

The Jewish Caste in Palestine

Adam Sabra

1995

Contents

RACIAL THINKING: ZIONISM AND ANTI-SEMITISM	4
BUILDING THE JEWISH CASTE	5
STATE AND CASTE	7
THE IDEOLOGY OF CASTE AND ITS ABOLITION	9

The development of a Zionist state in Palestine has presented a number of problems of interpretation, especially for theorists of the left. The Zionist movement combines elements of “laborism” and colonialism at the same time. This apparent paradox has led observers to classify Israel as anything from settler-colonialist to social democratic. Clearly, the traditional modes of analysis, while shedding some light on the problem, have failed to provide a sufficient framework for the task at hand.

It will be argued in what follows that the best way of understanding the development of Zionism is through the use of the concept of a Jewish “caste” or “race.”¹ This caste does not represent a prior existing social form, but rather refers to the historical construction, even invention, of a Jewish caste, calling itself a nation, which excludes the indigenous Palestinian Arab population. The invention of this caste has had a profound effect on the politics, economy, and culture of Palestine. This article will attempt to frame these effects in their historical development. Only once the development of the Jewish caste is understood can efforts be directed towards its abolition. In this light, the fatal weaknesses of the current attempts at repartitioning Palestine become brutally apparent.

The Zionist movement originated in the late 19th century as a response to the changes then occurring in European societies. As these changes proceeded, European Jews found themselves caught up in the rapid shifts of social and political order. The crumbling of old institutions and ideas sometimes gave them unparalleled opportunities for social advancement and integration, but often resulted in the destruction of traditional communities, either through response to social change or through the rise of Anti-Semitism.

The experiences of European Jews differed from most other Europeans in two important aspects: class and nation. Since these two concepts were the basis of the new political order, it is worth taking a closer look at these questions.

Jews had differed from their neighbors for some time when it came to class.² While most of their neighbors were peasants, Jews were overwhelmingly non-agricultural. They were concentrated in the trades and in “middle man” jobs such as commerce and tax collecting. These positions often left them stranded between the aristocracy, which made use of them when possible, and the peasantry, for whom they were often the face of oppression in the form of tax men and usurers.

As feudalism collapsed in eastern Europe, the tensions between Jews and their neighbors increased, and the Jews were increasingly impoverished. Anti-Semitism reached new heights, and many Jews thought they could do better in the West, where their co-religionists were better integrated into society. As these East European Jews moved westward, Anti-Semitism gained currency in the West, much as modern European rightists have responded to the rise of immigrant labor by appealing to racism.

Here the question of nation became paramount.³ The rise of the nation-state had made natural the idea that each “people,” a term for which there is no consistent definition, had to have a state of its own. Jews, having always considered themselves a “people” in a religious sense, became a

¹ The author regards the terms “caste” and “race” as synonymous. Both refer to non-biological, historically constructed entities. In view of the long-standing use of the term “Jewish Race” in Anti-Semitic rhetoric, the author prefers to use the term “caste” in order to avoid any form of misunderstanding.

² See Abram Leon, *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation* (New York 1970).

³ For an overview of this question, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York 1951).

people without a state. As racial nationalism became increasingly popular, Jews came to be seen as not only religious outsiders, but also national and racial outsiders.

RACIAL THINKING: ZIONISM AND ANTI-SEMITISM

Zionism grew precisely out of these dilemmas of class and nation. One early Zionist, Leo Pinsker, responded to Russian pogroms by writing, “Judeo-phobia is a psychic aberration. As a psychic aberration, it is hereditary, and as a disease transmitted for two thousand years it is incurable.”⁴ Thus, the specific historical and political problem of Anti-Semitism was converted into an existential dilemma. Like any good nationalist of his era, Pinsker knew the solution for his embattled people: a state of their own. Such speculations were not limited to East Europeans. Theodor Herzl, popularly known as the father of Zionism, reacted to the Dreyfuss Affair in France by adopting the slogan of a Jewish state as the solution to the problem of Anti-Semitism. That an assimilated French Jew could be convicted of treason on flimsy charges had a great effect on Herzl’s vision of the future of European Jewry. He wrote, “Every nation in whose midst Jews live is, either covertly or openly, Anti-Semitic.”⁵ Rejecting the attempts of assimilated Jews to solve the problem of Anti-Semitism within their own societies, Herzl concluded that the Jewish Question (as it was then called) could only be solved along national lines, that is, by the creation of a Jewish state.

