The Day the Sun Rises in the West—Ethnography of a Peace Process

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Abstract Both politicians and academic researchers have focused on the Oslo peace agreements, generally emphasizing the "New Middle East" and "Transnationalism." Less attention has been paid to social and economic changes affected by the process of peace-making. This paper examines the reality that was created from below and asks what the peace process meant to migrant Palestinian workers in Israel. Three years of ethnography challenge accepted theories of borders and borderland in the case of Israel and Palestine by asking what can be learned about the cultural identity of people from the ways they cross, understand, and move between geopolitical and cultural boundaries. In the last years of the Oslo Agreements, it became clear to the workers that "peace" meant preserving national borders: it involved a policy of separation, whereas their very livelihood depended on their ability to move between Tel Aviv and the Gaza Strip. Torn between their national identity and their class–cultural identity, they formulated a demand for a dialectical reorganization: a state without borders. This demand stood in opposition to the national aspirations of Israel and the Palestinian state-in-being alike.

Introduction

The present article aims to examine the social reality of the peace process that followed the Oslo Agreements (1993 and 1995), as seen through the eyes of migrant Palestinian workers, and to offer a contribution to the ethnography of nationalism and class where migratory labor is affected by political and cultural borders.

The research on which this paper is based was conducted in the field during the last years of the Oslo Agreements, focusing on Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip (most of them the second generation of 1948 refugees) who made their living as

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undocumented workers in Israel during the late 1990s. It became clear during the very first stages of the fieldwork that new practices of culture were under examination, practices which neither the academic discourse on the labor market and labor migration (Bartman 1998; Rozenhek 1998) nor the ongoing academic discourse on nationalism (Rabinowitz and Abu Baker 2002; Kimmerling and Migdal 1999) have paid enough attention to. To avoid the familiar categories that reduced Palestinian presence within Israeli society as either "workers" or "enemies," the intention was to open a door to the documentation and definition of social and cultural changes in what was generally referred to as "the peace process."

Newspaper, politicians, and industrialists have all spoken about the establishment of a "New Middle East." They have all dealt first and foremost with the reality created by the accords "from above," focusing on the motivations and reasons that led to the Oslo talks, the outcomes of official policy, macroeconomic data on income, employment, poverty rates, and so forth (Shkaki 1999; Rosenfeld 1999; Shiftan 1999; Kleiman 1999; Peres 1993; Gazit 1999; Brodet 1999). The present paper explores this same new reality, but this time from the subject's point of view. Learning the practices of everyday life that have informed the transboundary movement of Palestinian commuters can shed light on the emergence of a New Middle East "from below." Without ignoring the difficulties involved in drawing on the "above" and "below" metaphors or the cultural and political traps of representation, the question it seeks to answer is what the peace process meant for those of its Palestinian subjects who worked as undocumented workers in Israel.

In public and academic discourse, the Oslo Agreements were structured on a transnational basis, that is to say that they dealt with the opening of borders to a free exchange of resources, whether of manpower, technology, materials, or capital. The agreements were seen in terms of replacing barriers with roads, of turning a perpetual war zone with a rational Middle East, of replacing nationalism with the positive face of globalization. This was to be the New Middle East, of which Shim'on Peres spoke in 1993, and a certain amount of evidence accrued in this direction.

Academics accepted and reinforced this view in dozens of congresses initiated and backed by the EU: indeed, through the very existence of these congresses and joint forums, frequent trips, and meetings, Israeli academia confirmed the fact that the border was a line that was blurring because of the peace process.[1]

The question of what the peace agreements meant to the Palestinian workers who migrated to the Israeli labor market throws a fresh light onto the peace agreements. These workers, too, expected the peace agreements to produce a change. They expected the erasure of the borders to enable them to maintain their national identity and standing. They expected that they would be able to confer on their children the framework of a national state in which they would be educated, on the one hand, and find their livelihood and themselves in Israel, on the other. During the long years of the peace agreements (1993–2000), the fractions of the agreements, what the media and the statesmen called "the steps," would be enacted piecemeal into a final peace agreement.

