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William Berthomiere

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# NEW MIGRATIONS TO ISRAEL AND THE EMERGENCE OF A COSMOPOLITAN TEL AVIV

BY

DR. WILLIAM BERTHOMIERE

[william.berthomiere@univ-poitiers.fr](mailto:william.berthomiere@univ-poitiers.fr)

CNRS RESEARCHER

MIGRINTER (UMR 6588 CNRS)

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During the past decade Israel has come into line with a new temporality called the *time of the world*. This recent period takes root in the stalemate of the peace process started in Oslo (1993) and its migratory repercussions. The observer of mobilities in Israel is now induced to forget the usual pattern so far provided by the analytical framework defined by the system of Jewish migrations. In parallel with the factors intrinsic to the sphere of relations between Israel and the diaspora, extrinsic factors are now operative. The young State of Israel – which seemed to be established within «extra-internationalism» in a relational system, turned towards the sole Jewish community and articulated around the territorial centralism it formed, and a periphery synonymous with diaspora - is today caught up in the world system.

At the end of 1987, the Palestinian uprising known as the first *Intifada*, completely disturbed the economic « balance » that was set up after the 1967 war. The start of a cycle of violence in which Palestinian revolts and Israeli repression followed one another had the effect of progressively making Palestinian access to the workplaces in Israel more and more difficult. This temporary, and later extended, inaccessibility led Israeli entrepreneurs to find their workforce elsewhere. Demands for the recruitment of foreign workers were sent to Israeli authorities which, despite their reluctance, had no choice but to accept. The signing of the Declaration of Principles in Oslo (1993), which could have led to a revival of the recruitment of Palestinian workers –as the « architects » of peace would suggest – could not bring about this recovery. The deadlock made up by the non-implementation of the agreements signed only broke the ties that could have still existed between both economies and increased the importation of foreign labour. This recourse to foreign workers was all the more necessary as the demand in housing was strong since Israel, after the collapse of the Soviet block, had to absorb the migratory wave of Jews from the former USSR (more than one million of migrant).

With the multiplication of terror attacks after the Agreement signed in Oslo, the number of Palestinian workers kept decreasing; benefiting foreign labour. Between 1989 and 1996 the number of

work permits given to Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza decreased from 105 000 (6.7% of employees in Israel) to 19 000 (0.9%) while work permits delivered to non-Palestinian workers increased from 3 400 (0.2%) to 103 000 (5%) (Bartram, 1998, 2000, Berthomière, 2003, Rosenhek, 2003).

For Israel, the 1990's were defined by the establishment of a new migratory regime and the emergence of a veritable replacement migration. This process is all the more apparent in analysis as it is coupled with the integration of Israel within trans-national migratory networks. Long left aside from the north-south migratory logics, Israel now appears, for part of the migrants from developing countries, as an immigration space with a strong economic potential.

As a counter-effect of the policy of « fortification » of the European Community, notably established by the Schengen Agreements, Israel has now given the title of an immigration country: as have its Greek, Italian or Turkish neighbours. Though a few years ago this country could not imagine – due to the conflict – that it could one day attract populations beyond its own diaspora, it now attracts workers, employed legally or illegally, from Colombia Nigeria, Ghana, Moldova, Ukraine, Thailand, the Philippines and more recently China. According to the estimates provided by the government for the first year of the 2000's, almost a half of the 200 000 foreign workers could be working illegally in the country.

Mainly metropolitan, the landscape of the great Israeli cities gradually became tinged with this emerging diversity of the country's population<sup>1</sup>. In Jerusalem these « new faces » of Israel were perceptible in the central market area –the *Mahane yehuda*. On the day of the shabbat foreign workers go there to do their shopping and gather around a table to enjoy a rest and discover their new workplace country. In Tel Aviv, where a large a large part of migrants are concentrated (most notably illegal migrants) the area around the railway station displays this new social reality. Made up of industrial wastelands and decrepit houses this area (*Neve Sha'anan*) has become the urban centrality of this new population. Providing both accommodation and a job for part of the migrants - owing to the presence of numerous small businesses (wholesalers, second hand product dealers, etc.) and a market area - shops dedicated to this new population have integrated within the area's economic fabric. (Disco-) bars with names recalling the origin of the workers, such as the *Transilvania* or the *Bucovina*, have been opened. The central street of the pedestrian area is the place where an illegal market started in which clothes or second hand electrical appliances are sold, while the economic recovery of the shops along this street was mainly due to the telecommunication market. These telephone shops bear witness to the presence of these new residents with windows displaying numerous telephone cards or discounts for