In this defeatist attitude towards bigotry, and in the adoption of a nationalist program for a religious group lacking the geographic basis for a national state, Herzl, like many who were to follow him, simply adopted many of the claims made by Anti-Semites against Jews. First, he rejected any attempt to solve the problem experienced by Jews within their own European societies. Second, he accepted the view that Jews were strangers within these societies, and could only liberate themselves by leaving these societies and establishing a separate state elsewhere, preferably in Palestine.

Labor Zionists, such as David Ben Gurion, would go even further than this in responding to the claims of the Anti-Semites. Where Herzl treated Jewish emancipation solely as a national question, they attempted to address the class aspects of the question as well. Thus, for Ben Gurion, it was not the immigration of Jewish capitalists that would make Palestine a Jewish society, but rather the influx of Jewish workers.⁶ In one sense, the “normalization” of Jewish social existence was a response, therefore, to ideological conditions.

The early Zionists were in constant debate with Anti-Semitic demagogues, even adopting the picture these demagogues drew of the Jews as their model of what had gone wrong. The most damning case of such a convergence of views occurred in Nazi-Occupied Hungary. Dr. Rudolf Kastner, representing Zionist interests, negotiated the immigration of some of Hungary’s most prominent Jews to Palestine in exchange for his help in arranging the orderly deportation of the remainder of Hungarian Jewry to the concentration camps.⁷ The Nazi functionary Adolf

⁴ Cited in Nathan Weinstock, *Zionism: False Messiah* (London 1979), p. 44.

⁵ Theodor Herzl, *A Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question* (New York 1917), p. 8.

⁶ Mitchell Cohen, *Zion and State: Nation, Class, and the Shaping of Modern Israel* (Oxford 1987), p. 125.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York 1963), p. 42. The similarities in Zionist and Anti-Semitic thinking are clear with regard to “Diaspora” Jews, including survivors of the Nazi concentration camps. See, for example, Ben Gurion’s statement, “Among the survivors of the German concentration camps, there were those who, had they not been what they were—harsh, evil, and egotistical people—would not have

Eichmann saw this agreement as more than just an opportunistic political arrangement. He saw Kastner as an “idealist,” like himself, dedicated to national ideals, without regard to the suffering of lesser people.⁸ Thus, the congruence of racist and Zionist ideals was more than just coincidence, it was the consequence of the assimilation of nation and race.

Ultimately, however, the development of Zionist ideology was determined by the relationship of the Zionists to one factor that had nothing to do with the ongoing debates about Anti-Semitism within the Jewish communities of Europe, and in Europe in general. The proponents of the Jewish “new man” found themselves face to face with the Palestinian Arabs.

When the first Jewish immigrants began to arrive in Palestine in the 1880s, the task of setting up a purely Jewish society must have seemed absurd to any outside observer. As late as 1907, Arthur Ruppin, an official of the World Zionist Organization, reported that Jews only made up approximately 80,000 out of a population of 700,000 inhabitants.⁹ Furthermore, the indigenous Arab population was growing due to a rise in life expectancy. At the same time, Jews owned only 1.5 percent of the land.¹⁰ Massive Jewish immigration, which began in the 1920s and accelerated during the 1930s due to the rise of Nazism, raised the Jewish population to approximately one-third of the total population, owning seven percent of the land by 1948, when the State of Israel was declared.¹¹ How then could a purely Jewish society be constructed in Palestine?