The dragging out of the agreements resulted in these workers being placed into a complex series of paradoxical and contradictory situations, as the ethnographical aspect of this article intends to demonstrate. Even while these years offered expressions of inclusion

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[1] In 2000, for example, the Institute for Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation was located in Tel Aviv University, under the aegis of the Peres Peace Institute. Such institutes provided an academic language and legitimacy to the existence of peace and to the political possibility of cooperation and crossing the borders (Shamir 2005).

and dignity, the reality that the architects of Oslo planned for them, as the final station of the peace process, was concerned solely with separation. The final configuration of peace was the continuation of the greater project of separation: national separation and an entrenchment of the economic differences under a neoliberal policy. As a reality of wiping out borders, the peace agreements served only the elite groups, but never "the people." During the latter years of the agreements, the years in which the research at the basis of this article was conducted, the interest in preserving the national borders that lay behind the concept of peace became clear to the workers. Peace policy as a policy of separation stood to harm their very existence, namely, their ability to move between Israel and the PA. Moving between their national identity and their class–cultural identity, they formulated a demand for a dialectical reorganization: a state without borders. This demand contained a desire to express their multiple identities: to be part of an independent Palestinian collective, while at the same time preserving access to Israel where they could both earn their living and experience the freedom that was to be gained from adopting an ideology of western political culture. Such a demand posed a threat to both the national state of Israel and the national state-in-being of Palestine. As long as this demand was not met, the sole freedom that was promised to them was snatched away by the transition between cultures itself, without them finding a resting place in either.

During the years of this research, high hopes and expectations turned to soul-destroying uncertainties: whether the safe transit route would open, whether long-term work permits would be issued, whether prisoners would be released. I met groups of people whose patience was at an end and who were no longer able to face the reality of contradictions and disappointments that had dragged out for 7 years. It was clear to such people that this situation could not continue much longer. The apocalyptic winds that blew across the region up to 2000 created a sense among them that the end of the world was near. They explained many signs and portents of the end according to the tenets of Islam. On particularly difficult days, Amin used to say: "Today a single day felt like 100 years. Maybe tomorrow the sun will rise in the west."

The process of border-making entailed in Oslo formed the infrastructure within which the dialectics of social and cultural boundaries—their continuous construction and deconstruction—took place. In the following ethnography, we shall wander around the sites of encounters where the border culture materialized: Tel Aviv–Gaza and its border zone.

Before we turn to the ethnographic part, we will first present the political economic context of Palestinian labor migration in Israel, concentrating on the everyday life reality shaped by the Oslo Agreements.

The Palestinian Labor Force and the Israeli Labor Market

The Oslo Agreements created new geopolitical and economic conditions that gave rise to a new cultural experience. The labor market has been a central arena of conflict, interaction, and control since the very beginning of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict in the region, and it became further institutionalized after the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, following the 1967 war. Between 1973 and 1987, a third of the Palestinian labor force made its living in Israel, the majority being second-generation 1948 refugees (Hiltermann 1992). Most worked in construction, agriculture, and services, receiving an hourly wage and deprived of social welfare (Rosenfeld 1999). However, these Palestinian workers in Israel earned twice as much as workers in the occupied territories (Roy 1986). From the outset, Israeli authorities regarded Palestinian workers as a central component of an economic

"integration" policy, one that allowed for the protracted maintenance of nonannexation and yet nonwithdrawal from the occupied territories simultaneously. Nevertheless, as became clear to all, this integration was not mutual (Tamari 1992; Portugali 1996). The "Green Line"[2] became an economic border with a one-way political barrier (Roy 1986).

By the end of 1987, at the time of the first *intifada*, Palestinians from the occupied territories made up some 7% of the total labor force in Israel, reaching an all-time high number after 1987 (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 1987). The *intifada* led to the beginnings of a new stage in the history of the occupation and in the relations between Israelis and Palestinians, a stage best epitomized by the introduction of barriers, stringent work permit policies, curfews and closures. The main idea behind these constrictions was that of separation and control (Hass 1996; Shafir and Peled 2002; Kemp 2000; Schiff and Yaari 1990).

Between 1991 and 1995, four major events reshaped the labor market and adversely affected the Palestinian workers. From the outbreak of the Gulf War in January 1991, the Palestine Liberation Organization sided with Saddam Hussein. As a result, Palestinian workers in Kuwait and Saudi were expelled, even massacred in the case of Kuwait. Consequently, the dependence on Israel as a source of livelihood deepened. However, this also led to a greater reluctance on the part of Israelis to employ Palestinians as a result of their identification with an enemy. Many workers pointed to this war as a nadir with regard to work. A touchstone in their relations with their Israeli employers was whether they brought them into their gas-proofed shelters during missile attacks.

In March, 1993, Baruch Goldstein massacred 29 Palestinian worshippers in the Cave of the Patriarchs. Fearing retaliation, Israel immediately imposed a long and intensive closure on the border and also cut down the number of work permits issued. A speech in the Knesset by Yitzhak Rabin, the following month, revealed the ideology that lay behind the closure, an ideology of major significance to the present paper. He made it clear that, regardless of the political process, separation was essential to the sense of security of the Israeli people.

