

The moral economy of deportation in Israel: how the anxiety of the nation translates into the anxiety of the deportable subject

Barak Kalir, University of Amsterdam

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This paper was supposed to focus on different aspects the Israeli deportation regime. However in the past two months there has been an outburst of racist verbal and physical attacks against asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea. This has led me to reconsider the paper I am writing. I first wanted to highlight the role of street level bureaucrats (police agents, detention centers, ngos) in dealing with the implementation of state policies that concern the lives of refugees and undocumented migrants in Israel. Yet this latest events push me to examine more closely the racist dispositions of many in Israel and the ways in which they can be activated to lash at vulnerable people.

The polemic claim that the paper advances is that an appeal – mostly made by critical NGOs, journalists and academics -- to human rights and humanitarian morals that are rooted in the Jewish history of refugeeness and ethnic cleansing is counterproductive in face of the attempts by the Israeli government to deport 'infiltrators' in order to protect the Jewish state. The counterproductiveness of an appeal to Jewish morals and historic sensitivities results from a hegemonic ideology of fearism (Fisher 2005) that marks the national narrative and informs the notion of citizenship among Jewish Israelis. This ideology of fearism leads Jews in Israel to construct and view non-Jewish asylum-seekers as the Other, who poses a threat to their own right for secured citizenship that is guarded by an uncastrated Jewish state.

Put differently, this paper tries to shed light on the legal and social location of asylum seekers in Israel, by looking at the ways in which their position is being articulated by different parties, deploying competing discourses of human rights, citizenship, security and sovereignty.

I met Simon for the first time outside of the Saharonim detention camp in the Negev desert near the border of Israel and Egypt. Simon and three of his friends were escaping the unforgiving sun inside a shaded bus station, eating from disposable silver trays the lunch they brought with them from Tel Aviv. The four men, all in their early twenties, came to Saharonim to visit their detained relatives, who were caught by the Israeli military while crossing the border from Egypt.

Simon's wife and daughter are detained in Saharonim for more than a month now, but Simon has not yet been allowed to meet them. Although he left Tel Aviv at 5AM this morning, to be at the entrance to Saharonim early on, he was told after waiting at the gate for more than six hours that 'too many visitors were allowed in and I should come again in two weeks'.

Simon has never seen his daughter. He fled Eritrea when his wife Selam was 8-month pregnant. The Eritrean army called on Simon to join the ranks for what would have been a life-long military service under the internationally condoned authoritarian Eritrean regime. Refusing obligatory conscription usually lead to an arrest and imprisonment. After consulting with his family, Simon decided to flee Eritrea. He first crossed the border to neighboring Sudan and from there via Egypt to Israel. He had

to pay US\$6,000 to human smugglers for transporting him across Egypt and then over the border to Israel at the Sinai desert. After three years in Israel, Simon has saved enough money to be able to pay smugglers for getting his wife and daughter to Israel. The price for such an operation has skyrocketed in recent years, and can now cost up to US\$20,000. Such a high price can only be paid by those who have relatives who had already made it out of Eritrea and are now working in Israel.

As Simon explains, you can find smugglers who offer their services for less money. Yet, these smugglers are not trustworthy and the risk is higher that your smuggled relative will become victim to many of the potential hazards involved in such a lengthy smuggling operation. Israeli and international NGOs as well as investigative journalists have documented in recent years numerous cases in which smuggled Eritrean and Sudanese refugees have been raped by their smugglers on the way to Israel, turned into sex slaves, kidnapped for a high ransom, or even killed for snatching organs out of their bodies to be sold to eager private hospitals.

Simon is one of the estimated 35,000 asylum seekers from Eritrea who have made their way to Israel in recent years by crossing the border from Egypt. In total, around 60,000 asylum seekers are estimated to be in Israel: Eritreans are by far the biggest group, while around 15,000 are estimated to come from the Sudan (Darfur, North Sudan and South Sudan).