BUILDING THE JEWISH CASTE

The Zionists had one major factor working in their favor. After the defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Britain occupied and received a League of Nations mandate for Palestine. Despite the success of other Arab nations in achieving independence during the 1920s, the British, often with help from the Zionists, continued to maintain control over Palestine until after the Second World War, when the Zionist-Arab conflict made British rule impossible. Despite the later falling out of these erstwhile allies, a process that began in 1939 when Britain tried to limit Jewish immigration to placate Arab opinion during the war, the success of the Zionist colonization project depended on the British umbrella. Without the presence of an imperial power committed to the building of a “Jewish national home” in Palestine, the indigenous population could never have been forced to accept continued Zionist colonization.¹²

Meanwhile, the Zionists had been experimenting with different forms of colonization. Beginning in 1882, Zionist settlers coming from Eastern Europe were receiving financial support from Baron Rothschild to build a plantation system in Palestine along the model used by the French in Algeria. The idea was to use cheap local labor to establish areas of commercial agricultural production. While the settlers borrowed techniques from local Arab farmers, who had much more experience in farming the lands, the new settlements were based on totally different agricultural

survived, and all they endured rooted out every good part of their souls.” Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York 1993), pp. 118–9.

⁸ Ibid, p. 42, p. 60.

⁹ Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Cambridge 1989), p. 43.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 43.

¹¹ Exact figures are impossible to come by due to the prevalence of illegal immigration and land purchase through third parties. For the best available figures see Walid Khalidi (ed.), *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem Until 1948* (Washington 1971), pp. 841–3.

¹² Britain committed itself to supporting the Zionist movement in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. The British were so apprehensive about the Arab reaction to this document that they did not allow it to be published in Palestine.

relations from those of the Arab peasants, which were primarily oriented towards subsistence agriculture.¹³ Capitalist agriculture replaced a subsistence economy.

The result was predictable. While some Jews worked in the plantations, the overall effect was to equate class and caste. Jews managed the property, while Arabs worked it. While this pattern was not uncommon in other colonial societies, in Palestine the colonizers sought to found a society based on colonized labor. When later immigrants influenced by socialist ideas arrived, they were disgusted by the maintenance of Jews as a nonworking minority in Palestine. More to the point, it became clear that a specifically Jewish society could not be based on Arab labor. Jews would have to create their own institutions if they were to build a state in Palestine. The Arabs would have to be excluded.¹⁴

The problem of building a Jewish society among an overwhelming Arab majority came to be known as the “conquest of land and labor.” In effect, in order to build Jewish institutions, the normal relations of capitalist production had to be circumvented. Land, once purchased, had to remain in Jewish hands. No offer made by an Arab could be allowed to break up the acquisition of land for the “Jewish people.” This point was of particular importance since the other half of this project, known as Labor Zionism, was the exclusive use of Jewish labor on the land acquired by the Jews in Palestine. The Labor Zionists maintained this dual exclusionism (or apartheid, as we would now call it) in order to build up purely Jewish institutions.

In the case of the conquest of the land, the Zionists formed a very powerful instrument to force compliance on Jewish landholders. Land was not acquired by individuals, but by a corporation, known as the Jewish National Fund (JNF). The JNF acquired land and leased it only to Jews, who were not allowed to sublet it.¹⁵ Thus land was acquired in the name of “the Jewish people,” held for their use, and not subject to market conditions. The idea was for the JNF to gradually acquire as much land as possible as the basis for the expected Jewish state.

Naturally, in order for the land to serve this function, Arab labor had to be excluded. Thus, leases from the JNF specifically prohibited the use of non-Jewish labor on JNF plots.¹⁶ One way to achieve this goal was to lease land only to those Jews who intended to work the land themselves. In some cases, when land was bought from Arab absentee landlords, the peasants who resided on and worked the land were expelled. Jewish landholders who refused to exclude Arab labor could lose their leases or be faced with a boycott.

The conquest of labor not only pertained to agriculture, but also to industry. The Labor Zionists formed an institution to organize Jewish labor and exclude Arabs: the Histadrut. The Histadrut was (and largely is) an all-Jewish trade union providing its members with a number of services. More importantly, the Histadrut was a means of segregating Arab and Jewish labor, and especially of protecting the latter from competition in the labor market. Since the Arab workers were accustomed to a lower wage scale and standard of living, competition from them threatened to lower the wages of Jewish laborers. Furthermore, if the wage markets for Arab and Jewish workers were equalized, employers would employ both indiscriminately.