Next, in July 1994, Yasser Arafat first returned to Gaza with the official establishment of the institutions of the National Palestinian Authority. This brought two serious consequences on the Palestinian workers from Gaza. The first was the creation of a fenced border and a carefully controlled crossing point—the Erez checkpoint. Henceforth, it was only possible to cross into Israel by means of a permit and through the single crossing point. The second was the establishment of a new mechanism (the PA), which in practice became a middleman between the workers and the Israelis. This mediation enabled the authority to levy an additional tax, on the granting of permits, in the form of both a legitimate part of the bureaucratic process and as "wassah"—bribery.

Two further long periods of closure came as a result of major waves of Palestinian terror attacks in October 1994 and in February–March 1995. Such lengthy and intensive closures lessened the attraction of the Palestinian work force. Powerful lobbies in the corridors of government, such as farmers, building contractors and the smallholders' movement, began to put pressure on the government of Israel to grant work permits to foreign workers from abroad. The government gave way to these pressures, and from as early as 1991 and more readily from 1993 onward, more and more permits were granted to employers to bring workers from Third World countries and Eastern Europe (Rosenfeld 1999). The competition between "foreign" workers and Palestinians came up again and again in conversations between the present researcher and the Palestinians workers.

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[2] The "Green Line" is the 1948 boundary separating Israel and the West Bank.

The policy of the Israeli government with regard to the occupied territories vacillated between economic integration and political prohibition. This ambiguous policy continued when the Palestine Authority was established: political separation and exclusion, on the one hand, transition of goods and labor, on the other.

In the border zone, it was impossible to distinguish between the social categories that are generally discussed in academic circles: class, nationality, identity. All these were interrelated and interdependent. The Palestinian workers could be characterized as a group (a) that enjoyed economic independence from the intra-Palestinian communal mechanisms; (b) of young men who were exposed to the Israeli way of life; and (c) that experienced sharp and spasmodic transitions between their existence as part of the modern economic and cultural system (as proletarians) and their existence as heads of traditional households.

The Oslo process created a new geopolitical reality under the notion of "the peace process." For many Jewish Israelis, this was an opportunity to "take Gaza out of Tel Aviv" (Benvenisti 1999) and bring a clear-cut distinction to what had become blurred over two decades of the Israeli occupation, a distinction whereby "Palestinians are there and Israelis are here" (as the banner of the Labor Party read during the 1999 election campaign). However, the "top down" geopolitical vision of the architects of the Oslo Agreements meant, from the Palestinian workers' point of view, the transformation of the Gaza Strip into what they described as "one big jail." The agreement's most direct implementation was expressed in the creation of barriers, fences, and the introduction of ever more stringent work and entry permits, checkpoints, and the administrative apparatus that was to carry out the new policy. Within this new constellation of clear-cut dividing lines, Palestinian commuters that had become an integral part of the Israeli labor market became a kind of disturbing "noise" that interrupted the new social and political order (Shiftan 1999).

In the final days of the Oslo peace process, the PA gained partial control, but the neocolonial relationship between Israel and the Palestinians continued. For example, Palestinian work permits were handed to the PA by Israel for distribution. However, as noted above, the workers were forced to bribe PA officials in order to receive those permits, reaching approximately 20% of their total work income when times were good. From the perspective of Palestinian workers, the PA became yet another jailer.

The attraction of the agreements lay, not only in that they paved the way for a Palestinian state, but in that they promised prosperity. However, between 1994 and 1997, there was a sharp decrease in the Palestinians' quality of life, under the control of the PA. Between September 1995 and March 1997, unemployment in the Gaza Strip fluctuated between 24% and 39%. The daily wage in the winter of 1995 was $19 in the West Bank and $15 in the Gaza Strip. In winter, 1997, the daily wage dropped to below $13 (Rosenfeld 1999). During the 7 years between Oslo's rise and demise, Israel experienced several changes in its political leadership that resulted, at best, in poor implementation of the agreements and, at worst, their sheer violation. For example, the agreements over the "safe passage" between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, a passage that exerted a fundamental influence on the Palestinians' daily life, as well as on their access to holy places, family visiting, hospitals, etc., were postponed, and later the agreements over the use of this passageway were only partially implemented.

All in all, from the creation of the PA onward, the inequality gap within Palestinian society increased. Groups favored by the PA created a monopoly over basic necessities and made a profit from the general Palestinian population, this without any significant improvement in basic civic services (Rosenfeld 1999; Kimmerling and Migdal 1999).

The process of establishing borders entailed in the Oslo Agreements formed the infrastructure within which the dialectics of social and cultural boundaries—their

continuous construction and deconstruction—took place. The following ethnography will look at the sites of encounters where the border culture materialized, on the line between Tel Aviv and Gaza.

Being in Tel Aviv

"I would like to live in Tel Aviv, with my family; I want to enjoy the freedom that people have there. I consider myself modern. Wherever I see progress I want to be there." (Subhi, Palestinian migrant worker)

Being in Tel Aviv exposed the ambivalence that was the lot of the "border people": their potential ability to challenge dominant symbolic codes, and yet at the same time, their subordination to the border regimes of control and power.

