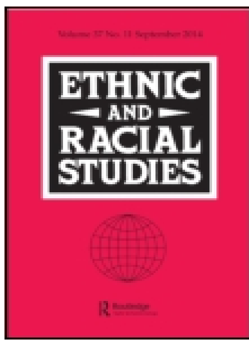

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Contesting the limits of political participation: Latinos and black African migrant workers in Israel

Adriana Kemp, Rebeca Raijman, Julia Resnik and Silvina Schammah Gesser

Abstract

The article addresses the significance of migrant associations and of their participatory practices as a vehicle by which migrant workers become political actors and negotiate membership in Israel. We offer a comparative analysis of black African and Latin American undocumented migrant communities to suggest the very fact that they manage to organize in autonomous associations in order to protect their interests, have the ability to mobilize support over issues of concern and raise claims before political authorities unwilling to accord them recognition, attest to the process whereby migrants become political actors and open new platforms of deliberation that enlarge *de facto* the limits of the Israeli public sphere. Moreover, by articulating their claims in terms of universalized themes such as "human suffering" and "human rights" migrants attempt at participating in the host society in the name of a generic category of "personhood", one that transcends state-embedded conceptions of citizenship.

Keywords: Labour migration; ethnic associations; citizenship; claim-making populations; political participation; Israel.

1. Introduction

Since the 1950s recruitment and importation of labour migrants have become a prevailing pattern that characterizes relations between high-income and low-income countries. This development has led to a marked increase in the number of undocumented immigrants and to the emergence of new ethnic minorities that challenge the endogenous nature of the nation-state and its traditional definitions of membership and boundaries. The fact that, despite restrictionist state policies, former 'temporary workers' have become 'alien permanent residents' has thrown into question many assumptions about the rights of citizenship, the nature of

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nationality and the viability of a multicultural society (Brubaker 1989; Castles 1994; Jenkins and Sofos 1996). At the end of the millennium, two main quandaries of a social, political and moral nature beset democratic societies (or those that presumably aspire to be so): first, which new ways of social and political participation will develop in a world constantly challenged by massive movements of people? And second, to what extent will these migratory trends lead to a recasting of existing conceptions of membership?

The present article deals with the emergence of new ethnic minorities among undocumented (non-Jewish and non-Palestinian) migrant workers in Israel. We focus on two groups that comprise a third of the undocumented migrant population (15 and 14 per cent respectively) and that have recently developed active communities in the Israeli metropolis: the black African and the Latin American.[1] We concentrate mainly on the strategies of social and political participation that they have developed in order to cope with their illegality and on their attempts at redrawing the limits of membership in Israeli society and polity. Our emphasis on the undocumented migrant communities themselves as political actors, rather than on state migration policy, stems from a conspicuous lacuna in political research on the subject.

Studies on migrant workers have tended to centre on their lack of political rights and resources in the receiving countries. Because disenfranchised, alien migrants have long been assumed to be politically passive. While most democracies have stopped short of granting full political rights to alien residents, they have, nevertheless, not prevented other forms of political participation (Miller 1989). This subtle process is seldom acknowledged by theoretical approaches that look upon labour migration 'from above', namely from state-embedded definitions of the phenomenon, thus neglecting a wide array of extra-electoral political participation in which migrants, including those who are undocumented, can engage (see also Chaney 1981; Walzer 1981).[2] More importantly, they overlook the significance of grassroots migrant associations as they open new platforms for negotiating the limits of membership and participation in the host society (Soysal 1997).

The main thrust of this article is to fill this lacuna by addressing the political meaning of migrant communities' participatory and associational practices. We suggest the very fact that migrants manage to organize in autonomous associations in order to protect their interests, and have the ability to mobilize support over issues of concern, and to raise claims before political authorities unwilling to accord them recognition, are politically significant regardless of their success. For these facts attest to the process whereby migrant workers become political actors and through which membership in contemporary nation-states is negotiated (Miller 1989; Layton-Henry 1990; Rex and Drury 1994; Soysal 1997).

By emphasizing migrant workers' participatory practices we do not wish to imply that they have free options or unlimited choices. On the contrary, the manifestly Jewish ethno-national character of the nation-state renders migrants' present or future incorporation extremely difficult, if not altogether unlikely. At present, migrant workers' already vulnerable situation seems to be getting worse as the Israeli government is determined to implement a deportation policy of 1,000 undocumented migrants per month (*Ha'aretz*, 13 September 1998). We rather suggest that despite a context full of constraints and obstacles, the significant political fact is that migrants still find the way to organize and raise their claims to the host society. In this sense, not the success of migrant groups in influencing the political public sphere of the host society is being addressed in this study, but the fact that they are actively participating in it. As such, we conceive of migrants as political actors capable of individual and collective empowerment rather than passive recipients of discriminatory state policy.

The article proceeds as follows: after presenting the theoretical background (section 2), we offer a brief description of the Israeli setting as an ethno-national state of immigration (section 3). In section 4 we depict the social organization of black African and Latino migrant communities in Israel. Then we follow both communities' attempts to politically mobilize their members (section 5) and analyse the articulation of legitimating principles and claims raised before the political public sphere of the host society (section 6). Lastly, we raise some brief concluding remarks on the dynamics between labour migration and the limits of membership in an ethno-national state such as Israel.