¹³ Shafir, pp. 50–52.

¹⁴ As early as 1906, David Ben Gurion insisted on the need to organize Jewish labor, while at the same time excluding Arab labor. This position was opposed by more conventional left wing Jews who wanted to organize all labor in Palestine. Weinstock, p. 87.

¹⁵ Walter Lehn with Uri Davis, *The Jewish National Fund* (London 1988), p. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 59.

The Histadrut aimed at forcing Jewish employers to hire only Jewish labor to the exclusion of Arab labor. Thus, Jewish wages would remain high, and a strictly Jewish economic sector would come into being. Even when Arab and Jewish laborers performed precisely the same job, Jewish workers were paid significantly higher salaries.¹⁷ These policies not only alienated Arab laborers, some of whom had already been displaced by Jewish land purchases, they also were the death knell for any attempt to organize labor on a non-racial basis. The “laborism” of Labor Zionism killed and continues to kill any and all efforts at building a unified labor movement based on the premise that Arab and Jewish workers both suffer from capitalist exploitation. In exchange for the privileges of membership in the Jewish caste, Jewish workers turn their back on the possibilities of unified struggle.

It should be emphasized that the depredations of Labor Zionism are not merely matters of work conditions or salary. For example, the demand for exclusively Jewish labor on Jewish-owned property led to the expulsion of Arab watchmen in Jewish-owned vineyards in Palestine. The paramilitary Jewish forces who replaced them became the basis for the construction of the Haganah, the main Jewish military force which participated in the establishment of the Israeli state and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian civilians from their homes. The descendent of the Haganah, the Israeli Defense Forces, continues its occupation of Palestine and other lands to this day. It should be clear from this sequence of events that what is at stake is not merely inter-ethnic competition over jobs and wages, but a struggle to control and direct the building of a nation-state. The invention of the Jewish caste from the different immigrant groups has always fundamentally been based on the subjugation of the Palestinian Arabs.

STATE AND CASTE

The establishment of the “Jewish” society was not accomplished peacefully. As Jewish immigration into Palestine increased, so did Palestinian resistance. Open civil war broke out in the years 1936–39, and the British were only able to defeat the Arab revolt by using brutal measures in collaboration with Zionist forces. When the Zionists were ready to make their bid for statehood in 1948, the British were only too happy to escape from Palestine, while the Arabs were defeated and demoralized by years of oppression.

The Zionists were not satisfied with the construction of a state; they knew they had to rid themselves of the Arab majority in order to have a specifically Jewish state. More than half a million Arabs fled their homes in 1948–49, either to escape the war zone, or else due to pressure from the Israeli forces. Some went to neighboring Arab countries, others became refugees in their own country.

At this point, the brazenly racist policies of the Israeli state became apparent. As Uri Davis has pointed out, these policies were contained in two laws passed in 1950. The first, the Law of Return, permitted any Jew, anywhere in the world, the right to “return” to Israel. This right did not apply to non-Jews, including the Palestinian Arabs who had recently become refugees.¹⁸ In addition, the Absentee Property Law confiscated the property of Arab “absentees,” and turned it over to the Custodian of Absentee Property.¹⁹ Arab refugees within their own country were termed

¹⁷ Shafir, p. 64 shows pay ratios approaching 2 to 1.

¹⁸ Uri Davis, *Israel: An Apartheid State* (London 1987), p. 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

“present absentees” (what a phrase!), but not allowed to return to their property. A number of refugees who attempted to do so were termed “infiltrators,” and some were shot in the attempt. Confiscated property accounted for as much as 95 percent of all agricultural land in Israel, and the vast majority of new settlements.²⁰

These confiscated lands, in accordance with the procedures that were established in the Mandate period by the JNF, have become Israel Lands, with their own administration. This administration, controlling 92.6 percent of all of the lands in Israel, only leases these lands to Jews.²¹ Apartheid is thus practiced by dividing lands between those belonging to the state, and only available for Jews, and those in private ownership, primarily in the hands of Arabs.

