**From ‘A light unto the nations’ to ‘the land of the white man’: Global migration and recent shifts in the racialization of migrants in Israel**

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This talk is as an overview of the history of racialisation in Israel, intended to explain the current picture, with its clashing and overlapping schemes of racialisation. It is intended for an audience which I presume is conversant with the broad outlines of Israeli-Palestinian history, but not necessarily with the intricate, even baroque sociological repercussions of the conflict. I offer it primarily as a contribution to knowledge of that situation, which I believe will be useful and important for academics and activists in India and elsewhere in the world. But while I will not spend much time on theoretical issues, there are also theoretical underpinnings which it may be helpful to sketch out quickly. Thus, I understand racial ideologies as ways of justifying the differential treatment of people on the basis of purportedly permanent and inherited characteristics which distinguish them from one another, and I believe that such ideologies are closely connected to the rise and consolidation of a capitalist and imperialist world system which thrives on “combined and uneven development” and must find ways to rationalise this unevenness (Quijano 2000; Löwy 2010).

The delineation of national spaces as units for analysis and discussion, what some critics have called “methodological nationalism,” is also an artefact of this world system. In this talk, I will do my best to break free of this demarcation, but I do not really hope to succeed. I will speak not only of Israelis and Palestinians but of migrants, who are neither but are nevertheless subject to the power of the Israeli state and its associated racializing ideologies. The process of Zionist colonisation will be central, not only to my understanding of how Palestinians are imagined under these ideologies, but also to understanding how racialisation works within the Jewish collective as well as with regard to those who are neither Jewish nor Palestinian. But I will not be speaking at any length about Palestinian society, whose ongoing separate existence is both an achievement of the Palestinian people and an outcome of their isolation under Israeli rule. There are specifically Palestinian racialising ideologies, for example those which stigmatise the Bedouin, “black” Palestinians of African origin and phenotype or the Palestinian Roma. But I am not a scholar of Palestinian society and know little about these forms of racialisation. Thus I will not discuss them, though I agree that a full picture of the situation would have to include them as well.

The colonisation of Palestine began in the late 19th century and Israel’s independence dates from 1948, yet the history of the forms of racialization which are relevant to our story is considerably longer. One convenient starting point, pointed to by Ella Shohat (2006) and other scholars, is the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492. The expulsion and the subsequent imposition of *limpieza de sangre*, an official doctrine which characterised those of Muslim or Jewish parentage as defective Christians and subjects, form one of the fonts of modern race-thought. Four hundred years later, the Zionist movement arose in Europe, aiming to solve the so-called “Jewish problem” by settling the continent’s Jews in Palestine. The “Jewish problem” as conceived in the 19th century was not primarily a theological one. In fact, the rise of the new anti-Semitism was linked to the growing secularisation and integration of Jews into gentile society. The anxiety of the anti-Semites, like that of the Catholic Monarchs of Spain before them, was due not to Jews’ visible, declared difference but to an invisible and supposedly hereditary particularity.

Zionism, following the German *völkisch* model of nationalism, aimed to create a racially pure community of Jews in the historical homeland of the Jewish people. Zionist ideologues like Max Nordau were heavily invested in late 19th-century forms of race-thought, believing as the anti-Semites did that Jews constituted a racially distinct Semitic population. Insofar as the indigenous population of Palestine figured into their schemes, it did so as a Semitic racial cousin to the Jews – an idea which was to crop again later, as we shall see. Zionist leaders including David Ben-Gurion, later to become Israel’s first Prime Minister, imagined the Palestinians as lapsed Jews and hoped to convert and assimilate them. The Jews of the Ottoman Empire fit into this racial scheme, which was at the same time contradicted by what we would today call a “cultural” racism, a scheme which figured European or Ashkenazi Jews as more educated and advanced, therefore fit to rule the new land.