Israel is signatory to the UN Convention for the protection of refugees, and was extensively involved in the developing of this Convention, given its history of religious and ethnic persecution, which often drove Jewish people to flee their country of origin and seek shelter in other countries worldwide. Nevertheless, the modern Israeli state holds one of the world's worst records when it comes to the granting of a refugee status to those who are escaping the religious and ethnic cleansing in Darfur or the authoritarian regime in Eritrea. Out of 8,890 asylum applications that were submitted in 2009 and 2010 a total of 4,178 were processed by the Refugee Status Determination Unit in the Interior Ministry (which took over the inspection of asylum application in Israel from the UNHCR) and presented to the Israeli National Status Granting Committee. Of these 4,178 processed application not even one was positively evaluated and thus not a single applicant was awarded a refugee status. The overall recognition rate of asylum application in Israel is a fraction of 1% (compared to a double digit rate in most western countries, for example, 27.2% in the USA in 2010).

Israel does recognize the dire situation in Sudan and Eritrea and thus refrains from sending citizens of these countries back to their homelands, where they are expected to be imprisoned, tortured and potential killed. In order to avoid granting asylum status to those who flee from the Sudan and Eritrea, Israel does not process the claim for asylum status of those who cross the from Egypt. For if Israel would have processed such applications, it is likely that around 80% of the applicants would receive asylum status, as is the case of refugees from Eritrea and the Sudan in most European countries and the USA. The solution Israel adopted for avoiding the granting of asylum status is: defining categorically those who come from the Sudan and Eritrea and enter Israel illegally to be 'infiltrators', who are to be considered mostly as economic migrants seeking the prospects of better jobs and a western standard of life in Israel.

The Israeli procedure for dealing with 'infiltrators' who cross the border from Egypt is: detaining them in the Saharonim camp until a positive verification of their country of origin and a medical control for contagious diseases have been completed. If the 'infiltrators' are healthy and coming from countries to which Israel has categorically decided not to deport people but to award them

‘temporary collective protection’, they are released from detention and are dropped at the central bus station of Beer Sheva with a bus ticket voucher that can take them to Tel Aviv or Eilat. The ‘infiltrators’ receive a 2(a)5 visa. This type of visa does not allow its holder to be employed in Israel, but the Israeli High Court of Justice has ordered the state to allow those who fall under the ‘temporary collective protection’ the right to work for the livelihood. The court decision will only be valid until the state will complete its plans for building the world’s largest detention center for asylum seekers (where it can then detain ‘infiltrators’ and provide for their basic needs). At the moment, Israel does not see itself responsible for the provision of accommodation and basic livelihood for ‘infiltrators’. The 2(a)5 visa thus allows its holder to work in Israel.

Since Selam and meme were detained in Saharonim, Simon calls them every day on the phone. He speaks softly to his daughter whom he never met. ‘She is angry at me’ he tells me, ‘she doesn’t like it there in Saharonim, there is nothing for her to do there. She is crying and shouting a lot and is asking all the time why they have to be there. She wants to go back to Eritrea’. Selam was diagnosed with ‘something in her stomach’ as it was explained to Simon, and she first needs to complete a medical treatment before she can be released. Detainees in Saharonim can receive visitors every Thursday. Yet there are around 3.000 detainees in Saharonim and time allows only for a few visitors to meet their relatives each Thursday. Simon tried to call the Saharonim administration and arrange for a meeting with his wife and daughter, but to no avail. Showing up in Saharonim every Thursday, he has been told repeatedly by the guards to show up early in the morning next week.

In the shaded bus station outside Saharonim, Simon and his 3 friends are eating a late lunch while they wait for the bus to arrive and take them to Beer Shave, from where they will take a mini bus to south Tel Aviv. When I approach them and ask if they are heading to Tel Aviv, they four men look at me suspiciously and nod their heads faintly. I tell them that I have been refused entry to the camp and am heading myself back to Tel Aviv with my car. I offer to give them a lift back to Tel Aviv. After a quick deliberation among them, they thank me and we get into the car.