2. The limits of participation and the emergence of claim making populations

In the last decade the concept of citizenship has been brought back into the heart of the socio-political discourse. A wide range of social, cultural and political phenomena have compelled scholars in social sciences to call for a recasting of the concept of citizenship (Hanagan 1997). In general, definitions of citizenship can be divided into two broad approaches: a *state-centred* and a *society-centred*.[3] The former emphasizes the regimes of inclusion and exclusion employed by the political organization for different social groups (Brubaker 1992; Bauböck 1994; Van Steenbergen 1994). The latter focuses on the differential modes of participation (social-political and economic) of various social groups (Soysal 1994; Smith and Guarnizo 1998).

The uneven 'distribution of membership' in Western democracies (Walzer 1981) emphasized by the state-centred approach creates what Martiniello has called a triangular structure of membership that comprises three categories: citizens, denizens and margizens. While both

citizenship and denizenship entail full or partial access to social, economic and political entitlements and recognition respectively,[4] the concept of margizens refers to a new category of people who, being denied of membership, remain excluded in legal, social, cultural and political terms (Martiniello 1994).

Martiniello's typology enhances our understanding of contemporary migration as it also includes undocumented migrant workers in the state's regime of membership distribution. Nevertheless, his state-centred approach neglects the dynamics of migrants' associational and participatory practices. Indeed, the overriding assumption shared by scholars dealing with post-war migration, is that migrants have no place in the public sphere except as subjects of exploitation, paternalism, advice and, at best, help. They are relegated to the private sphere and forced either to remain unorganized or to follow the 'communal option', one that reinforces their already marginal situation (Goulbourne 1991). The emphasis on what migrants and aliens 'lack' in terms of rights vested from 'above' precludes an understanding of the everyday process whereby immigrants are made into subjects through the negotiation of membership within a particular polity and society. A reconsideration of agency entails a society-centred approach to citizenship, one that allows for a revindication of social and political actors and of their participatory strategies in the public sphere. The question is, how can non-citizens, lacking any kind of membership, and in fact unrecognized by the state apparatus, attempt to influence the political public sphere of the host-state and society?

A central participatory strategy through which migrants become political actors in the public sphere of the host country is the creation of ethnic associations. These carry political significance particularly when dealing with undocumented migrants, who are 'disempowered' by state-centred approaches to membership (Ong 1996). Indeed, these organizations play an important role in the emergence and survival of new ethnic minorities in immigrant-receiving countries.

The literature underscores three main functions of ethnic associations: first, the adjustment of migrants into the host society;[5] second, the reaffirmation or the transformation of migrants' ethnicity in the new environment;[6] and third, the mediation between migrants and the home community in the sending countries.[7] Despite the important contribution of this large literature, few have considered the political significance of ethnic associations as they create new platforms for claim advancing in the host public sphere.

Taking a society-centred stand, Soysal (1997) has coined the concept of 'claim-making-populations', namely social actors who through their collective and relational activities, mobilize and advance claims in the public sphere. The transformation of migrant communities into 'claim making populations' entails a political process in at least two senses.

First, by creating self-help organizations social networks, migrant workers open new arenas for collective empowerment that may lead to potential collective action and mobilization (Gidron and Chesler 1994, p. 17). Second, by extending their claims from the private or communal sphere to the public arena, migrants engage in the 'politicization of associational life', widely considered as the hallmark of participatory democratic praxis (Habermas 1992, p. 424).

As the cases of Turks in Germany and Maghreb people in France clearly show, organized claims to recognition and social and civil entitlements advanced on behalf of migrant workers have enlarged *de facto* the limits of participation in the contemporary nation-state, providing new platforms for deliberation and public mobilization (Miller 1989; Withol de Wenden 1994; Soysal 1997). However, migrant workers seem to be challenging the nation-state not only at its 'contours' but also on the very ground that allows alien communities to raise their claims before the host society. As convincingly argued by Soysal (1994) and Jacobson (1996), and as our own case-study below corroborates, migrant workers enter the political public sphere to pursue their goals and advance their interests not through a state sovereignty discourse on membership but through a globalized discourse on human rights. Invoking universalized themes such as 'human suffering', 'human needs', and appealing to democratic values such as 'freedom' and 'equality', migrants increasingly participate in the host society in the name of a generic category of 'personhood', and not as 'citizens'. As such, they derive their claims to various social and civil entitlements from international agreements and laws that transcend the state embeddedness of traditional conceptions of citizenship, thus contributing to the ongoing decoupling between 'rights' and 'national belonging'.

We devote the following analysis to the emergence of new claim making populations among Latino and black African non-Jewish migrant workers in Israel and to the participatory practices that they have developed within the Israeli political public sphere.

3. The Israeli setting

Israel has been defined as an immigrant-settler society based on an ethno-nationalist structure, both ideologically and institutionally (Kimmerling 1983; Shafir 1989; Smooha 1990; Yiftachel 1997). While state and quasi-state agencies actively encourage immigration of Jews and are committed to their successful absorption, they restrict strongly non-Jewish immigration. The Israeli Law of Nationality, which came into force in 1952, and the Law of Return constitute the legal platform upon which the Jewish character of the state is premised. The latter law, based on the *jus sanguinis* principle, confers on Jews, and only Jews, everywhere the right of immigration, while the former gives them Israeli

nationality, virtually automatically. At the same time, Israel is an ethnically divided society composed of approximately 83 per cent Jews and 17 per cent of Palestinian citizens. Although Palestinian citizens of Israel are considered equal before the law, they in fact constitute a subordinate social, political and national minority (Smooha 1990).