***The evolution of a local racialisation scheme***

But sharp lines were drawn in the sand as Palestinian resistance to the Zionist colonisation of Palestine coalesced into a national movement in the early 20th century, and hardened following the War of 1948, in which Israel declared its independence while expelling the great majority of the Palestinian population. On one hand, the rise of fascism and the Nazi Holocaust which annihilated the majority of European Jewry made explicit racial ideologies taboo within the Zionist movement (Herzog, Leikin, and Sharon 2008). On the other hand, the concept of Jewishness as nationality, drawing on the *völkisch* model and divorcing itself strongly from the idea of Judaism as a primarily religious identity, became central to the ideology of the new state. In Israeli law as in the country’s vernacular culture, one is a Jew if one’s mother was a Jew; religious belief or lack thereof is irrelevant, and indeed the leading stream of Labor Zionism was and remains militantly secular (Shafir and Peled 2002).

For the same ideology, the Arab is a mirror image of the Jew, that is, a “national” category defined primarily in terms of parentage. The idea that indigenous Palestinians could be Muslim, Christian or Jewish, a commonplace of the Palestinian national movement, has always been anathema to Zionism, as was the very idea of a specifically Palestinian nationality until the 1990s. Today the Israeli state as well as most Israeli citizens do accept Palestinians’ claim to belong to a definite nationality within the larger Arab collectivity, even if they do not accept that this entitles them to self-determination and a state of their own. In a sense this only sharpens the distinctness and mutual exclusivity of the categories “Arab” and “Jewish.” The state and public opinion do not recognize an Israeli nationality, but only Jews, Arabs and “others” – on whom more below. The Nation-State Law, passed this year, codifies what was until recently implicit: that Israel is not the state of all its citizens, but of the Jewish nation, which does not include all the state’s citizens (20% of whom are Palestinian Arab) but does include millions of Jews living abroad who are not citizens, but are eligible to receive citizenship upon immigration.

Like most if not all racial schemes, this one is both incomplete and incoherent. It is incomplete, obviously, because it is local — not everyone in the world is either a Jew or an Arab, though it sometimes appears that Israelis view the world through spectacles that presume precisely this. Moreover, this local opposition is also remarkably intimate: Israelis conceive of themselves and Palestinians as enemies but also as “cousins” sharing genealogical origins (a conception supported by both Biblical exegesis and the linguistic contiguity between Hebrew and Arabic) and a strong attachment to the land. Now that Israel has become a country of non-Jewish immigration, the parochial incompleteness of this scheme grows glaring, and as I will argue below, Israelis are borrowing from other racial schemes to make sense of the new people arriving in the country.

The scheme is not only incomplete but incoherent, because “Jew” and “Arab” are not in fact mutually exclusive categories. Most of the Jews who arrived in Israel from Middle Eastern countries following independence, in the 1950s and ‘60s, spoke Arabic at home and shared in the culture of the Arab civilisation. Though they might not have defined themselves as “Arab Jews,” an identity that has acquired a radical chic in some quarters in Israel recently, they certainly bore many of the marks that the Zionist establishment saw as identifying Arabs. These Jews of Middle Eastern origin, today known in Israel as *Mizrahim*, quickly outnumbered the Jews of European origin or *Ashkenazim*, and were subjected to an overt policy that combined proletarianisation with cultural denigration (Swirski 1981; Chetrit 2010). To become “proper” Israeli Jews they would have to shed all their “Arab” characteristics – religiosity, large family size, the Arabic language and Arab-identified preferences in music, food and so on. But these characteristics were used, and still are, to paint them as deserving foot-soldiers in the project of Jewish national redemption.

Thus, by defining Jewishness as fundamentally European and in opposition to Arabness, Zionism bought into an Orientalist racialization scheme in which whiteness is an attribute of the European as well as, now, the Jew; according to this scheme, Mizrahim are not only opposed to the “white” Ashkenazi Jews as “black” — an epithet commonly used by Ashkenazim to describe them and, during the height of their militancy, also taken up by the Mizrahi Black Panthers — but also subtly characterised as defectively Jewish. At the same time, the so-called racial diversity of the Jewish people served as handy grounds for the Israeli state in its quest to deny that Zionism was a form of racism — a charge forcefully raised by the Palestinian national movement and even formally accepted by the UN General Assembly in 1975.

