

Politics - August 2007

For some people, living in the reality that they created is far more important than living in reality. Unfortunately, this (mis)-conception is particularly prevalent among politicians.

Raphael Cohen-Almagor

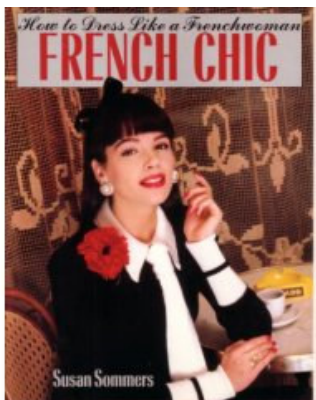


The news in Israel was dominated first by the Histadrut threat to open a general strike that would have put Israel's economy on hold. I was happy and relieved that the strike lasted only one day, after the Histadrut and the government reached a compromise of a 5% raise in the salaries of the public sector

workers over the next three years.

On August 15 I returned from Israel. The sun was shining. The sky was blue. The clouds were comforting rather than threatening. No rain. No floods. No harsh climate. The atmosphere in Israel this summer is relaxed; there is a sense of much-needed vacation. Families on the streets, on the beach, in the malls. This is exactly what Israel needs after the last dreadful summer.

The Tel Aviv promenade stretches from the old harbour in the north, to the picturesque Jaffa in the south.



I don't know many cities that offer such a stunning promenade, filled with restaurants, coffee shops, and points of relaxation. The sand is golden and inviting. The water warm and embracing.

The second most popular language, after Hebrew, is French. A few years ago the French Jews discovered the beauty of Tel Aviv, and since then every summer they fill the streets and beaches, adding a French chic to the ragged city.



Tel Aviv is Israel: from the outside it seems thorny, rigid, dirty, smelly. But once you scratch the surface and you find its originality, its inner beauty, its charm. Tel Aviv is eventful and lively to extraordinary extent. It is a city that does not like to sleep. In this respect, it is like New York. Even Amsterdam is

sleepy compared to Tel Aviv.

Nothing is happening this summer in Israel. No great news, which suits Israel just fine. The newspapers are desperate for headlines. Many MKs and ministers are vacationing in Israel or abroad, preferring to wine and dine over an interview on television. Those who were left behind have nothing much to say. It is too hot anyway, and people wish to rest. Every banal statement receives the headlines. The minister of defence is against those who wish to exempt themselves from army service. The minister of education is seeking ways to advance education. She travelled to Singapore and returned with fresh ideas. Once upon a time, the Singaporean sent delegations to Israel to learn from our education system. Now it is our turn. The minister of transport is angry as the minister of finance wishes to cut his budget. The foreign minister does not say much, as the prime minister ignores her anyway. Even the minister of justice is now calmer and ceased to initiate for a few days. Not to worry: he knows that his days are numbered, hence cannot sit comfortably and do nothing. The next judicial initiative is around the corner. The director of the Bank of Israel is thinking about raising the interest. On the other hand, he might not. The prime minister talks with Abu Mazen. Both know they cannot deliver, but they need to do something.



In short, this is the cucumber season. Such a nice season. Dull. Boring. Uneventful. Peaceful. Tranquil. Wonderful. after all, this is normal in normal countries. In some countries, this season stretches to 365 days of the year. In Israel, each day of this season is precious. The hope is that tomorrow will be similar.

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Ecology



The Division of Ethics of Science and Technology, Sector for Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO, just published book: "Environmental Ethics and International Policy".

UNESCO has invited well-known experts in environmental ethics for a project to describe the current situation regarding environmental ethics and to determine possibilities for international action in this area.

The aim of the book is to inform the general public, the scientific community and policy-makers of the ethical issues that are salient in current thinking about the environment. The experts have also made proposals for international action according to their analysis of the current situation of their discipline. The book covers the most important notions and principles in current environmental ethics, such as sustainability and future generations. International organizations are taking a growing interest in environmental issues. Governments are also increasingly aware of the need to develop environmental policies. At the same time, environmental ethics is a new area of applied ethics; though it is not as well developed as bioethics, there is a growing body of knowledge, there are experienced scholars as well as teaching and research schools. Despite growing interest in and awareness on environmental issues, the ethical dimension of environmental problems is often neglected in policy-making. The purpose of the book is to bring scientific and ethical expertise and policy-making together in presenting the latest situation regarding environmental ethics and in pointing out opportunities for international action.

The book costs 22 euros and can be ordered from UNESCO publishing on the following website:

http://publishing.unesco.org/details.aspx?&Code_Livre=4510&change=EFu

rther information is available on the following

website:<http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/ev.php->

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Poll



A new poll reveals that most Israeli Jews are dissatisfied with the way the government handles state business:

93.8% of the respondents said that the government deals with issues in "no good way" or in "entirely not good way". The public does not believe that at present there is a leader who could solve the country's pressing problems. 57.9% thought so.

Trust in government was ranked at 1.72 in a 1 to 4 scale.

Trust in parties was ranked 1.54 in a 1 to 4 scale.

Source: Yoram Peri, Yariv Tzfati and Riva Tikotzinsky, Do the Media Negatively Influence the National Moral? Report No. 7 (June 2007), Haim Herzog Institute, Tel Aviv University (Hebrew), pp. 8-10.