After the 1967 war, the government gradually began recruiting non-citizen Palestinian workers from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to perform mostly menial, low status, manual jobs in the Israeli labour market (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 1987). They matched the definition of 'daily labour commuters' who entered the country in daytime and left at night time. The number of non-citizen Palestinians increased dramatically over the next twenty years from 20,600 in 1970 to 94,700 in 1986, thus comprising 7 per cent of the Israeli labour force.

The Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) in 1987 created a shortage of labour in low status positions occupied by Palestinian daily commuters. Periodical strikes organized by the Palestinian leadership and closures imposed by Israeli authorities created a labour shortage in the construction and agriculture sectors where Palestinian workers were concentrated. The 1987 events set the initial stage for organized recruitment of foreign blue-collar workers. However, it was not until the Israeli government decided upon the hermetic closure of the border with the occupied territories at the beginning of 1993, that recruitment of large numbers of overseas workers began, primarily from Romania (construction sector); Thailand (agriculture sector) and Philippines (geriatric care, nursing and domestic services) (Bartram 1998; Bar-Zuri 1996; State Comptroller 1996).[8]

A combination of structural and political pressures determined that overseas migrant labour suited both the state's and the employers' interests.[9] By 1987 the number of permits accorded by the Israeli Ministry of Labour was 2,500 and it gradually increased to 9,600 in 1993. The qualitative change happened between 1993 and 1994, when the number of permits tripled. In 1996, the total number of valid work permits was estimated at about 103,000 (see Bartram 1998, Table 3). Of these workers, 72 per cent were in the construction industry, 16 per cent in agriculture, 7 per cent in nursing and geriatric care, and 5 per cent in light industry and the hotel and catering industry (Lerer 1996, pp. 17–18).

Similarly to other labour importing countries, official Israeli figures do not reflect the real number of labour migrants in society. The number of undocumented labour migrants working in Israel, which has dramatically increased during the last years, augments these figures considerably. The lack of valid data makes it impossible to estimate the current number of undocumented workers who live and work in Israel. The figures differ considerably from one source to another. Although official sources estimate a conservative figure of 100,000 illegal workers (State Comptroller 1996, p. 490) other sources suggest up to a maximum of 300,000 undocumented non-Jewish migrants living and working in

Israel (*Ha'aretz*, 14 November 1996).[10] For the time being, the number of foreign workers remains a matter of controversy and speculation.[11]

Whatever the sources for calculation may be, non-Jewish labour migrants (documented and undocumented) have become a salient feature in Israeli society, amounting to 10 per cent of the Israeli labour force. They have ceased to be 'invisible'. Their presence is increasingly felt, as they seem to be changing not only the labour market composition in specific sectors but the ethnic fabric of the Israeli metropolis as well. In contrast, Palestinian commuters, whose daily work in Israel did not involve a change in place of residence, overseas migrant workers' participation is not limited to the Israeli labour market but extends to other spheres of life. The fact that they have to reside within the host society implies the creation of a new category of foreign residents with all its implications. It means that the host society does not just benefit from their participation in the production process; it also has to take responsibility for their reproduction costs.

The increasing flow of migrant workers and the emergence of new ethnic communities among some of them call for a problematization of the membership regime in Israeli society and polity. All the more so, given the particular character of the nation-state which has been defined as an ethnic democracy constituted by the tension between two political commitments: one to the Jewish character of the state and the other, to a democratic form of government (Smooha 1990, pp. 391–95).[12] As in most Western European countries, migrant workers in Israel are perceived as an import of temporary workers, not as prospective citizens. Foreign workers (usually of distinct ethnicities) are considered outsiders in the cultural, social and political spheres (Baldwin-Edwards and Schain 1994; Schnapper 1994; Weiner 1996). Even the term by which they are referred to, *ovdim zarim* (foreign workers), with its biblical connotations of idolatry, exemplifies their status as 'margizens'. Their marginality is further highlighted by the fact that both ministries mainly concerned with the issue of migrant workers in Israel, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Welfare, are headed by ministers belonging to ultra religious right-wing parties. These seem to set the tone not only by creating policy but also by generating a public atmosphere of ethnic antagonism and xenophobia (*Ha'aretz*, 26 June 1998; *Ha'ir*, 26 June 1998; 21 August 1998). Taking all these political and structural constraints into account, our question is to what extent may the margizen situation of migrant workers become a source of political organization and empowerment? More specifically, to what extent are we witnessing the emergence of new-claim-making populations among migrant workers that could challenge the boundaries of Israeli polity and society? To answer these questions, we proceed by analysing the strategies of social and political participation developed by black

African and Latin American undocumented migrant workers in light of the state's manifest exclusion.