This situation has only been aggravated by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967. Along with the usual land confiscations and streams of refugees that accompanied the war and the subsequent military administration, the Palestinian labor force of the territories has become increasingly tied to Israeli capital. While Israeli Arabs have increasingly moved from unskilled to semi-skilled positions (still at the bottom of the Israeli ladder), the Arab residents of the “Occupied Territories” have remained stuck in the lowest skill level jobs.²² In 1982, 35.9 percent of European Jews had professional or managerial jobs, as opposed to 13.1 percent of Asian-African Jews, 11.4 percent of Israeli Arabs, and 0.8 percent of Non-Citizen Arabs.²³ The continued exploitation of Arab laborers in construction, agriculture, service industries, and menial labor indicates the caste nature of the labor market. This exploitation continues despite the massive increase in levels of education among Palestinian Arabs as a whole. Young people trained as engineers and computer scientists must find work abroad (and perhaps never come back), or submit to exclusion from their chosen fields and work in whatever jobs they can find available.

As the above statistics reveal, however, all is not well within the Jewish caste either. Jews have been divided into two ethnic groups: Ashkenazi and Sephardi. These terms are composites for Jews of European and Asian or African origins, respectively. While each term originally stood for a specific Jewish community (in Central and Eastern Europe or Spain), they have become terms for groups within Israeli society which are largely mutually exclusive. The European Jews have consistently treated their Oriental co-religionists with racist contempt. Jews who arrived from Iraq in the early days of the Israeli state were sprayed with DDT to kill whatever insects they might have brought with them.²⁴ Similar contempt has been shown for the persons and cultures of Moroccan and Yemeni Jews, and, more recently, for Ethiopians.

The Oriental Jews have also found themselves discriminated against in the labor market. Few are in professional or managerial jobs, while many are concentrated in the agricultural, construction, textile, and metal industries.²⁵ They are generally concentrated in working class development towns, many of which are located near Israel’s disputed borders with its Arab neighbors. Consequently, they are very security-conscious. Questions of security in addition to competition with cheaper Arab labor make them quite hawkish on military issues, a classic “poor white” men-

²⁰ Ibid, p. 20.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 58–60.

²² Moshe Semyonov and Noah Lewin-Epstein, *Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water: Noncitizen Arabs in the Israeli Labor Market* (Ithaca 1987), pp. 22–3.

²³ Ibid, pp. 22–3. The question of stratification within the Jewish caste is discussed below.

²⁴ Ilan Halevi, *A History of the Jews: Ancient and Modern* (London 1987), p. 204.

²⁵ Shlomo Swirsky, *Israel: the Oriental Majority* (London 1989), pp. 9–16.

tality. Like poor whites in other racist societies, the Oriental Jews are found in disproportionate numbers in the police and military services, jobs which offer some opportunity for advancement. While most of the Israeli political elite is Ashkenazi, a few Oriental Jews, such as former Likud minister David Levy, have made places for themselves in the Israeli political structure. Large numbers of Oriental Jews vote regularly for the “religious parties,” many of which make ethnic gains a priority.

Oriental Jews are doubly discriminated against in the schools. First, they are given distinctly inferior schools, within their local communities. Fewer of them obtain higher, or even high school, education, and many drop out.²⁶ Second, a concerted effort has been made by the Ashkenazi officials to defame non-European Jewish culture. Given the hostility of the Jewish caste towards the Palestinian Arabs, it is not surprising that Arab Jews, that is, Jews from Arab countries, are never referred to as such. But the school authorities have gone further than that. Speaking of “cultural deprivation,” they have tried to force a “modern,” i. e. Ashkenazi identity, on the Oriental children.²⁷

In the early 1970s, young Oriental Jews responded to this degradation by forming a protest group called the Black Panthers, based on the example set by the Black Power group in the United States. They likened their condition to that of racially oppressed minorities elsewhere and called for changes in government policy. Eventually, the protests broke down, and the leaders were co-opted by the government. Furthermore, during the last twenty-five years, the political fate of the Oriental Jews has improved somewhat.

The exclusion of the Oriental Jews was in no small part due to their being blocked out of the solidly Ashkenazi Labor alliance. In 1977, a Likud government came to power for the first time, largely on the back of Oriental votes. While outside observers primarily noted the hawkish politics of Menachem Begin and his cohorts, many of their followers were more interested in breaking out of their exclusion from power than they were in foreign policy.