The Palestinian migrant workers found shelter in the Palestinian towns of Israel without violating the comfort of the Jewish ruler. Indeed, the comfort of the Jewish ruler stood at the center of the workers' experience in Tel Aviv. The workers tended to adopt practices that camouflaged their identity as Palestinians from the other side of the border, acting as Israeli Palestinians.

In a sense, the migrant workers brought the border with them to the center of Israel. Bhabha (1994) and Rouse (1991) refer to this phenomenon as the "third worlding" of the First World. For example, in the very heart of Israel, in Tel Aviv–Jaffa, one could find border police units that were specially trained to deal with Palestinian workers, far from the geographical borderline. It could be said, then, that the presence of Palestinians was the presence of the border. The national conflict, which we tend to perceive as focused around the national border, had moved to the metropolis.

Projecting his image of the "New Middle East," Abu Ahlam, a worker from the West Bank who was happy to drink tea with us once in a while, said (when a big smile emphasized his beautiful green eyes) he would like to see in Israel lots of people wearing the *keffiyeh* [the traditional Arab head scarf] and the *jalabiya* [robe]. These types of people would bring their "purified (oil) money" and change the Israeli landscape, he claimed.

With his words, Abu Ahlam broached a sensitive issue for both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians: changing Israel's ethnoscape is the dream of the Palestinian migrant and the nightmare of the Jewish citizen. One of a ruler's main concerns is the entrance of the "alien" into his home. This process of migration is a threat to the national border policy, as well as to the cultural norms of the hegemonic culture.

The act of migration, in this context, unifies the different dimensions of the discussion. Colonial control is based on economic, political, and cultural control: "The colonial control is unique because the economic infrastructure is at the same time the superstructure. you are rich because you are white and you are white because you are rich" (Fanon 1969). In this sense, the Israeli–Jewish landlord at the construction site was at the same time "boss" and occupier. This scenario was not only metaphorical. For example, it was not at all uncommon, in this context, to find a Palestinian worker, employed by an Israeli businessman who worked in the metropolitan area, lived in a West Bank suburban settlement and served as a regimental commander during his yearly reserve duty in the Israeli army.

The experiences of migrant workers in Tel Aviv reflected their ambivalent relations with Jewish Israelis. It was a relationship located within a postcolonial framework, with ties that included critique and resistance, along with mimicry and desire. These types of contradictory relations were representative only of border identities.

This was expressed in the very first steps the workers took into Israel and in the way they crossed the border. I asked them how they interacted with the police when asked for their work permits. Most of them gave the police false information by pretending to be Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Though control on undocumented Palestinian migrants became stricter from 1991 onward, concomitantly with the policy of closure carried out by Israeli authorities, after 1996, an increasing number of work permits were issued to Palestinians and a looser policing of informal border crossing, mainly from the West Bank, came into being. In an interview with the Public Defender's Office, I was told that most of the workers used this strategy when residing in Israel as illegal migrants. When it was discovered that a worker was not really a Palestinian citizen of Israel, he was arrested for intentionally deceiving an officer and falsifying his identity. When caught, many Palestinian workers tried to prove their innocence by referring to their "border identity," using their cultural resources:

> "If you want the policeman to believe your story", said one of the workers, "You have to show self-confidence. If he asks you a question, respond with another question. If he tells you to wait, say you don't have time to wait. He knows and you know that only a Gazan would wait. An Israeli wouldn't."

For Palestinian migrant workers, being in the "Jewish space" exposed their duality as border people: knowing two languages, having two names, and being familiar with the Jewish Israeli way of thinking.

Abu Abud had been working in Jaffa for 15 years. He did not visit Tel Aviv often, though it was just a stone's throw away. When a friend invited him to join him for a walk on the sea front, he refused. "Why?" I asked him. His response refers to the experience of border identity in conditions where no physical borders exist:

> When I say 'peace' I mean that everybody can be free. At the border, soldiers keep asking me, 'Where is your work permit?' I feel like a criminal suspect when entering Israel. They see an Arab face, they say, 'Stop'. I have no criminal record; I want to feel good like everybody else. I want to walk around Dizengoff and Allenby [main streets of Tel Aviv]. I want to taste life. I want to be able to sit in a Jewish coffee shop and feel at home, go to a dance club and enjoy myself. I want to feel like people in America. Here I cannot enjoy myself—everybody points at me and says, 'Watch out, he is an Arab'.