4. The social organization of black African and Latino communities in Israel[13]

The pattern of formal labour recruitment in Israel has created a peculiar situation for labour migrants. The issue of work permits to employers but not to employees, transforms documented workers into a *de facto* 'captive labour force' (Rozenhek 1998). While the state permits provide a formal infrastructure of incorporation into the labour market, the workplace conditions resemble a kind of 'total institution', so to speak, which leaves little or no room for migrant workers' associational initiatives. Indeed, except for the Filipino community, which comprises a mixed population of documented and undocumented migrants, documented migrant workers have not developed ethnic communities in Israel.

In contrast to their documented counterparts, undocumented migrant workers such as Latinos and black Africans, arrive haphazardly. They enter the country on a tourist visa valid for up to ninety days, which forbids them to work. They become undocumented migrants by overstaying the tourist visa.[14] Their being undocumented makes them 'invisible' in the eyes of state apparatuses in regard to social, political and civil rights. The lack of legal status and work permits is apparently one, albeit not the only, catalyst for the development of informal patterns of organization in this unfriendly environment. We suggest therefore that undocumented migrants' greater tendency to organize and develop communities should be understood as a strategy of survival in the absence of state regimentation of their work and life conditions.

The main characteristics shared by the two communities can be summarized as follows:

1) the great majority of the community members are undocumented; 2) the socio-economic composition of both groups shows: a) a high percentage of families with children; b) a highly educated population (secondary and tertiary education); c) the majority are employed in the service sector (cleaning, restaurants and light industry); 3) recruitment of workers is not formal but realized through informal networks; 4) both groups have developed communitarian patterns of organization (self-help institutions, churches, formal and informal religious groups, sports clubs and centres for various leisure activities) (Lukumu 1997; Raijman 1998).

Despite these similarities, there is a major qualitative difference in their patterns of social organization. While the black African community has developed a highly institutionalized organizational infrastructure, the Latino community consists of isolated and fleeting socio-cultural

associations. Moreover, the black African community has managed to mobilize resources and people in order to create a supra ethnic, indeed, pan-African association which forms the common basis for claim advancing, this community has already succeeded in becoming a political actor in the Israeli public sphere. By contrast, the multiple and fragmented character of Latino associational life hinders their ability to engage in collective action and create a political platform aimed at negotiating community interests and needs within the host society. In the following section we describe the two communities' organizational networks.

The black African migrant community

Black African migrant workers began arriving in Israel during the late eighties. Migrant workers come from various countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), the Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Mauritius and South Africa.[15] Black African migrant workers have created three main kinds of organizational networks: socio-cultural organizations such as churches (Pentecostal Church, Methodist Church, Jehovah's Witnesses Church, among others), sports and music clubs; national and regional origin-based associations and rotating credit associations. The organizational networks constitute social capital that helps migrants in all spheres of life providing information on and access to lodgings, work, health and education.

Most associations fit the pattern of self-help institutions. These are mutual-aid associations that organize to solve social and personal problems, in the present case problems caused by the illegal status of migrants (Gidron and Chesler 1994). African patterns of self-help organizations are inspired by the village association in the home country. However, similar to migrant communities' experiences in other receiving countries (Light 1972; Massey *et al.* 1987), the significance of African self-help institutions is redefined within the context of the Israeli society. Self-help associations help migrants to cope with exclusion from the host society by providing information, employment connections, and financial and emotional support, thereby minimizing the costs and risks of migration.

African associations are mostly organized along national and regional affiliation lines. At the national level, among the oldest (started many years ago) and best organized are the Ghanaian communities. The most salient national-based migrant association is one that nucleates a federation of various social clubs. Other examples of associations organized around national lines are those of migrants from Mauritius Island, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic. An interesting case of both regional and tribal organization is the association of the Manding people.[16]

In general, African self-help institutions display a high degree of

bureaucracy evinced by their hierarchical structures (a chairperson, a general secretary and a recording secretary, sometimes a treasurer and an auditor); regulations and formal sanctions for those who do not comply with them, and fixed admission and monthly fees. Some of them even have written constitutions; others like the *moziki*, a Congolese socio-cultural self-help association, are based only on members' mutual trust. While the specific objectives of each association vary, self-help organizations play a similar role in the process of incorporation and accommodation of the black African minority into the host society. In fact, their explicit objective is 'to unite [. . .] all sons and daughters' of the specific group, area or country of origin, and to assist members in emergencies such as illness, death and deportation (Lukumu 1997).

A salient example of self-help institutions is the rotating credit associations, which meet the need for money and raising loans. The *likelemba* is a case in point. A non-formal association, this formation is based on imported cultural patterns of mutual aid and trust. A group of ten people make a weekly or monthly contribution that is collected by a treasurer. This money is assigned by rotation to each of the members for different ends: marriage, funerals, arrest and deportation. In sum, African organizations provide institutional frameworks within which members can strive to meet their needs, pursue their interests and exert greater control over their lives both as individuals and as groups (see Gidron and Chesler 1994). These institutions operate as a means of both individual and communal empowerment. As we show later in section 5 below, this organizational infrastructure creates the conditions for resource mobilization necessary for collective political action. We turn now to the description of the Latino community's organizational framework.

The Latino migrant community

Latinos come from almost every country in South America, but mainly from Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela.[17] The community displays a wide array of social arenas that include religious, cultural and sports activities. Although on weekdays labour migrants are dispersed among the host society at their workplaces, on the rest day they actively engage in religious and leisure activities.