The racial situation in Israel, if one can call it that, was further complicated by the immigration of two additional groups in the 1990s. By far the larger of these consisted of ex-Soviet Jews and their relatives. Close relatives of Jews have always been allowed to move to Israel and receive Israeli citizenship, on the basis that the Jewish state had no business turning away people who would have been considered Jewish according to the rather expansive definition espoused by Nazi Germany. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, not many such people were interested in immigrating to Israel, but the fall of the Eastern Bloc brought about a new state of affairs. In the USSR, Jews had intermarried with non-Jews at very high rates; many members of these mixed families were now both anxious and able to emigrate, and about a million of them Soviet citizens ended up in Israel. Of these, about half were not descendants of Jewish mothers and thus not officially recognised as Jews. But though this group continues to suffer discrimination around issues of personal status, they have by and large been socially integrated as Jews, at least to the same extent as “officially” Jewish immigrants from the FSU. Of course, it is far from irrelevant that these “almost-Jewish” immigrants are light-skinned.

A diametrically opposed example is that of the Ethiopian Jews. This group of about eighty thousand people, which also immigrated primarily in the 1990s, has faced a startlingly different reception. The Ethiopian Jews have faced intense discrimination in all areas of life and are today concentrated in ghettoized neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Israel’s cities, where most live in poverty (Offer 2007). Many of their relatives who are not recognised as Jews by the Israeli state have languished in transit camps in Ethiopia for decades, in stark contrast to the Soviet Jews. Ethiopian Jews present a phenotype that appears black to most Israelis, with dark skin, curly hair and flatter noses. While most did not identify as “black” in Ethiopia, where yet another racial scheme is prevalent (Salamon 2003), many in the younger generation have looked to African American and Jamaican culture, and to the associated hip-hop and reggae styles, for political inspiration and many now identify as black on this basis.

The contrasting examples of the Soviet and Ethiopian Jews point to the fact that the official, hegemonic scheme which racializes populations along the so-called “national” axis of Jew vs. Arab is not the only one active within this political space. Ex-Soviet immigrants are accepted and integrated — even when not officially Jewish; Ethiopian immigrants are sidelined and criminalised — though accepted as Jewish. And everyone understands this phenomenon along lines of “black” vs. “white”, that is, along a racialization scheme which runs obliquely to the Jewish-Arab axis and which is imported from globally dominant frames originating in the Atlantic world. I now turn to these frames in order to make sense of the racialization of non-Jewish migrants from East Africa and from Southeast Asia.

***The globalization of racial ideologies***

The globalisation of race is both an old and a relatively new phenomenon. It is old because the history of race is, in a fundamental sense, the history of the world system. I have already pointed, following Shohat, to the year 1492 as a pivotal moment. As you all know, this is not only the year of the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain, but also the year in which the conquest of the Americas began. This is no coincidence. This combination of expulsion and conquest precipitated the rise of Western European imperialism, which would conquer the world, and with it the first stage of the rise of racial and racist ideologies which would justify and rationalise this conquest (Wallerstein 1979). The literature I am most familiar with discusses this phenomenon as centred on what is called the Atlantic world — Western Europe, Western Africa, and the Americas. In this arena a racial scheme arose in the 16th and 17th centuries which revolved around three poles: at the apex stood the white race of the European conquerors. Another pole was that of the supposedly savage red race, which would or could not serve European hegemony and must therefore face annihilation or *mestizaje* — subordinate incorporation into the White race through intermarriage. The third or black pole consisted of people of African origin, enslaved and incorporated into the economy of the New World through forced labor.