These words also help us understand how Abu Ahlam sees Tel Aviv and relations with Jewish Israelis. If "Tel Aviv" were to be substituted with "New York," people's desires would be clearly understood: Tel Aviv was the only place where one could "taste life" with its symbols of coffee shops and dance clubs. In this modern zone, one could go out with friends and feel *hofesh*, meaning both vacation and freedom in Hebrew—a freedom Abu Ahlam could not feel under the colonial rule.

Tel Aviv was usually represented as "the liberal city, the capital of modernity." These images dictated the ambivalence of the colonial subject: there was a dialectical attitude towards Tel Aviv and the Jews as objects of desire, on the one hand, and as objects of resistance, on the other. Taisir told me:

> I want to feel part of a democratic society. **In my head I have democracy**. I want to travel to different countries without the need for permits. I want to be free. Nowadays you can taste freedom only if you have lots of money. Money talks. All around the world, if you live in a country for five years they give you citizenship. I have lived in

Tel Aviv for 12 years and they refuse to give me a blue I.D card [indicating Israeli citizenship] because I'm an Arab.

The experiences of the Palestinian migrant worker in Israel help us understand the ambivalence that is embodied in the colonizer/colonized relationship. As Said brings into the discourse words like "power" and "resistance," Bhabha (1994) brings the notions of "mimicry" and "desire."

When visiting Israel for the first time, Taisir's wife wanted to go to Jerusalem and pray at the Al-Aqsa mosque. The second time she came, she asked to be taken to Tel Aviv. This time she arrived with her children and she wanted to take them to the sea. As a gift, I bought them tickets for the amusement park. Surrounded by bumper cars and roller coasters, Taisir's 9-year-old son was holding his hand, he said to his father in Arabic, "Dad, tell the Jewish woman that when she has a daughter, I want to marry her. I'll wait as long as it takes."

At the end of the day, when I asked Taisir, who at that time spoke excellent Hebrew, what his wife had most liked about the visit, she replied, "The lights in Tel Aviv at night," and tried to conceal the large smile covering her face with her hand.

This sense of desire can be understood in a conversation with Aiman who described the feeling of a young worker who has just arrived in Israel from Gaza:

> Never in his life has he seen such a thing! He goes to Holon and Bat Yam [towns just south of Tel Aviv and part of its conurbation], calls home and says, 'I have been walking along the seaside promenade.' In Gaza there is no such thing. At 10:00 o'clock at night everything is closed and everybody is asleep.[3]

The young worker, recently arrived from Gaza, did not feel only political and personal subordination (at the hands of the Israeli soldiers and policemen) or economic subordination (under the Israeli bosses), he also felt freedom. Freedom, while watching and partly participating in "modern society."

The place that symbolized the "modern city" was the promenade that runs the length of Tel Aviv's seashore. There you can find cafes, tourists, card sharks, drug dealers, and street musicians trying to earn a living. It was seen as *the* exhibition of modern culture. Not many of the workers visited the promenade because of the police presence, but those who did returned with many stories to share. One of my friends recounted his experiences at the promenade on Israel's Independence Day:

> It was such a pity that I didn't see you there. I had a great time. It was very funny. I met a religious Jew who was dancing and singing. Asi and I caused some trouble with all the gamblers, because we didn't want them to gamble any more. When the sun set, we went to the place where people play the drums. There we met a girl who plays football—just like men! But she had a nice voice and sang a beautiful song.

The promenade was not only popular with Jewish citizens and Palestinian migrant workers. Prior to the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa *intifada*, every Friday, as the weekend began, many Palestinian tourist buses visited too, bringing extended families from the West Bank to Tel Aviv to be by the sea. Evenings often found PA leaders spending their time and money at the promenade restaurants and eyeing beautiful women strolling along the promenade.

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[3] It is important to emphasize that Tel Aviv and Bat Yam are just a few kilometers from Gaza and they share the same coastline, yet they are incomparable worlds.

Being in Gaza

> The sun had just set and we were still in Gaza. The Mercedes that Taisir rented was on its way to the Erez checkpoint. Our cell phones began to ring, our worried mothers calling to make sure everything was okay. We promised them that the moment we got across the border we would call them. Sohil glanced at us with a worried smile and said, "Soon you will be gone. Who will worry about us and make sure we are O.K. here alone in the dark?"

In the wake of the first Oslo Agreement, the Gaza Strip became one of the first major areas where changes were to be implemented. Its small size and demographic homogeneity made Gaza the "Oslo laboratory," a place where the visions penned in the capital of Norway were to be constructed into a complex reality: Gaza also became the first locale to be placed under the control of the fledgling PA. Then, in 1993, a fence was built around the strip and checkpoints were established, thus creating a visible and tangible image of separation. Gaza was supposed to be the first site of the vision of the "New Middle East," with industrial zones that brought together Israeli money and know-how and the Palestinian workforce.

