influence of the United States on Western Europe and Latin America, during the Cold War, the growth of the affluent society in social democratic societies in the West, and even the evolution of the welfare state outside the United States. This research clarifies the ways in which these global influences were manifest in the adoption of an American consumption culture in a heterogonous immigrant society undergoing accelerated construction processes.

Consumption culture may not be identified solely with Americanization and assessed only in terms of the development of the middle class, urbanization or capitalism. Nevertheless, this research focuses on global consumption culture in its manifestations in the United States and in the Western world after the Second World War, a culture that became one of the characteristics of the ‘American way of life’, in the political-cultural Cold War. This culture represented an ideal of economic prosperity and democratic political freedom comfort, wealth and technology achieved by the United State. However, Israel’s Americanization was not merely an imitation. Rather, this research examines Americanization mainly by describing the unique Israeli case, as it was experienced by its harbingers of the Americanization, its practitioners and opponents. It also focuses on consumption as a daily practice and seeks to understand it in its historical context by describing the situation of ‘people who consume goods’. Consumption, as argued in this study, was firmly connected to social class and gender. By adopting the American consumption culture, the emerging middle class also adopted a global-political stance that manifested openness to a specific Western culture while strengthening the class structure of Israeli society, in itself a political act in Israel during the 1960s. This adoption contributed to the distinctions of class as a category, though class does not necessarily overlap with traditional political distinctions. Class as discussed here was not only an economic or professional entity but had to do with norms and practices of daily living. This usage of class presents it as a central social entity, that absorbs meanings, practices and members based on cultural criteria, and which potentially has the ability to deviate from the national collective, as well as to change it from within. Like class, gender was central to the evolving consumer culture, but images, representations and norms of feminine and masculine consumption were not only national but were formed through an exchange with other cultures.

Aside of the use of social class and gender as categories and the presentation of women and men as agents of consumerism, this research also focuses on physical materials, goods and commodities. It considers aspects of this materiality: the manner in which consumed commodities were produced, advertised and purchased, the manner in which materialism was realized in the ‘spheres of consumption’, and the visual and verbal forms in which this materiality was presented. By doing that, this study follows the rich anthropological literature on artifacts and its social consumption and meaning. The industrialized consumption goods embodied the ‘America’ of comfort and wealth and of the new modernity. The present study expands our understanding of their role as social mediators and as generators of transformations in the urban scenery, at home and even in the Israeli acoustic sphere.

The dissertation draws on a wide and varied range of materials. These include a vast corpus of materials discovered in a number of archives in Israel including: The *Israel State* *Archive*, *Yad Tabenkin* archive, The *Knesset* archive, *Lavon* Archive (storing documents of the Labor Movement), *Israel Electric Corporation* archive and the archives of the Israeli academic institutions such as Tel Aviv University, The Hebrew University and the Weizmann Institute ofScience. Printed primary materials include statistical reports produced by *The Bank of Israel* and *Israel Central Bureau of Statistics*, periodical publications and the daily press.

The wide selection of newspapers attempts at recouping the variety of views on and images of America and Americanization during these years. For this purpose, this study makes extensive use of autobiographic and ethnographic Israeli texts on the United States and to its culture, particularly texts that recoup the authors’ direct experience of their travel and stay at the US. In addition to the written texts, this research makes use of visual materials: newsreels, government promotional films, commercials films, cartoons, advertisement in newspapers and radio commercials.

The study is divided into seven chapters. Each chapter is focused on a product or on a site of consumption and follows its movement from the US to Israel, while examining the role of agents who were involved in its import, distribution and circulation. Each chapter also recoups the public debate revolving around them and recovers the varied modes of the appropriation of American products and the expansion of their uses. Finally, in each chapter the consumers themselves are examined, focusing on their identity and activities, practices and the meanings they bestowed meaning on American goods and commodities.

Chapters One and Two explore the adoption and consolidation of a new American commercial model in Israel- the Supermarket. Chapter One focuses on the agents who imported this model: entrepreneurs who established the first supermarket of *Shufersal* chain stores, alongside *Brit Ha-cooperazia Hazarchanit* (the consumers’ cooperative alliance- part of the *Histadrut*), that consolidated the importation of the model by launching hundreds of supermarkets. This chapter also describes the activities of a variety of associations and organizations: the government, owners of small retail businesses, notably grocery stores, members of *Knesset* and the daily press, all of which provided a public platform for the ‘debate on the supermarket’- a series of stormy arguments on the adoption of the new form and site of retail and shopping.

Chapter Two demonstrates the ways in which the adoption of the supermarket in Israel, through practices and new procedures, established and consolidated new types of consumers. The American supermarket was first adopted by the emerging urban middle class which viewed it as an arena where it could define itself and its cultural values. The establishment and consolidation of ‘consumer capital’– a collection of images and practices that articulated the norms and behaviors of the group members, accompanied this process. Middle-class consumers separated themselves from large parts of the Israeli public. This capital also included a new consumers’ landscape, knowledge and ‘consumers’ trust’, which established sets of norms and behaviors. Following the consolidation and expansion of supermarkets, different audiences gradually acquired this consumers’ capital. Consolidation became possible mainly due to the support of the government, alongside that of *Brit Ha-cooperazia Hazarchanit*. Americanization functioned as a marker of distinction and differentiation, but also as a unifying and solidifying agents, catering for groups outside the middle class.