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<sup>1</sup> At a different level, the rural areas were also concerned by the Foreign workers presence but it didn't reached the same impact. This group of migrants was less visible as they were accommodated inside the farms.

calls to Africa or Central Europe. At night, the quarter welcomed groups of foreign workers searching for fresh air, West Africans repairing cars etc... At the end of the 90's, it was what we can call the golden age of the cosmopolitan Tel Aviv.

Two points have to be considered: primo, we were facing a process of "cosmopolitanization" from outside: Israelis were spectators of the process. They discovered new people, new signs appeared in the city and these activities led Israelis to confront, on a daily basis, the global/local process characterizing our contemporary societies. As mentioned by South Tel Aviv Israelis themselves, "things are changing, two years ago, nobody was able to imagine that we will welcome one day shops as this one: 'The Kingdom of Pork'". Segundo, this emergent cosmopolitanism site was quickly integrated as a cosmopolitan opportunity to challenge the ethno-religious boundaries of the Israeli society: at an individual level, i.e. "I can buy non-casher food in my/this quarter" or at a collective level, "we' can argue that the religious dimension of the State as to be put in question". Before to explore this process of cosmopolitanism from within (to quote Beck, 2002), it is necessary to mention that the State position was in favour of the limitation of this cosmopolitan process as it was perceived as an uncontrolled situation. The decision to set up an immigration administration as an "expulsion unit" (in 2002) changed radically the face of the place. The Foreign workers stopped to organize meeting at night, the African women stopped to get out without the children as they see them as a protection against the "expulsion unit" and when it appears that it was not enough they began to set up school at home to limit their travel inside the quarter. With the "expulsion unit", 80 000 Foreign workers left but this social process didn't limit the cosmopolitan conviction.

This cosmopolitan situation reveals a process of reconsideration of the Israeli identity, which occur through a reconsideration of national narrations and a reformulation of the modes of identification to the national project. Two social processes govern the understanding of this reformulation: the growing individualism of the Israeli society and the transformation of the relation with migrants as the Jewish immigration decline and the flow of foreign workers was growing.

The « cosmopolitanization » of Israel is now an element in political argumentation used as much by the post-Zionists as by the neo-Zionists. The entry of Israel –owing to the economic situation- in the international migratory system is interpreted as the emergence of a time of the world (Berthomière, 2003) which for the neo-fundamentalists symbolizes « a materialistic and westernized Israel which would have betrayed its national mission»<sup>2</sup>. On the contrary this process of « cosmopolitanization »

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<sup>2</sup> Uri Ram quoted by Uri Ben-Eliezer (1999).

serves the post-Zionists' objectives who claim they belong to a movement open to the world<sup>3</sup>. In this way Israel is a society in the grip of a cosmopolitan « revolution » and in this social spectrum with sharp limits the Israeli identity is being redefined. All this debate was transferred in the Israeli press with articles as "Don't fall in love with foreign workers" or "Le Pen speaks Hebrew" and "Foreign workers have rights too".

However even if one accepts the approach that the effects of a cosmopolitan situation reveals a questioning of identity, there is much risk in describing a social reality that is in no way considered as such by the Israeli population. It is therefore important to avoid an over-intellectualization of daily life by projecting, as Ulrich Beck emphasized (2002), « *the cosmopolitan intentions of the scholar* ». Our interviews performed on this theme with the Israeli population or foreign workers emphasize that a large part of these populations can not see any tangible reality; that this comes close to being a « monologue », or even a utopia. In comparison the risk is equivalent to that of a study which would consider Amos Gitai's filmmaking as a reflection of a social analysis shared by a majority of Israelis. On the whole it is a limit placed on the understanding of social facts envisaged under the notion of cosmopolitanism. Giving priority to an approach which would differentiate between « what relates to a philosophical debate on *cosmopolitanism of the de facto cosmopolitan situations* in the society » as M.-A. Hily and Christian Rinaudo (2003) suggested, would presumably allow one to avoid any pitfalls.