Religious organizations play an important role for Latin-American migrant workers not only as a source of spiritual and moral support but also as a place for exchanging vital information about jobs, housing and recreational activities, as well as useful information about remittances, health care, kindergartens and schools. By offering their congregations the opportunity to learn Hebrew, the local language, and English, as well as various activities such as sewing and hairdressing lessons or youth groups, churches provide a source for individual empowerment. Latino migrants attend two kinds of religious organizations: 1) Catholic

churches in Jaffa which hold weekly Latino gatherings; 2) independent religious organizations, mostly evangelist, created by the migrant workers themselves. Many of them are supported by the central headquarters outside Israel and some have established connections with the network of Arab Protestant churches in Israel.

The other most important institutional site of Latino migrants are soccer fields. The Latino's presence is conspicuously felt in public spaces that transcend the limits of their residential area. Soccer games are taken seriously to the point of organizing continental (Copa America) and world (Mundial) championships with the participation of foreign workers' teams representing different countries. These gatherings, where stalls with traditional food are set up and genuine Latin music plays loud in the air, are defined by Latino migrants as 'the most genuine expression of their way of enjoying leisure time' (Madriz Lovera 1997). Both religious and sports institutions serve as suitable arenas for raising money and mutual aid accomplished through ad hoc arrangements such as fairs and raffles.

Besides religious and sports institutions, many lay associations with cultural and recreational purposes have also been founded, among them various folklore ensembles that share the musical spectrum of the migrant Latino community (for detailed information see Madriz Lovera 1997). A different kind of institution is the *tertulia,* which consists of informal gatherings of friends to discuss social and political issues of interest for the community both in the country of origin and in Israel. Members of the community invest efforts also in the written word. Two informal periodicals were published for a short period of time, and even a book about the non-Jewish Latino community in Israel was published under the sponsorship of Aurora, the Latin American Jewish immigrants' publishing house.[18]

Notwithstanding this wide array of activities, attempts to associate on national or supra-national lines have not lasted long. In interviews with active members of the community, we learnt that their communitarian efforts are often terminated at the initial stages. According to them, personal enmities, gossip, intrigues and power struggles seem to undermine the mobilization attempts. Latinos therefore have so far not succeeded in translating their communal activities into a source for collective empowerment. Their efforts remain uncoordinated and ephemeral because of an organizational infrastructure that can effectively mobilize community members when needed. Moreover, the unstructured character of the community further minimizes an already vulnerable sense of reliability and trust in the co-ethnics, which is indispensable for mobilizing undocumented migrant workers.[19] The organizational weakness is well reflected by the 'internal' difficulties faced by the community members in creating an umbrella organization that furthers the common interest of the Latino community. In the following section we offer a

comparative analysis of the black African and Latino attempts at politically mobilizing their communities.

5. From individual to collective empowerment: politicizing the communities

As shown in the previous section, both the Latino and the black African communities display a wide array of socio-cultural associations that promote their members' individual empowerment. Nevertheless, they differ significantly in their organizational infrastructure and in their concomitant ability to politicize their own community, namely to mobilize people, resources and public opinion in order to translate the community activities and claims from the private-communal realm into the public sphere. As shown in the literature, the passage from the private-communal realm to the public realm entails, first, the creation of an organizational platform representing the common interests of the community, and second, intensive interaction between migrant community representatives and public agents of the host society, among others the media, political leaders, state and local authorities, and governmental and non-governmental organizations (Jaakola 1987; Werbner and Anwar 1991; Rex and Drury 1994). This transition also requires a series of organized political actions, both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary, such as public demonstrations, lobbying, strikes and so forth (Miller 1984). While the political organization of the community does not automatically lead to access onto the public sphere, its absence jeopardizes any attempt to elicit public support and attention. Conversely, access to the political public sphere means opening new platforms on which the new migrant community can negotiate the conditions of participation and membership in the host society.

Which strategies have black African and Latino leaders adopted to assert themselves as actors on the political stage of a state unwilling to accord them any recognition? To answer this question, let us start by describing the steps initiated by the black African community. Beyond national and regional level organizations, black African migrants in Israel have organized at the pan-African level. A development in this level is the African Workers Union [AWU], founded in September 1997, which aims at 'bringing all African workers in Israel under a common umbrella which will provide assistance and services' (Lukumu 1997). This supra-ethnic organization uses the black African identity as a platform for recruitment and claim-advancing in the Israeli public sphere. This is the most interesting emergent political feature that differentiates the black African from the Latino community.

The catalyst event that led to the politicization of the black African community and to the concomitant creation of the AWU was escalation in the deportation policy implemented by the Israeli authorities during

1997. In reaction to it, and with the mediation of an Israeli journalist committed to the cause of human rights, black African migrant workers initiated a series of informal contacts with members of the Israeli Knesset. These led to a formal invitation, issued by a group of Knesset members from various political parties, to African representatives. During the meeting, the African community leaders raised issues concerning the plight of migrant workers in general consequent to the deportation policy, and of black African migrants in particular, as they are more easily targeted by authorities. The first meeting between black African and Israeli representatives resulted in the submission of a policy proposal regarding the status of the black African community in Israel, and more importantly, in the creation of the AWU.