Most of Asia, of course, was also brought under imperialist control, though on a very different basis and somewhat later. Racial ideologies were also used to justify and rationalise the subjugation of Indians, to mention only one crucial example. As I have mentioned, the literature on race that I am familiar with is mostly structured around the Atlantic world, an outcome of the dominance of Anglo-American academia which is of course, in its own way, a legacy of imperialism. Recently this academia, following South Asian thinkers among others, has begun to discuss how the hegemonic ideology of the imperialist world-system also racialises Asians — with differences but also commonalities between South, Southeast and East Asians (Lowe 2015). I look forward to discussing this dimension of things with the other participants of the workshop, who are bound to know more about it than I do. Before I continue, however, I would like to mention one dominant commonality in the racialisation of Asians in the imperialist-racist ideology; that is, the figure of the “coolie.” While the native American or “red Indian” is too savage to be incorporated into capitalist enterprise, and the African slave or her descendant begins to be pictured as unruly and dangerous, the imported Asian labourer figures as docile, servile and unthreatening — particularly, in the case of men, sexually unthreatening (Eng 2001). This image, too, originates particularly in the Atlantic world and should not be taken as representing a globally homogeneous form.

But the globalisation of racial ideologies is also, in another of its aspects, a relatively new thing. I am speaking of the manner in which, particularly in the twentieth century with its new methods of mass communication, racial ideologies began to converge in a much more obvious fashion. If colonialism and imperialism can be said to form the political-economic substrate of the vast panoply of racial schemes and formations which could be found throughout the world in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, in the 20th and especially the 21st it is not only the substrate but also the appearance which begins to merge under the pressure of a shared racial “common sense.” This common sense is shaped by the commercial mass media — Hollywood, the music industry, etc. — as well as by the overtly or almost overtly fascist movements comprising what some commentators are now calling the “nationalist international.” In countries like Israel, and if I am not mistaken India also, dominant strata which had steered clear of fascist-sounding racial schemes are now openly, even proudly, imagining themselves as “white” and associating with a globally ascendant white supremacy.

***Racialising non-Jewish migrants to Israel***

The 1990s have been identified above as a decade of massive Jewish immigration to Israel, due primarily to the collapse of the Soviet bloc in that period. (The immigration of the Ethiopian Jews is also an indirect result of the fall of the Soviet bloc, since this also triggered the collapse of the Soviet-allied Mengistu regime.) This period also marked the beginning of mass non-Jewish immigration to Israel, for reasons that are related to the end of the Cold War as well. In 1967 Israel conquered the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and immediately began exploiting the cheap labor of the Palestinian inhabitants of these Occupied Territories, leading to a long economic boom. In 1987, the *intifada* or uprising of Palestinians against Israeli rule began,and went on until the early 1990s. In 1993, greatly weakened by the loss of support from the Soviet Union, the Palestine Liberation Organization under Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo Accords with Israel’s Labour government, led by Yitzhak Rabin. The Oslo Accords would not lead to the creation of an independent Palestinian state but to the establishment of a severely limited “autonomy” in the concentrations of Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories.

The *intifada* had featured industrial action by Palestinian workers as a method of struggle, exposing the Israeli economy’s strategic vulnerability. The Rabin government and those which followed his assassination by a right-wing extremist in 1995 moved to remedy this exposure by replacing Palestinian labourers with workers from abroad, with special attention to the agriculture and construction sectors, which had been totally dependent on Palestinian labour (Farsakh 2005; Raijman and Kemp 2010). An aging population and neoliberal reforms also led to the creation of an entirely new sector of the economy — home care for the elderly — which was also to be manned by migrant workers. Source countries for construction workers were rotated in short succession; in agriculture (on which more below), Thailand was quickly selected as the source country for labour; for the home eldercare sector, the Philippines became the main source (Liebelt 2011). Besides these regular or documented workforces, the market for domestic services, which had also been manned primarily by Palestinians, was now taken over to a great extent by undocumented migrant workers, mostly from Latin America and West Africa.