In the following section, I will explore the subsequent political changes through the eyes of the workers. I will open the discussion here to include the way they understood the separation process, primarily through the fence and checkpoints. Then, I will try to follow the way they interpreted the concept of "border" as "border zone" and not "borderline." Finally, we will explore the position between the tendency of nation-building and the neocolonial process.

Like Tel Aviv, Gaza drew ambivalent attitudes from the workers. On the one hand, Gaza was home, the place where they grew up, and where their children would grow up. They were proud of the community and the high level of solidarity among people. They were proud of the low crime rate and the good education system. On the other hand, they had internalized the representation of Gaza as "Third World": "Everybody told us that Gaza will be like Hong Kong. In the meantime, it looks like India," they said jokingly. But this was not the only image offered up by the Palestinians.

"Look what you did to us, with the Oslo Agreement!" they said again and again. "You put us in one big jail." This image of being prisoners in "one big jail" expressed their resentment and feeling of being dominated. The Oslo Agreements marked the end of colonial control and the beginning of neocolonial control (Khalidi 1997).

The practices of everyday life created by the Oslo accords expose the idea of self-government as absurd, self-government of prisoners. My friends constantly criticized the actions of the PA. They called them, derogatorily, "the Tunisians" or "the newcomers." "When they arrived," they recalled, "we hosted them and spoiled them. We were happy. Now they've forgotten our names."

They were well aware of the widespread corruption in the PA and claimed that "their way is not our way." These feelings and images put the Palestinian citizens of Gaza side by side with communities that do not feel that their "home" is a place that they can truly identify with (Hazan 1988). Abu Abud (originally from a small village near Nablus) expressed some of these feelings:

> Most of the people in our village want to be connected to Israel, [and to] have the opportunity to work in Israel .What good is an independent [Palestinian] state if we will be unemployed? Arafat doesn't want me to live an honorable life in his state, so I won't declare that I'm Palestinian. What does it mean to be Palestinian? Well, for example, in our village the schools close at noon; the kids spend the rest of the day on

the streets. There isn't even one computer in any of the schools. So I want to know, where does all the money [from the donor countries] go? You know, when I look around and see all the people of the PA who came from abroad [primarily Tunisia, former headquarters of the PLO] I see them as one big mafia. So you tell me, what am I going to do with this kind of a state?

The migrant workers experienced Gaza as a lonely place. They felt disconnected both from the Arab world and from Israel. The borders defined by Oslo aggravated this feeling.

Being in the Borderline

Erez checkpoint, 4:30 A.M., Subhi, waiting to cross over into Israel, talked to another worker. Then he turned to me and said, "Do you see the problem? Everyday is the same old thing. We come, wait in line for an hour or two and when we finish work, we come back here and wait again."

"What has changed since Oslo?" I asked.

"Before Oslo things were better. The situation wasn't only good, it was great. The checkpoints were never like this; [effectively] there weren't any. We would get on the bus and a little while later find ourselves in Israel. And then after work, we would hop back on the bus and return in no time. Look what Oslo did to us! We went backward 10 years."

The Erez checkpoint is the workers' doorway to Israel. It is constantly supervised by the Israeli military. Since Oslo, getting out of Gaza became a complex mission.

On the same day, Taisir started a conversation with another worker (who preferred to remain anonymous):

Taisir: Before Oslo did you also work in Tel Aviv? What was the situation like then?

Anonymous: It was much better. It wasn't difficult to get into Israel for work. We didn't have to wait in lines like this.

T: What do you think about the Palestinian Authority?

A: They have no money.

T: Is that their only problem?

A: Of course. Our problem is that we don't have money. The important thing is that everyone should have employment.

T: But it is known that they [the PA] get a lot of money from different countries.

A: We don't get anything. That's what is important is me as a citizen. We don't see that money.

T: The PA doesn't organize work for you in Gaza?

A: They say they don't have money so they can't get us work here.

T: How much does the average worker from Gaza make?

A: There aren't workers in Gaza. Anyone working there works for the police and doesn't make much at all, maybe $300 a month—which is the same as the government unemployment payments. Instead of paying them to sit at home, the PA pays them to sit at work.

The Palestinian migrant workers who stood at the barrier that day were lucky—they held work permits. Obtaining a permit was a creative challenge in itself. Officially, the PA made a list of people who asked to work in Israel. They gave it to the Israelis who checked the security information of the Palestinian names. The Israeli officers then issued permits and gave them to the PA. But to obtain these permits, the workers had to bribe the PA to the tune of $300. There were other ways of achieving this goal, for example, paying a commission to the Israeli employer who could ask for a permit to be issued to a specific worker on the Israeli side of the bureaucracy.