In the car, the four men ask me how much I will charge them for the ride. I say that this ride is for free and I tell them about my work in the university and the interest I have in understanding the position of asylum seekers in Israel. I’m lucky that we have a long ride ahead of us; after half an hour the ice between us is slowly getting broken, and the four men ease a bit in their seats. They tell me that they were worried to accept my offer because they know of stories of Israeli or Palestinian people who give refugees a lift in their car and then drive to the border with Egypt, threatening them that they will put them back to Egypt unless they pay them a certain amount. Other stories are known about refugees who accepted a lift and were kidnapped and killed for snatching organs from them. After an hour of intense exchange two of the men at the back are falling asleep, while the third one is fixing his eyes out of the window. Simon who sits in front next to me is the most talkative in the group. He tells me about his dire position in Eritrea, as it became clear to him that he could no longer escape military conscription. His father has died in the war with Ethiopia when he was a small boy. His mother has taken care of Simon and his sister with much help from Simon’s uncle, who has made it to the USA and has ever since been sending money to the family every month. It is this uncle who helped Simon to raise the funds necessary for paying the smugglers for getting Simon to Israel three years ago. The uncle first tried to get Simon to the USA but that proved to be impossible.

Simon speaks Hebrew very well. He learned it at the different working places where he found work during his time in Israel. He speaks softly but with patent confidence. He is very skinny and his eyes are deeply sunk behind pronounced cheekbones. His appearance communicates a combination of unusual fragility and unmistakable determination.

Simon works around 16 hours a day in the kitchen of a bohemian restaurant in Tel Aviv. Missing a day of work is not an easy matter for Simon, who desperately needs the money for paying the rent for his apartment and save some money for accommodating his small family once they are released from Saharonim. Simon's boss 'is a good man', he tells me, 'he understands my situation and even wants to help me with giving me cloths for my daughter'. Yet Simon is on the verge of quitting his job at the restaurant, because an Israeli NGO— hotline for workers – that assists exploited workers has informed many 'infiltrators' about their rights for a minimum wage and vacation/sickness paid days. Simon, who has always been paid under the minimum wage and never had a single day of paid vacation in the two years that he works at the restaurant, asked his employer about it. He heard back that this is not correct and it does not apply to people from Eritrea and Sudan. The NGO now offers Simon legal assistance in suing his employer at a court for labor issues. His employer already told Simon that if he chooses to 'insist on these rights', he can look for a new place to work in. 'he got very angry with me' Simon tells me, 'he started to say that I don't appreciate everything he did for me. But I only asked what I deserve. Why shouldn't I ask it? I'm not a human being like Israelis?'

It is precisely this last question that Simon somewhat rhetorically posed to me that is at the heart of this paper. Should Simon be considered in Israel as a human being or as a noncitizen holding a A(2)5 type of visa? Should he and his family be treated in Israel according to international conventions, humanitarian morals, or security concerns?

It can be quite hot in Israel around mid-May. Summer is in full swing, and walking around noon under the scorching sun is usually avoided. People escape the discomfort of heat and humidity in air-conditioned offices or cooled apartments. Simon and I try to walk mostly in the shades of the big trees that are dotting the streets of the Shapira neighborhood in south Tel Aviv. Simon is not sure about the exact location of the crèche we are heading to. 'I think it is here, wait a second, I'll check', he tells me as he goes into the back garden of a 3-stories residential building. After a couple of minutes he reappears together with a lady from Eritrea who points us at the right direction. Two toddlers are hiding behind her, looking at me with their big eyes. Simon introduces me to M who lives in Israel for four years and is running together with a Nigerian lady a makeshift crèche for 15 children from Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria and Ghana.

'Did you also suffer from attacks on your crèche last week?' I ask M. 'no, no, we didn't' she quickly replies, and then adds 'we never had any problem'. We thank her for pointing the way and say goodbye. Two streets further down the block, we reach the crèche we look for. From the outside it is difficult to see that the one story apartment in the middle of a quiet residential street hosts a bustling crèche with 12 Eritrean children. It is even more difficult to see any signs for what happened here a week ago. Only in the small front yard, which used to serve as a playing ground before the children were afraid to step outside, we can see signs for the fire that was set by the Molotov bottles that were thrown in the middle of the night into the crèche. The perpetrators of the racial attack on the crèche were never caught but the police believe them to be part of a small but growing number

of residents in the poor neighborhoods of south Tel Aviv who have in recent weeks resorted to violent attacks on the properties and bodies of asylum seekers.