The 1990s Labour governments of Rabin, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak shut the majority of Palestinian workers out from the Israeli workforce, but did so under the neoliberal and multicultural rhetorical rubric of the “New Middle East,” in tune with developments elsewhere in the world during that decade (Ram 2008). This decade saw real improvements in the status of Palestinian citizens of Israel (as opposed to those resident in the Occupied Territories), and a relative openness towards the new non-Jewish residents, especially in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area where they were concentrated. Things changed in the 2000s, as Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu of the right-wing Likud provoked and then crushed a second Palestinian *intifada*, scuttling all hope for an independent Palestinian state, stepped up hardline rhetoric and instituted draconian policies towards all non-Jews, including migrants (Willen 2007). Though Israel had always been careful to import its migrant workers only from non-Muslim countries, the resurgent discourse of the “demographic problem” slated all non-Jews (except, to a large degree, the non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union) as threatening the Zionist project and the future of the Israeli state (Lustick 1999; Yonah 2004). The new migrants, hailing from all over the global South, presented diverse phenotypes; but in grouping them all together, “demographic” discourse was drawing closer to the xenophobic New Right in the global North, which presumed to protect an imaginary cultural cohesiveness against all non-white others (Rosenthal 2011).

*Case Study I: East African asylum-seekers*

This response became more explicit and tenacious around 2005, with the arrival of the first groups of asylum-seekers from war-torn parts of East Africa: Darfur, South Sudan and Eritrea (Kalir 2015). By 2015, when the flow was stemmed following the construction of a 500-kilometer-long wall along the Egyptian border, more than 80,000 people had entered from these countries; Israel refused to consider their claims for asylum, but was also prevented from deporting them by UN injunctions. Thus the group was stuck in a legal limbo, with many of its members undergoing repeated periods of administrative incarceration in prison camps in the Negev desert, bans on residence in certain central areas, uncertainty with regards to the legality of employing them, the docking of a “deposit” from their wages, and many other punitive measures. In 2018, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that an agreement had been reached with African states willing to receive the asylum-seekers and that they would be deported *en masse* forthwith. Following local and international pressure, these unnamed states (apparently Uganda and Rwanda) withdrew their consent and the legal limbo persists.

Due to the refusal of the government to take any responsibility for them, the African asylum-seekers have become heavily concentrated in areas where they can live cheaply with access to employment — chiefly the neighbourhoods around the Central Bus Station in southern Tel Aviv. State neglect combined with the prevalence of severely traumatised young men among the asylum-seeking population (Yuval, Zvielli, and Bernstein 2017) have led, predictably, to a deterioration of the quality of life in these neighbourhoods, though this deterioration is opportunistically exaggerated by right-wing politicians. Though the number of asylum-seekers remains quite small – perhaps 1% of the population – and is not expected to rise soon, incitement against their presence and calls for their deportation have become part and parcel of the right-wing agenda, including that of Prime Minister Netanyahu. The way in which this has happened is both indicative of the changing landscape of racialisation in Israel, and a major driver of these changes. It therefore deserves closer scrutiny.

One place to begin this scrutiny is a right-wing demonstration in southern Tel Aviv in May 2012, in which then Member of Parliament Miri Regev of the ruling Likud party gave a speech labelling the “infiltrators” (the common term for asylum-seekers among the right) a “cancer in our body” (Azoulay and Efraim 2012). Regev, previously spokesperson for the Israeli army and today Israel’s minister of culture, has played an important role in transforming Israel’s racial politics. While proud of her Moroccan background and committed to the rehabilitation of Mizrahi culture, she has taken a leading role in attacking Israel’s Palestinian minority and especially in censoring its cultural-political life. At this early point in her career, she chose to use a trope – calling asylum-seekers a “cancer” – that harks back to the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Nazis. Regev explicitly compared the nation to a body, and implicitly likened the “infiltrating” group to an insidious disease destroying that body from within. Such rhetoric had never been used against the Palestinians, precisely because the dominant forms of racializing ideology directed at them had always been at pains to paint them as *outsiders* and the distinction between them and the Jewish collective as an obvious and clear-cut one, even when reality was considerably murkier.