In fact, the two positions are closely connected. The seizure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (which the Likud still vows to keep) has made it necessary to further secure the loyalty of Oriental Jews. Some have made their way into the entrepreneurial class, especially in the service industries. Land east of Jerusalem has been used to build comparatively cheap housing which has proved a boon to many young families. While the current Israeli government is happy to turn over the administration of the Gaza Strip to the Palestine Liberation Organization, it has little incentive to do the same with other territories on which Jewish settlement is more dense. In addition, free access for Israelis to Palestinian labor and markets has been a prerequisite of any Israeli agreement to the extension of Palestinian authority in Gaza and Jericho.

THE IDEOLOGY OF CASTE AND ITS ABOLITION

As we have seen in the case of the Jewish National Fund’s campaign to acquire land in Palestine, the basic ideological precondition of Zionist settlement has been the notion that the state is the property of the Jewish people. Whether in immigration law, housing, or political rights, being a Jew in Israel means having a certain set of privileges which signify one’s membership in the caste

²⁶ Halevi, pp. 24–6.

²⁷ Swirsky, pp. 26–8.

that possesses the state.²⁸ Naturally, there are cracks in the foundation of the unity of this caste. The Oriental Jews, as victims of discrimination and members of the Jewish caste, illustrate the contradictions inherent in the mythical unity of the Jewish people. Despite these contradictions, the Zionist leadership must maintain the illusion, if not always the reality, of shared interests and opinions.

Perhaps the best example of this attempt to speak for the entirety of the Jewish people, whether in Israel or elsewhere, was the Israeli response to the Nazi atrocities against the Jews during World War II. The Israeli government not only set up “the” Holocaust memorial, they managed to obtain millions of dollars in compensation from the West German government. Israel’s greatest claim to inherit the grievances of the Jewish victims of the Nazis came, however, in the abduction and trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in 1961.

As the philosopher Karl Jaspers pointed out at the time of the trial, Eichmann, who was charged with “crimes against the Jewish people,” should have been charged with crimes against humanity, and tried before an international tribunal.²⁹ Instead, the Israeli state chose to carry out the trial in the name of the Jewish people. While many explanations have been given for this choice, one can only conclude that it was of a fundamentally political nature. Israel needed to establish itself in the eyes of the world, and of world Jewry, as the sole representative of the Jewish people. The constant references to the Nazi atrocities are less the product of the needs of a particular constituency (the majority of Israelis are not of European descent and have no direct connection with those events), than of the desire of the Israeli state to present the unified face of world Jewry in a Zionist guise. Calls for the defense of Israel are carried out with the slogan “never again!,” as if the defense of Zionism were the only alternative to Anti-Semitic genocide.

This attempt by the Israeli leadership to represent world Jewry also takes other forms. One form is the fetish of history, that is, Jewish history. As G. W. Bowersock, an expert on the Near East in the classical period, has noted, “the politics of archaeology are everywhere.”³⁰ Biblical archaeology is regularly used to buttress “Jewish” claims to the land (i. e. to a historical presence on it), while archaeology of the Arab periods is slighted, and finds that bring into question the historical authenticity of the biblical account are suitably reinterpreted. The history of the land of Israel is the history of the Jewish people exclusively. *[Editors’ interjection: the Israeli state’s effort to establish itself as the sole representative of world Jewry produces ironies. In December 1991, forty-three Soviet Jewish emigrants who had sought asylum in Holland were captured and, with the assistance of dogs, forcibly put on a plane to Israel—at the behest of the Israeli government. About fifty more remained hiding in the town of Eindhoven, evoking memories of World War II, when the Dutch hid Jews from the Nazis. (Dec. 20, 1992 Jewish weekly Forward, cited in Middle East LABOR BULLETIN, Winter-Spring 1992.) The sight of police in Europe setting dogs on Jews must chill the blood of any opponent of Anti-Semitism.]*

It should be noted, however, that the ideological veneer is not unbroken. One major controversy that has shaken attempts to homogenize Jewish life in Israel is the “who is a Jew?” contro-

²⁸ It is worth noting that Israeli ID cards do not list “Israeli” as a nationality. Religion and nationality are listed together, as either “Jewish”, or, for example, “Sunni Muslim Arab”. Thus, no legal barrier prevents the denial of citizenship rights to non-Jews or, for that matter, to Jews whose credentials are rejected by the Israeli state. See Davis, pp. 26–32.