The details on the birth of the AWU are worth mentioning for they reflect the interesting dynamics of labour migration, modes of participation, and the negotiation of membership within the public sphere of contemporary nation-states. The creation of the AWU was not only triggered by the demands articulated by the black African community itself, but also by the encounter with Israeli representatives and activists who subscribe to a globalized human rights' discourse, and by their active sponsorship. These provide a channel of interaction with the state and its agencies, at both the local and the national level (Drury 1994, p. 21). The AWU was registered as a non-profit organization in September 1997 with the help and legal advice of a member of the Knesset. Next, the founding members called a meeting of social clubs and church leaders in order to announce the foundation of AWU. Community leaders were asked to cooperate and involve their constituencies in the AWU's activities and future decisions. In their words:

> The current immigration crisis can only be used to unify the black Africans but should not be the only reason for our unification. We have a lot of challenges that threaten the existence of the black people which we all need to face with courage, strength and determination (Lukumu 1997, p. 94).

At a meeting on 16 October 1997, African community leaders gave full support to the newborn AWU, its elected leadership and its policy proposal.

The explicit objective of the policy proposal submitted by the AWU to the Israeli Knesset committee was: '[To] suggest to the Government of Israel to formulate a policy regarding the Africans' employment in Israel'. The Union demanded the regulation of African workers' status: asked for work visas for three to five years which would allow them to open bank accounts, participate in welfare services such as social security (*Bituach Le'umi*) and national health insurance, freely enter and exit to state territory, and enjoy protection by the police and other state institutions.

Following the African experience, Latinos have recently attempted to create a Latin Workers Union [Organización de Trabajadores Latinoamericanos; hereafter OTL], which would function as a channel of interaction with Israeli authorities and organizations dealing with labour migration. This latest attempt follows previous unsuccessful initiatives undertaken by activists in the community to gather under one common organization Latinos from different parts of the continent.[20] The significant factor that led to the idea of founding a supranational organization was an encounter between members of the Latino community and Israeli social activists and academics who encouraged them to follow the black African example. Indeed, the process that led to the creation of the OTL was one known in organizational theory as isomorphism: a process driven by a mixture of competition and mimesis *vis-à-vis* the black African community.

The first assembly of the OTL was convened by a local journalist and followed by a series of meetings and consultation of OTL members with AWU leaders, Knesset members and non-governmental organizations. During these meetings participants discussed the steps to be taken in order to address successfully both the Israeli public opinion and members of the community reluctant to participate in political activities. Latino activists called for weekly gatherings to organize the community itself along national lines inspired by the black African model. The OTL's short-lived political activity reached its peak at a meeting held between Latino and black African representatives and the Chair of the Knesset Committee on Migrant Workers (17 May 1998), at which an alternative policy to deportation was discussed. The meeting resulted in the submission of a joint proposal by both migrant communities' representatives and members of the Knesset committee, which recommended the grant of one-year work permits for undocumented migrants already residing in Israel and a $5,000 deposit meant to ensure that migrants would leave the country when the permit expired. This proposal was rejected by the government.

The nascent Latino political organization was curtailed when police raided the houses of some of the leaders of the Latino community (*Ha'ir*, 16 April 1998). From interviews conducted with Latino leaders, we learnt that members of the community believed that the escalation in the arrest and deportation policy was a direct reaction to the community's organizational activities. Although persecution is a serious setback for both black African and Latino undocumented communities, in the case of the latter it endangered the survival of an already fragile and fragmentary organization. The combination of lack of recognized leadership, lack of an integrated and coordinated organizational infrastructure, and lack of a ready-made participatory political culture imported from the country of origin, seems to account for the inability of Latinos to create a viable channel for claim-advancing into the Israeli political public sphere. As

already suggested, access to the political public sphere means opening new platforms on which the new migrant community can negotiate the conditions of participation and membership in the host society. Its absence puts the Latino community at a disadvantage compared with their black African counterparts when competing for public attention and resources. So far, this has been expressed by the success of the black African community to gain greater exposure in Israeli media and to articulate clearly their claims and expectations of the host society in a variety of forums.[21]

The question that arises is on what grounds do organized migrant communities negotiate their right to participate in the political public sphere of the host-state? Since the black African community is the only one that has so far succeeded in politically mobilizing its members, we shall focus on the analysis of the claims advanced by black African leaders on to the Israeli public sphere.

6. Legitimating principles and claims raising

Analysis of migrant workers' claims enables us to uncover the discursive strategies followed by community leaders in their attempt to gain political recognition within the context of the host society.[22] Among the arguments advanced by black Africans we find two major themes explicitly aimed at mobilizing Israeli public opinion and support, and one main discursive strategy aimed at eliciting pan-African solidarity from members of the black African community in Israel. The first argument corresponds to what Soysal calls the *valorization of personhood* theme. It draws on a deterritorialized conception of rights that divorces rights from national membership. An abstract and universal notion of personhood has been invoked on various occasions and at different levels. For example, in a speech given before the Knesset Committee on Migrant Workers, one of the black African community leaders argued that 'It would be an horrible mistake for the whole world to design a law that everybody should live only in his own country of birth of origin, at a time when the world is becoming more interdependent than ever' (Speech, 16 September 1997 cited in Lukumu 1997, p. 93).