We enter the crèche, where in one spacious room five baby beds are lined one next to the other, and seven toddlers are crawling and playing on the floor. Fortune, who runs the crèche for the last two years, is a 25-year-old Nigerian asylum seeker. She lives in the back room of the crèche and was there at the night the racist attackers set fire to the place. She tells us about the traumatic night, while serving the small children their lunch. 'I want to leave Israel, but I can't go anywhere' she desperately shares with us her thought. 'I can't go back to Nigeria and I can't get to Europe. I have to stay and work here, but I'm scared. The children are asking me "when are they going to kill us?" what should I say? I don't know what to say. We used to play in the front yard but they are now afraid to go out. I also try not to go out of my apartment. I do the shopping quickly and come back. I close the door of the crèche and then also the door of my room at the back. If someone rings the bell at night, I don't come to open it.'

I ask Fortune whether the arson was preceded by threats from neighbors or thugs in the neighborhood. 'No, not at all. The neighbors were the ones who saw the fire first and came down to stop it and call the fire fighters and police. I always had a good relationship with them.' Indeed, until May 2012 only a handful of racist incidents were recorded during the recent years, which saw the arrival of more than 50.000 asylum seekers in the poor neighborhood of south Tel Aviv. Important to note here is that south Tel Aviv hosts for decades the poor, underclass residents of the city, and suffers from persistent neglect and lack of investment in its deteriorated public infrastructure, failed schools, and perverse presence of drug dealers and prostitution. In the 1980s and 1990s Palestinian collaborators with the Israeli army have been relocated from the occupied territories to the neighborhood. Since the mid-1990s the area became the "capital" of undocumented migrants who reached Israel from countries worldwide in search of a better life. The inflow of asylum seekers from Eritrea and the Sudan is thus only the most recent layer in this over populated and under invested part of the city, where the Israeli inhabitants carry grim grievances against the municipal and national authorities.

Given the dire circumstances in which different populations in south Tel Aviv are forced to live and make a living, one might actually point out the impressive conviviality that characterizes the life in the neighborhood. Yet in recent months the racist anti-'infiltrators' tension started building up in south Tel Aviv. I experienced firsthand the fermentation of this racial tension on my earlier visit to Israel in February this year. Simon and the three friends from Eritrea with whom he shares a 3-room apartment in south Tel Aviv invited me for dinner at their place. We were sitting to a table at the living room, eating and chatting while in the background the satellite TV was tuned to the national Eritrean channel. After dinner Simon walked me to my car which was parked in a street parallel to their building. On our way to the car we were stopped by a group of three young Israeli thugs who were hanging out at the street corner. They blocked our way and one of them, emitting heavily from alcohol, aggressively ordered Simon 'give me your passport'. Simon looked puzzled. I asked the guy 'Why should he show you his passport?' to which he agitatedly reply: 'shut up and show me your ID too. We are undercover police'. Knowing all too well that a guy with a tattoo on his forefinger were no police agent, I asked him to show us his police ID before we present our own ID papers. While I tried so speak respectfully and calmly, I could sense the tension reaching a critical point. The guy was blushing, and I was expecting him to through a punch at one of us. Luckily, he eventually said to me:

‘ah, I was pulling a joke on you, we are not policemen, but we live here, this is our neighborhood’. He waited for a few seconds, observing me closely, and then asked me if Simon was my friend. ‘Yes, he’s my friend’, I answered laconically. ‘We know they live here’ the guy said to me, ‘it’s okay, but they should not be out on the street at night. Otherwise there will be trouble, you hear me’. I nodded my head and we started to walk away from the group. When we reached the car I told Simon that we should wait in the car for a while and then I shall make a round and drop him just in front of the entrance to his building. In the car I asked Simon if this happens regularly to him. ‘no, no. we live here for more than a year and we never have problem with the neighbors’.