Chapter Three discusses an important and extensive phenomenon, which I term ‘the age of electricity’- the dramatic growth in the production and consumption of electrical household appliances in Israel. Within a few years, the Israeli home, mainly the kitchen, was transformed and included a new line of products. This change too, initially involved in the new middle class and gradually expanded to additional groups and sectors.The age of electricity was a local manifestation of a more general phenomenon: a growing utilization of electrical household appliances in the Western world and the US and their representation as a proof to the success of the American way of life. The age of electricity included new practices, which were assimilated into the Israeli market and society: production practices, consumption and uses of advertising. Electrical appliances embodied consumption as a value, accompanied by values such as comfort, esthetics, wealth, hygiene and functionality. Furthermore, their purchase and usage transformed the perception of consumerism, while publicly revisiting concepts of luxury, necessity, conspicuous consumption, imitation consumption, design, standard of living, etc. This chapter also discusses the agents who ‘made’ the age of electricity, including governmental ministries, the electricity corporation, local factories, advertising agencies, consumers’ unions and the consumers themselves.

The growth in consumption and usage of private cars, which began during the mid-1950s and escalated throughout the 1960s, is the subject of the Chapter Four. This chapter discusses the consolidation of the ‘vehicle culture’ as a materialistic, economic and social phenomenon in Israel. Car consumption was also a part of a broader, global phenomenon, which took place mainly in the US and Western Europe after the Second World War. The consolidation of local vehicle culture promoted what I have termed ‘motornisation’: the local adoption of a new modernity, embodied in the vehicle culture with privately owned car at its core. This motornisationwas manifested in new images of comfort, wealth speed and space, and in a set of practices such as driving, production processes, domestic tourism, behavior during driving, fashion and formal and informal car races. As with electrical appliances and the supermarkets, so with motornisation, the car became a tool, used by groups from the middle class, to differentiate themselves from others and from a new identity focus. However, motornization simultaneously served other groups that wanted to challenge class and gender divisions, to reinterpret them and to cast new meanings into them: teenagers participating in illegal car races or women drivers, who both occasionally challenged traditional or gender-based roles. Alongside the activity of consumers, this chapter also relates the contribution of additional historical agents: the government, factory owners and manufacturers and car import agencies.

Chapter Five deals with advertising the objects and goods discussed in the first four chapters and recovers the emergence and development of the advertisement sector, between the end of the 1950s and the end of the 1960s. This development included transformations in the structure of advertising agencies, the formation of new advertisement channels and changes in existing channels and the implementation of new diversified methods and strategies in the advertisement process. This chapter also considers the advertising agents themselves and the changes in their work and concepts. Advertising agencies that expanded and professionalized, activated and nurtured the ‘American materialism’ and aesthetics of wealth, commodities and the culture of consumption that accompanied them. The chapter also traces what I defined as the ‘advertisement awareness’, meaning- the new way of thinking about advertisements in Israel, as central to the modern economy, and its apprehension as a scientific rational process, in which consumers took a central part. The chapter demonstrates that the advertising sector became an important component in the modern identity of consumers in Israel. The advertisement awareness was accompanied by the adoption of a new advertising knowledge: a set of assumptions and practices regarding advertisements, which originated in the US and which led to changing the ways in which products or factories were advertised.

Chapter Six discusses Americanization in Israel from a different angle: its presence in the Israeli acoustic sphere. The chapter reviews the ways in which two characteristics that were identified as American radiophonic advertisements and rock and pop music, emerged and began to spread in Israel. This was due to the growing consumption of radio receivers and transistors and the usage of the governmental public radio service: a new station- *hagal hakal* (the light radio wave), both described as the generators of “noises”. The chapter follows them and their transformation into a part of the soundtrack of the Israeli vocal landscape of the 1960s. The ‘new noises’ described as ‘American’ provoked an extensive public debate, but, within a short time, turned into background noises. This process pointed at the existence of a lively dialogue between the governmental radio agency and various social and generational groups that demanded to be represented. This process also symbolized the transformation in the approach towards radio listeners, who became consumers-listeners, itself reflecting that producers, like consumers, were attuned to the global-American culture. This awareness was manifested in a new musical consumption culture in which the state’s radio agency played a major role.

Chapter Seven completes the dissertation by focusing on the view of America in the writings of Israelis travelling in the United States. Representations of the United States was widespread in a variety of genres including travel books, ethnographies, newspaper articles and commentary columns in various types of journals and children’s books. The large volume of these texts reflects the growing interest in America in the Israeli imagination and the intensive attention to processes of Americanization which occurred during that time in Israel, and are discussed in the first six chapters. Their analysis in their context shows how they expressed the attraction to the US alongside criticism on it and even its rejection by the writers and their readers, and, at the same time, a self-consciousness about Israeli appropriation of American consumption culture. This repository of texts became an abundant channel for the description and imagining of ‘America’ and expressed and circulated changing perceptions of American culture and society while simultaneously producing new apprehensions and new methods for analyzing it.