A 'naturalized' version of personhood is usually invoked by community members when directly addressing Israeli public opinion. One such occasion was a series of articles published in a local newspaper by the community members themselves under the symbolic title 'Is there such a thing as illegal human beings?' In an obvious allusion to a well-known slogan of a German human rights' organization, the writer asked the audience to consider that 'We are all legal citizens of Mother Earth, and we deserve just treatment as anybody else' (*Ha'ir*, 19 December 1997). The personhood theme therefore subsumes Mother Earth, Law of

Nature (*Ha'ir*, 9 January 1998) and Basic Human Rights as legitimating claims for participation.

The recurrent usage of discursive categories such as human rights and personhood made by the African community in Israel is neither casual nor unique. It bears witness that African migrant workers in Israel share globalized expectations that proliferate among migrant workers around the world as to what they can claim and what they deserve. Black African leaders in Israel seem to be well aware that only through appealing to a generic concept of personhood might they claim for a 'piece of the pie' from the host society and polity regardless of their formal status.

The other recurrent, and yet more prominent, argument invoked by the black African organized community is the *community of suffering* theme. As used by the community, this theme carries simultaneously two different and complementary connotations: one is a humanitarian and universalized sense of suffering, albeit attuned to cultural motifs resonant in the host society; the other refers to the particular history of hardship and exploitation suffered by black people alone.

Black African leaders invoke the suffering of black people drawing a parallel with the history of hardship of the Jewish people. Members of the black African community emphasize the common human lesson that should be learnt from both Jews and black people as they have been subjected to suffering and segregation throughout their history. This motif was invoked particularly following the first massive arrests carried out by the authorities against undocumented migrants. The scene of black people being led away, shackled, to police vans outraged public opinion. To the community members, these violent scenes evoked the darkest chapters in human history: slavery and holocaust. 'Do you know how many black Africans died during the slave trade journeys from Africa to Europe and America? Millions and millions. This chapter [slavery] of human history symbolizes the first holocaust.' (*Ha'ir*, 19 December 1997; see also *Ha'ir*, 4 July 1997).

Departing from the 'universalized suffering' theme presented above, and yet within the same discourse of 'suffering', is the discourse that presents Israel as part of Western imperialism and exploitation. Aware of the intensive bilateral relations that evolved between black African countries and Israeli governments throughout the years, black African migrants are pointing at the lack of symmetry whereby Israelis behave towards their former 'hosts' and present 'guests'.

> "Do you know how many Israelis live in Africa?" asked one of the community leaders. "Westerners cannot come and use our resources without taking responsibility for our people [. . .] Who do you think enabled Israel to become the first diamond exporter in the world that she boasts so much about? [. . .] Where do all those diamonds come from?" (*Ha'ir*, 4 July 1997).

Israelis are asked for reciprocity on two grounds: as victims of suffering and as part of the Western responsibility for Third World exploitation.

A nuanced version of suffering is the community's appeal to be recognized as *political refugees*. Although the State of Israel does not acknowledge the status of refugee, black Africans again and again have raised their claim for asylum from political persecution and hunger. With the aid of different agents such as local journalists, diplomats and Knesset members, black African migrants are introducing a new discursive category – refugee – with which Israeli authorities are being compelled to deal. Israel's commitment to humanitarian goodwill was called on particularly following the latest political and military events in Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria. In January 1997 the Nigerian ambassador in Israel intervened on behalf of thirteen Nigerian citizens who were about to be deported. They claimed that since they belonged to the rebel forces, their return to their country meant a death sentence. The Minister of Interior rejected their appeal, a decision that almost led to a diplomatic incident (*Ha'aretz*, 14 January 1997). Later the same year, an appeal was submitted to the Israeli Supreme Court by Nigerian migrants who claimed that they had nowhere to return to in case of deportation. The court rejected the appeal on the ground that it should have been submitted prior to their entry to the country. However, the judges seemed to have forgotten that the State of Israel does not recognize the category of refugee as such (*Ha'ir*, 10 January 1997; 25 July 1997; 16 January 1998).

A landmark in the production of the refugee discourse by migrants was the campaign sponsored by the local weekly *Ha'ir* on behalf of migrants from Sierra Leone doomed to be deported. Following a series of articles denouncing the massacres of civilians in Freetown, an amateur videotape smuggled out by a migrant from Sierra Leone was broadcast on prime time national television in Israel and before the Knesset Committee on Migrant Workers (*Ha'ir*, 3 July 1998). The chairperson of the Committee declared that the Israeli government should take a binding decision not to deport migrants to countries in a state of civil war or when imminent and tangible danger awaited them (*Ha'ir*, 17 July 1998).[23]

If a common history of suffering and reciprocity are used as humanitarian claims to obtain support from Israeli public opinion, the 'acting out' of blackness is a different kind of strategy since it is intended first and foremost to mobilize the black African migrants themselves. Literature on ethnic mobilization deals with the way in which reified notions of race or ethnicity might hinder mobilization of migrant minorities (Neveu 1994). However, research has also shown that the use of black identity as mobilizatory practice and organizational asset is common among migrants coming to Europe from black Africa and the Caribbean. The mobilization of black organizations and activists throughout the European continent has been particularly reinforced since 1992 as a result of the debate on the implications of the creation of the European

Community regarding equal opportunity for black migrant workers (Singh 1994, pp. 78–86). In Britain, for instance, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, blackness became a prominent means of ethnic mobilization and policy formulation, overshadowing other ethnic and racial identities (Rex and Drury 1994).