This process of obtaining a work permit well typified how the PA served the Israeli government, on the one hand, yet had enough power to force the workers to bribe it to get the permits. The bottom line was whoever controlled the border and issued the permits was the one with power and control.

The old colonial practice of "separate and rule" was embodied in the Israeli border policy. West Bank citizens enjoyed full access to the cities of Israel and VIPs from Gaza enjoyed a separate terminal to that used by the workers. The workers were aware of facing discrimination in comparison with the other Palestinian groups. This awareness intensified their anger. The creation of an elite that enjoyed special permits and preferential treatment was made possible by the presence of the borderline.

Is this enclosed zone the beginning of a free national state? Following Kemp (1999), one can consider that the PA controlled its people much more effectively than before its institution. During the years of the "classic occupation," the Israeli army's presence did indeed reach the residential areas in Gaza, but during the years of the peace process, control was concentrated on the borderline. The PA exploited the power of the border and used it to construct its own force, as noted above.

"During the years of the Israeli occupation sometimes we had curfew and sometimes we didn't. Since Oslo we have been under curfew all the time." This feeling exposes the way the Palestinians experienced the "peace process," not as a process of liberation but as a separation dictated by Israeli policy.

One can argue that the ideology of separation is opposed to the capitalist ideology of a "New Middle East," but these two ideas are actually complementary. In order to have an industrial zone on the border, the border must be defined. In order to successfully exploit a cheap labor force, economic gaps between Israel and Palestine must be maintained. From the very outset of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the occupation carried a double meaning: "political divorce" alongside "economic marriage" (Roy 1986). This double meaning is illustrated in the peace policy as well.

This is the nub of the discussion. The neocolonial control increased the desire to "go out," i.e., to work in Israel. Under these circumstances, the idea of nationality had failed. The "border people" had no sense of freedom in Gaza as long as it was a "closed area." The fence exposed the falsehood of nationalism under conditions of neocolonialist rule. As the second generation of refugees and migrant workers, there was no defined territory where they could find peace, whether the peace of Oslo or inner peace. The only sense of freedom they had was the freedom to move between these two worlds.

Conclusions

Jaffr, a 27-year-old originally from a small township near Tulkarm, was married to a woman from Jasr e-Zarka, a village under Israeli rule. Consequently, he had an Israeli identification card. He worked as the cleaning supervisor in Israel's Laniado Hospital.

Q: What do you think of the current situation, with a Palestine Authority?

A: We'll see. We have a new Prime Minister now [He was referring to Ehud Barak], we'll see what he does. I know that in our village near Tulkarm most people really wanted Bibi [Bibi Netanyahu, leader of the main right-wing party] to win the elections, because he's against [the establishment of] the state, so the borders would be free. There'll be a problem with Barak, because the borders will close and there won't be food for anyone. And if you ask people whether they prefer bread or a state, they'll all tell you they prefer bread. What will we do with a state without bread?

Learning the peace process through the lens of border theory brought me to see the Palestinian and Israeli societies and the meaning of nationalism and class in a new light. Ethnography of Palestinian work migration and of border relations exposed the ambivalence that both societies feel about the borders.

Ethnography of the peace process is one of separations and meeting points—ethnography of relations that came into being in and between the borders, both as a geopolitical site and as a culture. If we accept the way people identify themselves, put their liens,[4] we can understand how they give sense to and interpret their being and the life around them. Learning the changes across borders is learning culture as it is put into practice and becomes social reality.

An examination of differences between borders of the nation state reveals that Israel is altogether "borderland" (Kearney 1991), a space in which different cultures and political systems stand face to face and become mutually intertwined (Appadurai 1991; Rouse 1991) as a complex result of tourism, immigrants, refugees, and migrant workers.

The 1990s were the years when such theories of border shaped the way that the Israeli academia explored the Israel–Palestinian conflict (Kimmerling 1983; Shafir 1989; Kemp 1999; Morris 1996). These researchers offered an understanding of the national borders as the fulcrum for an analysis of the political culture and ideology of both Israeli and Palestinian societies.

Exploration of theories concerning borders in the Israel–Palestine context requires an analysis of the two entities as a single territorial, economical, and cultural unit—the border zone. Theories on migration and nation states have taught that the movement of border people posits, in principle, a challenge to the national order of things (Basch et al. 1994; Zolberg 1981; Appadurai 1991). In their daily course, migrant workers link places that the national borders try to keep apart.

This research documents and analyses the meaning of the economic, political, and cultural practices that embodies the double relationship of the two border societies: the absolute closure of Gaza by means of fences and sole rule by Israel, as against the complete breaching of the "Green Line" that separated Israel from the West Bank territories in the years 1993–2000.