On my visit in May, after racial violence has erupted in the streets of south Tel Aviv, I asked Simon how he was dealing with it. ‘We leave to our work very early in the morning, and after we return in the afternoon, we don’t leave the apartment. We try not to leave the apartment after 7[PM]’. Hoping for the approaching release of his wife and daughter from the Saharonim detention camp, Simon was now looking for a 2-room apartment for the three of them. He already found a suitable apartment four months ago, but before signing the rental contract he heard from Saharonim that his family would not be released for at least three more months. Yet within four months the task of finding an apartment became a much more difficult one. ‘There are many apartments for rent, but many Israelis don’t want to rent them to people from Eritrea or Sudan’, I looked at Simon not in disbelief but with an unease sense of shame and embarrassment, ‘when you call up a number from a newspaper advertisement for renting an apartment, the person ask you if you are from Eritrea or Sudan...then they say that it’s not going to work’.

Yet finding a rental apartment has become the least of Simon and other asylum seekers in Israel in the past two months. A viral wave of racist statements by politicians against ‘infiltrators’ has led to massive demonstrations in south Tel Aviv, to numerous reported attacks against asylum seekers and their properties, and on May 23 t what many journalists and NGOs called the ‘crystal night’ of refugees in Israel. On the night of May 23 a demonstration against ‘infiltrators’ got out of control when a delirious mob began throwing bricks and bottles against shops and bars associated with asylum seekers. Some shops have been looted and torched, and a number of asylum seekers were injured and taken to hospital.

This eruption of racist attacks was instigated by right wing and Jewish orthodox politicians, who in prior days and weeks expressed in the most blunt and racist fashion Israel’s “need” to rid itself from ‘infiltrators’. After four Eritrean men were arrested on suspicion for raping a 19-year-old Israeli woman, the Interior Minister Eli Yishai, from the orthodox Shas party, told a radio station that: ‘Most of the African infiltrators are criminals. I would put all of them, without exception, into a prison or other holding facility’. The criminalization of asylum seekers has been rampant among Israeli politicians, in spite of studies that show the opposite, that is, that the proportional rate of criminal acts among the population of asylum seekers is lower than the average Israeli one (According to police data, the crime rate among ‘foreigners’ in Israel was 2.04% in 2010, compared with 4.99% among Israelis). And that is without controlling statistically for the underclass position and dire situation in which most asylum seekers in Israel find themselves. When the Interior Minister was presented with the fact about the low crime rates among ‘infiltrators’, he responded as follows: ‘Many women in Tel Aviv were raped by [African] foreigners but are afraid to complain [to the police] about it, so that no one will think that they are AIDS carriers’.

The Interior Minister is not alone in this racist medicalization of asylum seekers as the carriers of dangerous and contagious diseases. Here is what Michael Ben-Ari, a MP from the National Union party had to say: 'A fourth grader (Israeli) girl is studying in the same class with infiltrators' kids, that you don't know what diseases they are carrying. These are the worst viral diseases'. Here again, these statements are voiced in spite of the findings by an Israeli expert committee who concluded that such danger does not exist.

Yet it is the Jewish character and purity of the Israeli state that clearly concerns most politicians and drives them towards racist categorization and demonization of asylum seekers. The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has framed the issue very clearly when he addressed the 'problem' in the cabinet meeting on the week prior to the Israeli 'crystal night': 'If we don't stop their entry, the problem that currently stands at 60,000 could grow to 600,000, and that threatens our existence as a Jewish and democratic state. This phenomenon is very grave and threatens the social fabric of society, our national security and our national identity. (...) we will begin by removing the infiltrators from South Sudan and then move on to others'. Other in his party did not need more than this clear sign to inflame the situation, for example, here is what MP Danny Danon from the ruling Likud party had to say: 'Israel is at war. An enemy state of infiltrators was established in Israel, and its capital is south Tel Aviv'.