Another significant intervention was made about the same time by Minister of the Interior Eli Yishai. Also of Moroccan origin, Yishai was then the head of Shas, a Mizrahi religious party. Against this background — representing an intra-Jewish collective which had been denigrated as “black” and “Arab,” as well as one committed to a religiously defined Jewishness, Yishai’s comments in an interview the following month (Yerushalmi 2012) were instructive. Yishai began by contrasting his own understanding of the state’s Jewishness to the humanitarian vision of other ministers, who had reprimanded him for his hard line, claiming that “[because] ‘we’re a Jewish people’ … ‘we should be considerate of foreigners.’” Yishai’s own opinion was that “this is a real threat to the existence of the Jewish state. … There are many families with children among them. When I visited [the Saharonim prison camp] they told me explicitly that whoever brings children gets citizenship from us. In the United States they deport families with children who came from Mexico and we don’t.” In comparing Israeli policies unfavourably to US policies targeting Mexican immigrants, Yishai was tying his argument into global racial ideologies. This becomes even clearer in a final comment, in which the old Jewish/Arab axis of racialisation is definitively merged with the new one: “Most of the people who come here are Muslims who don’t think the land belongs to us, the white man.” On the one hand, here, asylum-seekers are (falsely) described as Muslims; on the other, Israeli Jews, including Mizrahim, are redefined as “the white man.”

*Case Study II: Thai migrant farmworkers*

The Thai migrant labourers who have been doing the bulk of the work in Israel’s agricultural sector for the last thirty years present a different picture. Unlike the Palestinians, who are opposed as the dangerous obverse to the hegemonic Jewish group in the local racialisation scheme, or the black Africans who are opposed to it in the globally borrowed one, the racialisation of Thais in Israel has proceeded in a way that positions them at right angles to both axes, and therefore a politically neutral presence. In my analysis, the reasons for this result are primarily political-economic; but it is achieved through the mobilisation of both racialisation schemes.

Today Israel’s agricultural sector is organised along capitalist lines, but throughout most of its history its profit-making role has been subordinated to strategic and ideological functions. Before its achievement of political control in 1948, the Zionist movement had to establish control over territory and to find employment for Jewish immigrants, and it did both by purchasing land and turning it over to collectives and cooperatives of Jewish workers, whose communities were called *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* respectively (Kimmerling 1983; Shafir 1989). The ideological commitment to “self-labour” and “Hebrew labour,” precluding the use of wage labour, and especially of Palestinian labour, was observed until the end of the war of 1948, when vast tracts of arable land vacated by their Palestinian owners were turned over to these settlements. The *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* now hired Mizrahi immigrants and members of the remaining Palestinian group, which had become citizens (Bernstein and Swirski 1982). But these were never accepted as members of the settlements or allowed to reside within them, thus maintaining what Gershon Shafir (1989) calls the “ethos of pure settlement.” Some Mizrahim were settled in moshavim in peripheral areas, but the *kibbutzim* in particular retained a prestigious role as the vanguard of the Zionist movement — and an exclusively Jewish, almost exclusively Ashkenazi, racial makeup.

After the war of 1967, as both Mizrahi Jews and Palestinian citizens moved up the class ladder, a huge new reserve of cheap labour appeared in the Occupied Territories. For a period, the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories formed a very convenient solution. Much like the migrant workers of apartheid South Africa, concentrated in the Bantustans(Burawoy 1976), these workers’ permanent residences were in a territorially demarcated and racially marked space, where their families subsisted at a low level. As far as their employers were concerned, they “came only to work,” possessed no claim to the land they worked and could not hope to raise their families on it. The Palestinians, of course, saw things differently and rebelled in the first *intifada*. After they were locked out, their employers needed a replacement. Citizen labour — Jewish or Palestinian — was too expensive, so another source had to be found.

Thailand was the country selected. The immediate reasons for this, though interesting, are not directly related to my subject today. But quickly enough, and without any central ideological planning, a crystal-clear ideological image emerged among the Israelis who employed Thais, presenting them as obedient, eager to please and interested only in doing the work for the term allotted them (first one year, then two, then five) and returning home. It was and still is taken for granted that Thai workers are not inclined to settle down in Israel permanently and raise families there, either with Israelis or with other Thais. Employers emphasise that in opposition to *both* Jews and Arabs, they are steady, dependable workers who do not put on airs or try to “become the manager.” In a word, they are a neutral presence, individually expendable and interchangeable.