²⁹ Arendt, *Eichmann*, pp. 269–70.

³⁰ G. W. Bowersock, “Palestine: Ancient History and Modern Politics,” Edward W. Said and Christopher Hitchens (eds.), *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question* (London 1988), p. 185.

versy. While this controversy has a long and complicated history, what is basically at stake is citizenship rights in Israel, that is, membership in the Jewish caste. Secularists treat the essence of Jewishness as a national question, while religious Jews treat the subject as a religious question. As the matter stands, no solution has been found. Religious Jews have increasingly managed to have religious definitions incorporated into the Law of Return, and civil law in areas such as marriage are only accepted if they conform to Orthodox Jewish law.³¹ This confusion has led to some bizarre attempts to find some historical unity for the Jewish people. For example, some Israeli scientists have attempted to prove that Jews have genetically distinct features, the result of a common genetic origin. As Roselle Tekiner has pointed out, these efforts, of dubious scientific validity, are nothing more than an attempt to reconstruct the idea of a Jewish “race,” the old weapon of the anti-Semites.³² The fact that Israelis are driven to such extremes to justify their own existence as a national group is the product of extreme insecurity about their constructed identity.

One does not have to look far to find the basis for this insecurity. While the Zionists have succeeded in dividing Arabs and Jews in Palestine, such divisions can never really be permanent. The two groups of people inhabit the same land, work together (if unequally), and cannot actually exist independently of one another, at least not anymore. Furthermore, the attempts to divide them culturally are under constant attack. The Zionist state must do everything in its power to maintain the illusion of irreconcilable difference.

One example of this breakdown of difference has come about in the use of Hebrew in Israel. Until the beginning of Zionist settlement in Palestine, Hebrew was largely a liturgical language with a smaller secular cultural audience. It was not the mother tongue of any living Jewish community. The Zionist leadership established Hebrew as the mother tongue of the Jewish community in Palestine, both as a device to unify the disparate Jewish immigrants into a single national community and to prevent the cultural assimilation of the immigrants into the indigenous Arab population. The creation of Hebrew as a national language has been one of the great successes of the Zionist movement, but not without some contradictions being raised. For one, Hebrew was insufficient on its own. Words have had to be borrowed from other languages, including Arabic. More importantly, Arab writers within Israel have begun to express themselves in Hebrew. One writer of extraordinary talent, Anton Shammas, has written what some consider to be the greatest novel yet produced in the Hebrew language.³³ While some Israeli Jewish authors have welcomed this phenomenon as proof of the success of Hebrew literature, one cannot help but wonder what this trend (if it becomes such) will mean for the future of Arab-Jewish separation in Palestine.

Of even greater significance to this question, much of what is called “Israeli” culture is clearly copied or directly expropriated from the Palestinian Arabs. Israeli restaurants serve traditional Arab food, Arab handicrafts are sold as “Israeli”; the list is enormous. While Israelis have tried to refuse to face the consequences of such borrowing by denying its Arab origins, this charade cannot go on forever.

Indeed, the Israeli public is constantly faced with cultural objects of Arab origin aimed at Oriental Jews of Arab origin. Films, concerts, and other cultural artifacts emanating from the

³¹ Roselle Tekiner, “The ‘Who is a Jew?’ Controversy in Israel: a Product of Political Zionism,” Roselle Tekiner, Samir Abed-Rabbo, and Norton Mezvinsky (eds.), *Anti-Zionism: Analytical Reflections* (Brattleboro, 1989), p. 75.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 80–1.

³³ The English translation was published under the title *Arabesques*.