On the evening of May 23 an anti-'infiltrators' demonstration was organized in one of the neighborhoods in south Tel Aviv. Some of the (self)-invited speakers included municipality workers and politicians from non-coalition right wing parties. Yet it was MP Miri Regev from the ruling Likud party, a former Brigadier General and chief spokesperson in the Israeli army, who dangerously inflamed the atmosphere, shouting from the podium to an tempestuous crowd, 'the Sudanese people are a cancer in our body'. Some minutes later the crowd started collectively shouting the slogan 'Sudanese to Sudan', and then things got out of controlled as many rushed in rage through the streets of south Tel Aviv beating up anyone who looked like an African 'infiltrator' (including some Israeli citizens from an Ethiopian decent), and vandalizing their shops and other properties.

While the 'crystal night' shocked Israel and led many to criticize the racist pronouncements by Israeli politicians, the level of violence against asylum seekers has not subsided, as might have been expected, but has instead remained steady and with the potential to escalate further. Since the 'crystal night' three weeks ago, a few more houses and properties of asylum seekers have been attacked and burned, and many asylum seekers have been beaten up for no reason by racist Israelis on the streets of south Tel Aviv. Two weeks ago eleven teenagers were charged with beating and assaulting migrants from Sudan and Eritrea, and the State Prosecutor claimed that the attacks were racially motivated. A poll by the Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University discovered that more than half of the Jews in Israel (52%) agree with the statement of MP Miri Regev that the unauthorized Africans living in Israel are a cancer in the body of Israel. And MP Danny Danon from the Likud announced that: 'the "infiltrators" are a blow to the [Israeli] state. We must stop, arrest and deport them from Israel before it will be too late. In this way the increasingly violent "infiltrators" will be stopped. The state of Israel finds itself as an extreme point that threatens Israeli society'.

Discussion

How should we account for the systematic zealotry and racist verbal attack by Jewish Israeli politicians against asylum seekers in Israel, which led to racist physical attacks by Israeli mob against asylum seekers and their properties? I'm less concerned here with trying to explain the precise timing of the racist outburst around May 2012. The timing of this outburst is determined by a contingent combination of many factors, among which are: a steady rise in recent months in the total number of asylum seekers entering Israel and residing on the streets of south Tel Aviv, a raising level of unemployment and underemployment among poor Israelis, increasing sanctions on the employment opportunities of asylum seekers who are then pushed to take dire actions for securing a minimum livelihood, the political need to deflect attention from Israel's diplomatic isolation on the Iranian nuclear question, a possible call for dissolving parliament and holding early elections.

I am more concern here with arguing that the Israeli state's extreme attitude against the cause of asylum seekers is largely determined by an entrenched anxiety that underlies and informs the idea that the Jewish state is under an existential danger, which translates into an existential threat for the Jews living in it and worldwide. The source of this anxiety is the Jewish history of religious persecution and ethnic cleansing that is believed to be remediated by the establishment of a formidable Jewish state in the land of Israel. The national Jewish Israeli narrative makes explicit the idea that only a strong and unyielding Jewish state can secure the right of Jews as equals in the world. That is, the citizenship of Jews is only safeguarded under the Jewish state and nowhere else in the world. That much, so goes the national narrative, history has taught the Jews. It is for this reason, that the right for citizenship for Jews is exclusively dependent on the existence of a strong and integral Jewish state, that Israel is morally right in guarding its Jewishness by refusing to include increasing numbers of non-Jewish elements in it.

The most recent turn of events in Israel saw the Israeli high court rejecting an appeal by lawyers from NGOs to cancel or at least postpone the decision by the Israeli government to start deporting asylum seekers to the new born state of South Sudan. Ignoring the fact that international independent studies have all indicated the life threatening situation in South Sudan, and that most countries worldwide refrain from sending back asylum seekers to South Sudan, the Israeli court accepted the expert advice of an Israeli committee and approved the government plan to detain and send back all the South Sudanese in Israel. On June 12 a deportation campaign to South Sudan has been launched, and the Israeli Interior Minister celebrated it with the following statement to the press: 'In having to choose between being called "enlightened and liberal" but not having a Jewish and Zionist state, and being called "endarkened and racist" but being a proud citizen [of a Jewish and Zionist state], I choose the second option. The era of slogans has ended, now the era of actions has begun.' And in another interview he said: 'I am not working out of hate of foreigners, I am working out of love for my nation. Giving up on this mission would be tantamount to giving up on the declaration of independence'.