Ulrich Mühe



A few months ago I saw "The Lives of Others", a very good film that rightly received praise throughout the world. All who saw the film will not forget the performance of the Stasi officer, Gerd Wiesler, who lives the life of others and, at one point, decides to interfere in a positive, rather than negative way. The film sheds light on another sad chapter in the history of Germany, the part under Russian influence. On July 26, 2007 I was saddened to hear about the death of Mühe. Born in Grimma, Saxony, Mühe established himself in the GDR, and later reunified Germany, as a versatile actor on the stage, television

and the movies. But theatre was his preference and he celebrated some of his biggest successes acting in plays by Heiner Müller.

He won Germany's highest film award for his role as Stasi officer in *Das Leben der Anderen*. The film itself attracted audiences worldwide after earning an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film this year as well as top prizes in Europe and Germany. His repertoire included playing Hitler in a 2007 parody of the dictator as well as portraying a coroner in a German TV crime series.

Stiftung Aufarbeitung, the government-funded organization tasked with examining and reappraising East Germany's Communist dictatorship, lauded Mühe: "Through his impressive performance ... Ulrich Mühe sensitized an audience of millions to the Stasi's machinations and their consequences", adding that Mühe had been an active and valued participant in the foundation's events. When asked how he prepared for his role as Stasi officer Wiesler in "The Lives of Others," Mühe responded, "I remembered."

Mühe was married to actor Susanne Lothar and had five children from three marriages.

See <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2706089,00.html>

Beautiful Book



Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of Geisha*.

Beautifully written, with sensitivity, rich figurative speeches and idioms, providing penetrating insights into a very different culture. Golden takes your mind and soul to Japan of the 1940s, providing a glimpse into a very different way of life. I enjoyed both the book and the movie, and would especially recommend the former.

New Books



SECURITY FIRST: FOR A MUSCULAR, MORAL FOREIGN POLICY By Amitai Etzioni; Yale University Press, st£14.99



Toleration

A Critical Introduction
by Catriona McKinnon
Routledge, 2006

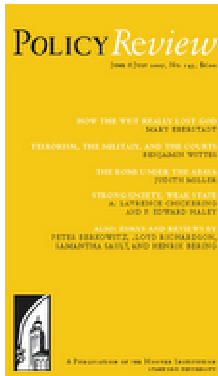
The View From Here

Bioethics and the Social Sciences

Edited by: Raymond De Vries (University of Michigan), Leigh Turner (McGill University), Kristina Orfali (Columbia University) and Charles Bosk (University of Pennsylvania)

<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/book.asp?ref=9781405152693&site=1>

Terrorism, the Military, and the Courts



By Benjamin Wittes, *Policy Review*, June & July 2007

The terrorist mastermind had slipped through their fingers before, and American forces were not about to let it happen again. At one point the previous year, they had actually arrested him, but not realizing who he was, had let him go. Unable to track him down now, they managed instead to locate and detain his wife and children, who were living in a remote area of Afghanistan. For several days, they interrogated his wife at an air base, but she repeatedly insisted that he was dead. Finally, they tried a new tactic.

They noisily put a plane on a nearby runway, its engines running. As the commanding officer later recalled: “We then informed [her] that the plane was there to take her three sons to Saudi Arabia unless she told us where her husband was and his aliases. If she did not do this then she would have two minutes to say goodbye to her sons. . . . We left her for ten minutes or so with paper and pencil to write down the information we required.” Having threatened, in essence, to kill her sons — for nobody doubted what the Saudis would do to them — the interrogators got the information they wanted. And they got their man, disguised as a farm laborer, that evening.

What followed was a protracted habeas corpus action in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Lawyers representing the high-value detainee decried the coercive interrogation of his wife, the threat to his children, and the savage beating he incurred on his arrest. (The medical officer accompanying the troops who detained him had shouted to the commanding officer to call his men off “unless you want to take back a corpse.”) Human rights groups uniformly condemned the interrogation tactic as torture; major newspapers weighed in on their side. The Bush administration, meanwhile, insisted that the courts had no jurisdiction over any such overseas military action, which had in any event been lawful and had yielded essential intelligence and the capture of a very big fish. As of this writing, the lower courts have deemed themselves powerless to hear the case and the Supreme Court — for now, at least — has not intervened.

Should the courts hear it, notwithstanding an act of Congress that explicitly precludes review? If so, what should they hold? Is such a tactic — garnering information from a mother by threatening to have her sons beheaded by a totalitarian regime — ever legitimate? And who, in a society committed both to law and to victory in a global struggle against terrorism, is to be the judge?

<http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/7831532.html>

Personal News



My family and I are about to leave for Washington DC for the 2007-2008 academic year. I hope to see as many of my American and possibly Canadian friends as possible. If you happen to pass via DC, please let me know. I'd love to see you.

In my September 2007

Newsletter I hope to advise you of my DC contact details.

With my very best wishes for a continued relaxed and uneventful summer,
Yours as ever,
Rafi

My last communications are available on <http://almagor.blogspot.com/>
Earlier posts at my home page: <http://hcc.haifa.ac.il/~rca/>