Arab world continue to be popular with Oriental (we should properly say “Arab”) Jews. One example of this trend can be seen in popular music. One of the reigning stars of “worldbeat” is the *rai* singer Cheb Khaled. Of Algerian origin, Cheb Khaled is the best known of a group of North African singers who have popularized a culturally mixed (Arab, Berber, European) form of music that addresses the aspirations and frustrations of the youth and the oppressed. Besides his native North Africa, Cheb Khaled has attained considerable popularity in France, with its large North African immigrant population, and in Israel, where he was the first Arab singer to attain “number one” status. While much of his audience no doubt is among Oriental Jews, other Israelis could not help but be impressed by his success. What is particularly intriguing about the success now enjoyed by *rai* singers is that for the first time the whole Middle East is listening to the same music. To some degree this fact can be attributed to aggressive marketing on the part of the French, but it speaks of a greater potential for cultural mixing and the creation of common tastes.

One should not, however, blow this cultural mixing out of proportion. The barriers remain in place, and the current attempts to repartition Palestine into Arab and Jewish sectors will only increase the alienation of the two groups from one another without actually removing any of the economic or social impediments to real solidarity. Indeed, this is just what the Zionist leadership wants.

A perfect example can be taken from the recent Knesset decision to support the negotiation of some form of withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the area around Jericho. When the Labor-led coalition was in danger of collapsing, it received the support of the few Arab legislators in the Knesset. However, Labor made it clear that no Labor-Arab coalition would be acceptable to them, and Labor leaders spoke of the need for a “Jewish majority” to make any such important decisions about the future of the country. Clearly, the granting of voting rights to Arabs living inside Israel has not changed the character of the Israeli state. Israeli Jews consider the state to be their property, and only they have the right to determine its future. The state of the Jewish people continues to be run by a caste which has no intentions of allowing full democracy for all of its residents, even within Israel’s official borders.

This fact reinforces the need to construct an alternative to Zionism and Palestinian Arab nationalism. It is clear that the current plan to redivide Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab bantustan will not bring an end to the suffering of the excluded Arab population. Nor will such a solution compensate for the failures of Zionism to solve the “Jewish Question,” since the creation of a Jewish caste in Palestine has only inflamed the growth of Anti-Semitism in the Middle East and led to recurrent wars and atrocities.

The failure of the current Israeli-PLO agreement could also foreshadow more ominous events. The Labor government has already sustained significant criticism from the Likud opposition which promises its supporters a big Israel. As the inability of the parties to solve the basic problems of Arab-Israeli relations becomes clear, the Likud, or those to its right, may push for sterner measures, including the removal of the Arab population. The recent political activism of Ariel Sharon, the Butcher of Lebanon, is a sign of this rightward turn. If a movement that combines the political aspirations of Arabs and Jews cannot be built, an Israeli demagogue may find a willing audience among Oriental and Russian Jews who are locked out of the Labor establishment.

At the moment, neither the Arab nor Jewish political spheres have much to offer. The Palestinian Arabs are caught between the opportunism of the PLO and the fanaticism of Hamas. While individual Israelis have made clear their opposition to the Zionist government, none has suc-

ceeded in working with like-minded Arabs to create the necessary political movement. What is needed is a movement of Arab and Hebrew workers that is dedicated not only to formal equality, but also to tearing down the borders between one another, and between Palestine and its neighbors. Such a movement would undoubtedly meet with the enmity not only of the Israeli state, but also of all of the surrounding Arab dictatorships.

However such a movement is formed, one point cannot be subject to negotiation or compromise. Any claim by the current members of the Jewish caste to nationhood, and thus to self-determination, must be rejected. Palestinians, whether they are Arabic or Hebrew speakers, are members of one, indivisible nation. All attempts to partition or repartition the country and the nation in the name of “two peoples” must be rejected as mere modifications in the terms of an apartheid system. Only the abolition of the Jewish caste can prevent the continuation of the ongoing race war in Palestine by building a society free of race and caste.

Adam Sabra is an Egyptian-American student of Islamic history.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Adam Sabra
The Jewish Caste in Palestine
1995

Retrieved on June 29, 2016 from web.archive.org
Published in *Race Traitor* No. 4 – Winter 1995.

theanarchistlibrary.org