On one hand, Israel granted selective entry permits, and on the other, it subsidized the buses that brought the migrant Palestinian workers to their workplaces. A feature of the situation was that the tenure of the Ministry of Labor and Welfare by Shas, a religious party, established an approach by which Palestinian migrant workers were given preference over migrant workers from "abroad" because the former did not live on Israeli territory and, hence, did not present a threat on the Jewish nature of the state.

Hence, it is arguable that the concepts of a "New Middle East" and of separation do not stand in opposition to each other, but were mutually fulfilling trends. In order to set up industrial parks on the border, there had to be a border; in order to achieve a synthesis

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[4] As proposed by Zerubavel (1991).

between Israeli capital and Palestinian labor, there had to be two states that perpetuated the gap between two economies, two standards of living, and two kinds of consumption, so that the Palestinian work force remained cheaper than Israeli labor and the economic meeting point on the border remained profitable for the Israelis and essential for the Palestinians. Cooperation with Jordan and Egypt became the model for an economic meeting point that was made viable by the differences that national state borders perpetuated.

The meeting of the worker from Gaza with the Jewish collective and the state authorities described in the section "Being in Tel Aviv" reveals ambivalences. Most Palestinian workers saw Tel Aviv as the only place where they could "taste life," the only place where they could enjoy a sense of freedom, where there were no politics. Yet few of them visited it. The encounter with Israelis demanded that they juggled different identities: speaking Hebrew, showing self-confidence, and asserting rights to the place in the face of the various security forces (mainly the police). Yet penetration of the Third World into the heart of the First World did not lead into the expected collapse of the First World (Lavie and Swinberg 1995), but to the establishment of new borders on the threshold of the rulers' houses.

The next section, "Being in Gaza," brings out the heightened duality of the border. This can be seen on three levels. Firstly, the Gazan experience was sharpened by the awareness of the border: the Erez checkpoint had turned Gaza into "one big prison." In other words, the erection and maintenance of the fence and the separation it engendered became the essence of the experience. It was the very possibility of crossing that gave the Palestinian migrant workers the sense of being in a prison, of having become border people. Crossing the border to work had devolved from the workers' own volition to a complex fiefdom of special permits, work quotas, people smugglers, and a trade in permits between Jewish contractors and Palestinian middlemen.

Secondly, Abu Ahlem compared the relationship between the two groups with those between East and West Germany where the collapse of the wall between them brought out the existence of two different cultural entities side by side but without borders or walls (to which Taysir replied that there were no walls between us, but a state). Another worker, Mahmud from Barta, produced an example which was surprising, since we usually think of it in a negative context, but to which he gave a positive slant. When asked what would happen to Barta when a peace treaty was finally signed, he said he did not think the village would come out on Arafat's side. It was pointed out to him that Barta was currently under the rule of the PA and Arafat would not cede any territory. In that case, he answered, it would be like a village in the Israeli security zone in Lebanon. Even if their formal identity papers defined them as from "there," their life would be "here"—in Israel.

The Lebanese security zone was Mahmud's image to express the ambivalence and the only way to resolve the contradictions of their life. It was as though he needed a Palestinian school for his daughters and an Israeli school for his sons. What Abu Ahlem had to say about the joint border patrols was also a compromise born out of the duality of the border. Joint rule over a border that had depth and range would dismantle its dichotomies.

On a third level, it is the duality of the border that creates the need for a dialectical reorganization, a need that only the border people, through their movement in the area, can create: a call for the establishment of a state without borders.

The Demand for Dialectical Reorganization—A State Without a Boundary

Intellectuals have identified the workers as those with "the real national demand," but may be surprised to discover that the experience of border passage has brought the Palestinian migrant

workers to formulate demands for a "dialectical reorganization," i.e., a state without borders. In Homi Bhabha's words: "They are now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of culture difference. The native intellectual who identifies 'the people' with the 'true national culture' will be disappointed. The people are now the very principle of 'dialectical reorganization'" (Bhabha 1994).

The call for such a dialectical reorganization reflects their attempt to formalize and define what happened in the border zone during the years of the peace negotiations. It was an attempt to find a compromise between nationalist utopias and their awakened understanding of their chances of making a living; an attempt to carry on and to simultaneously support their identity and standing, while adopting the ideology of Western culture, as exposed to them on the fringes of Israeli society. As long as their demand was not realized, the only sense of freedom these people had arose out of the experience of the passage itself. However, it was a transition that fused two cultures—and left them homeless.

As of recently, since the Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip and its takeover by the Hammas, even the former tenuous measure of passage had been blocked for the Gaza Palestinians. From this paper's point of view, it means that the workers experience an erosion in every dimension of their identity: the day of the Israeli disengagement and closure put an end to them as supporters of their families, as men, and as members of a national group that fight for an independent state. It put an end to the options that they have shaped during the Oslo years: finding comfort while moving from one place and social category to another.

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