Having said that, I wish to argue that the Israeli case study is not unique in the way in which the treatment of asylum seekers is being articulated. It is only an extreme case of the same dynamics of anxiety and fearism that are at work in the increasing exclusion of refugees in most western nation-states. The spread of fearism is inherent, as Agamben argues, to the very logic of the world order that is premised on territorial sovereign nation-states and their regimes of citizenship.

As Agamben (1995) writes in 'We Refugees': 'If in the system of the nation-state the refugee represents such a disquieting element, it is above all because by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty'.

Human rights are not, as many believe the case to be, foregoing or superimposed on citizenship rights; much to the contrary, it is a global regime of citizenship, anchored in nation-states that cover every territorial piece on the planet, that serves as the first grid for entitlements for individuals, who are always primarily seen as belonging to a particular nation-state. It is by an appeal to humanitarian morals that a room is conditionally being created for the treatment of individuals on a different ground, that is, as humans rather than as nationals. Yet this room is conditional because it is ratified and secured by each of the nation-states that have agreed, in principle, to the need of allowing for this exceptional room. Nation-states are then left to strike a specific balance between what they consider to be their commitment to the exceptional room of human rights and their obligations within a regime of citizenship towards their own nationals.

Refugees are bringing to a stark relief the inherent tension in striking this balance. For if a nation-state was easily acknowledging the claims of all asylum seekers, and including them within its regime of citizenship, then it would be risking the blurring the distinction between its own nationals and the rest of the world's population. This reveals the very logic of territorial sovereign nation-states as being based in the exclusivity of a national belonging to a regime of citizenship. We thus enter the realm of symbolic policy in which states are forced to make the point that recognizing asylum seekers can only be done given exceptional humanitarian reasons. Yet this is a reversed image of the de facto moral geography in which a regimes of citizenship is always located on a higher plain than that of human rights.

If this was only a discursive exercise in political theory, it would be interesting but mostly theoretical. The fact of the matter is that the implications of the inherent tension between a regime of citizenship and that of human rights is very real and often manifested in the monstrous construction of the Other in the image of the bogus asylum seeker and 'failed' refugees. These abject Others (Kristieva 1991, 1993), like bare life of Agamben, are excluded by the state by means of their very inclusion, as those who stand outside the political realm and whose present threaten to undermine the very distinction and legal border between the inside/outside of the sovereign nation-state. The anxiety that the threatening abject Other inflicts on those who find themselves on the inside of the sovereign helps to produce and perpetuate the fiction of tangibility of 'us' and 'them'.

This, I believe, is also the reason for the increased demonization among right wing circles of NGO activists who helped the cause of asylum seekers on the basis of moral obligations to human rights. In Israel, NGO activists and leftist journalist are being regularly scolded by nationalists, many receive hate letters and phone calls, and a few have been physically attacked during the 'crystal night'. The incitement against those who (dare) put human rights before the perceived good of the nation are condemned publicly, and markedly also in the Israeli parliament, as expressed, for example, by MP Yulia Shamalov Berkovitch from the center party Kadima: 'All human rights activists [who protect the African asylum seekers] should be imprisoned and transported to camps we are building'. She further referred to those aiding refugees as "hypocrites" that incite against Jews.

What we see here is the expansion of fearism to engulf not only the figure of the abject Other, but also that of the messenger who delivers the 'bad news' to the sovereign. Without challenging the very logic that privileges some subjects under a system of territorial sovereignty and constructs as abject some Others, we risk the reproduction of existing power relations that work to ignore historic processes of colonialism and racism that have configured the world system, and instead we – somewhat naively – attempt to counterpoise a hegemonic regime of citizenship with a humanitarian discourse.

Bibliography

T.B.C