While the Thais I have spoken to and worked with have not expressed any interest in settling in Israel permanently, this cannot be taken as a natural inclination on their part, since they are well aware that no such option exists. It does not exist primarily because Israel’s migration policy is above all intended to ensure its impossibility. Migrants can only come to work in Israel for five years, once; couples may not migrate together; of the few female workers, those who become pregnant must choose between aborting and leaving. By “binding” workers to particular employers and denying permits to those employers whose workers violate the terms of their stay, the state turns employers into enforcement agents — and looks the other way when they carry out this task with illegal means, such as confiscation of passports and even abduction. The result is that very few Thais remain in the country illegally, and none have families there. (There are a few mixed marriages and families, however.)

I mentioned above that the local scheme of racialisation along the Jewish/Arab axis has a strongly parochial and intimate element. Jews and Arabs are seen as opposed but also as similar. In particular, both are seen as having a strong link to the land, a link which can be expressed and fortified through agricultural practice. Of course, Zionist ideology valorises the Jewish link to the land while decrying the Palestinian one, but it nevertheless recognises the latter as dangerous. I suggest that employers’ perception of *both* Jewish and Palestinian workers as strong-willed and independent-minded, willing and able in some way to claim proprietorship over the land they are working, fits into this conception. Thais, on the other hand, are maintained in their political neutrality by the fact that they do not fit into this scheme. Phenotypically, Thais do not fit the Israeli conception of what either a Jew or an Arab looks like; in terms of culture and religion, too, they come from outside the zone of Mediterranean kinship and gender norms, and, being Buddhists, from outside the realm of the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions which have a stake in the Holy Land.

The global racialisation scheme also helps to construct Thai workers as standing outside the primary axis of conflict. As I have mentioned above, the Asian “coolie” is constructed in the white Atlantic imagination as a docile and obedient worker, who can be set against the unruly blacks and natives in political life as well as in the workplace; additionally, the Asian man is not expected to compete with the white man in the sexual sphere. All these elements can be witnessed in Israeli conceptions about Thais, which stress their exoticness — sometimes as repellent, sometimes as intriguing, but never as dangerous. This, of course, is very different from the way African asylum seekers are seen.

Let me stress once again that the primary determinant of the way Thai migrant workers are treated and understood in Israel is the migration policy instituted by the state, which prioritises their removability above all else. That Thais also fit into convenient slots in these two dominant racialisation schemes is probably not the result of conscious choice on anyone’s part, but it is indispensably useful in stabilising this political status, which in its turn stabilises the racial prism through which Thais are seen.

***Conclusion***

Israel is a small country, but one which receives a disproportionate amount of international political attention. I have concentrated here on how a local racialisation scheme — whose origins can be traced to the beginnings of the modern world system — is today joined by a global, Atlantic-centred racialisation scheme, whose origins can also be traced back to the same beginnings. But given the ample attention Israel receives globally, we must also heed the flow in the other direction: just as Israelis are becoming accustomed to thinking of themselves as “white,” as opposed to dangerous black and neutral Asian “others,” racial supremacists around the world — from the US to Brazil to the Philippines — are learning to conceive of themselves of themselves as “Israelis,” as opposed to dangerous “Arabs.” (Thus, recently Israeli right-wingers were elated to spot Brazilian President-Elect Bolsonaro’s sons wearing “Mossad” and “Israel Defense Forces” t-shirts (Amiur 2018).)

This is not the place to discuss the reasons that Israel/Palestine plays such an important role on the world stage; let me just suggest that this role can be understood in dialectical materialist terms, as a spot where certain globally crucial contradictions have come to a head since 1948. There is nothing mystical or conspiratorial about it. For this reason precisely, Israel/Palestine is both a condensation chamber for global tensions and a place from which such tensions emanate and take on new forms. I look forward to hearing from other participants about whether and how their experience with radicalising ideologies elsewhere reflects and touches upon what I have described here.

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