As Laurent Dornel (2003) emphasized during the conference « On cosmopolitanism in the Mediterranean: from the reference model to present realities »<sup>4</sup>, cosmopolitanism develops and disappears over the years. No evolutionary perspective should be considered. As M.-A. Hily *et al.* (2003) suggested, by leaving this question out of the post-Zionist/neo-Zionist debate, and considering it in its « fragile » dimension as a social interaction established in a relation of domination, it is possible to describe a cosmopolitan Tel Aviv in its everyday nature. The paradox is then that the Israeli population does not agree with the ideas of a « cosmopolitanism of elites » (as it is connected to the "paternalist" Ashkenazi elite active in the post-zionist debate) and produces a *de facto* cosmopolitanism that can be defined as a *banal cosmopolitanism*<sup>5</sup> as there would be a daily *banal nationalism*, as evoked in the work of Michael Billig (1995).

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<sup>3</sup> As Uri Ram (1998) defined it, the neo-Zionist axis "represents a retreat to a sense of identity, a nationalist, racist and anti-democratic trend that tries to heighten the barriers around its national Israeli identity (...) This is based on both violence of the israelo-arab conflict and the low level of integration in the capitalist economy". On the other hand, he defines the post-Zionist axis as "(...) a libertarian trend which aims at reducing the barriers of the national identity and at integrating the 'Other'". See also Ram (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Organized by the CMMC (Arts and Human Sciences University of Nice), on December 11., 12. and 13. 2003.

<sup>5</sup> While suggesting this I have discovered that this was also suggested by Ulrich Beck in the text previously quoted. I agree with his definition, making cosmopolitanism an « intaglio » nationalism.

In this relation of co-presence, the daily life of Israeli civil society sees a development of the Israeli ethnic-national identity at the micro-local level. This new Other, who for the State has limited rights (for he will not be integrated) is nevertheless an everyday employee, colleague, or neighbour. If it is still difficult to consider cosmopolitanism as such, the understanding of the Other in the diversity of cosmopolitan situations is essential (Gastaut, 2002, Brogini, 2002). The social relations established in the professional sphere between home helpers (and their families) and the Israeli elderly, or at school, (as in the school near the coach station, where over a third of pupils are foreign workers' children) or also in associations (Kemp *et al.*, 2000) allow to better understand this process of « cosmopolitanization ». Despite the pressures of the State to reduce the presence of the foreign workers to the minimum, as with the *Closed skies*<sup>6</sup> procedure, this process remains implemented.

In conclusion, the micro-local analysis then suggests that there is a new path to be explored between a *cosmopolitan situation* and *cosmopolitanism*. Finally, the question is how to set up the continuum between the cosmopolitan conviction and its experience in the daily life, with this *banal* cosmopolitanism. At that point, we are confronted to the difference between globalisation and cosmopolitanism. Looking back on our fieldwork, it seems plausible to evacuate the cosmopolitan dimension of this work and just to mention that we are facing a dynamic of management of the globalization process and that, in fact, we are observing a process of "naturalization" of the immigrants with the creation of a special status for this new population. On the other side, we can argue that the cosmopolitan conviction is developing through the emergence of this cosmopolitan place and succeed when the government has changed the law to open the possibility to grant the citizenship to foreign workers families with children born in Israel and of 10 years old or more. This cosmopolitanization appears quite difficult as the local situation cannot be analysed without taking in consideration the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is a paradox when you are discussing the relation between the Israeli state and the Israeli UNHCR office about the question "who can be grant with the status of refugee in Israel?" and in the same time refusing the hypothesis a right of return for the Palestinian diaspora. The Israeli cosmopolitanism is -let say- quite schizophrenic...

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<sup>6</sup> Programme begins in October 2002 with the aim of limiting the entrance of new foreign workers by the replacing of some of them by those who are under arrest in the Israeli prisons.

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