Empirical evidence within the Israeli context also shows that far from being an obstacle to immigrants' mobilization, an abstract and generalized category of blackness can become a political resource for commu-solidarity. Black African leaders in Israel seem to be consciously 'acting out' their race in order to achieve solidarity and unification within their community. The acting out of blackness is achieved through reference to the suffering of black people both in Africa and in Israel. The message is that becoming organized in Israel as black is a means of 'symbolic solidarity to the thousands of starving people [in the homeland countries]. To relieve them from the punishing routine they are going through [. . .] should be the primary aim of our unification' (Speech at a General Meeting of the AWU, 16 September 1997 in Lukumu 1997, pp. 92–4). It is no surprise therefore that the AWU's motto is 'Unity is Strength'.

In sum, the analysis of both the institutional framework created by black African migrant workers and their claim-making discourse clearly shows that their community functions as an ethnic interest group, in clear contradistinction from that displayed so far by the Latinos. The appeal to a supranational identity, namely 'black African', made by migrant workers from a mosaic of countries and ethnic groups, should be understood not as a reaffirmation of a primordial ethnic identity as such but as a search for a basis on which they can act together in pursuit of political and social ends. Large-scale associations that transcend the boundaries of particular national groups could become an asset when competing with other migrant workers such as Latin Americans for resources, public attention and benefits in the host society. Leaders of the AWU have expressed their concern that raising claims on behalf of a generalized category of migrant workers, which would extend the boundaries of solidarity to include other migrant groups, may be counterproductive to their political aims. Acting out their blackness therefore is a conscious strategy employed by members of the AWU in order to differentiate themselves from a catch-all category of 'foreign workers'.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the significance of migrant associations and of their participatory practices as a vehicle by which migrant workers become political actors and negotiate membership in contemporary nation-states. Our focus has been on the political process itself and *not* on its actual impact on immigration policy-making. Further research will

certainly have to take into account both a state-centred and a society-centred approach for understanding the dynamics between emergent claim-making populations among migrant workers and the limits of participation in an ethno-national state such as Israel.

Nevertheless, some general observations that touch upon the significance of migrants' political agency can already be drawn from the Israeli case. By confronting the state agencies with new dilemmas regarding the link between national membership and various social, civil and even political rights and practices (among others, the right to education, health, security and police protection, and the right of association), migrant workers are already challenging, explicitly or implicitly, the limits of membership and participation in the modern nation-state. Similarly to the European experience, this challenge is particularly felt at the local level, as municipal authorities are confronted with the need to 'solve' immediate problems affecting the everyday life of those living under their jurisdiction. A social worker from the Department of Welfare Services in the Tel-Aviv municipality defined it succinctly: 'The state does not have a "problem" of migrant workers, we (local authorities) do'.[24] Highly indicative of this point is the fact that the issue of migrant workers became an inextricable part of the agenda during the last local elections in Tel-Aviv, where up to 80,000 migrant workers live and develop their own communities (*Ha'ir*, 18 September 1998; 25 September 1998; 16 October 1998).

The 'localization' of the migrants' issue, its confinement to municipal boundaries impinges upon the 'national' as it were from below. It transforms municipal agendas and interests into interests which are different and often contrary to those of the state. Hence, Tel-Aviv's newly elected mayor's calling overtly for the legalization of migrants' undocumented communities, since city authorities can no longer ignore their presence.[25]

On the other hand, state agencies and bureaucrats cannot be completely oblivious to migrant communities. The fact that migrant workers are using their ethnic associations as political platforms for advancing claims and for raising issues of their concern in the name of a global discourse on human rights posits a new challenge to state representatives. This is exemplified by the fact that *illegal* migrants are not denied the right to *legally* register their associations at the Registrar for Non-Profit Associations of the State of Israel, thereby according the recognition of the state itself. Or yet another paradoxical situation whereby under the auspices of the Knesset Committee on Migrant Workers, meetings are being held between representatives from the Ministry of Interior and 'undocumented' representatives of 'undocumented' migrant communities for the purpose of negotiating the terms of their stay in Israel.

However, the challenges posed by the emergence of new migrants' communities are not only of an administrative or jurisdictional nature. The appeal to a globalized discourse on personhood made by migrants'

associations indicates that, as we look towards the next century, the Israeli polity will have to add to its concerns a recasting of the notion and the practice of citizenship within a global context, one that aims at transcending national and ethnic cleavages.

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Notes

1. This article is part of a larger research on the emergence of new ethnic minorities among non-Jewish Latino and black African migrant workers in Israel and on their impact on both the Israeli society and polity. Primary research data are collected through extensive semi-structured questionnaires as well as through ethnographic fieldwork in various institutional sites of both migrant communities.
2. According to Miller (1989, pp. 129–43), international migration has created a complex web of transnational politics that includes five avenues of extra-electoral participation: (1) homeland participation; (2) consultative voice; (3) unions and factory councils; (4) political, religious and civic organizations, and (5) extra-parliamentary opposition. The first relates to the politics of the homeland, the other four to the politics of the country of residence.
3. Turner (1994) uses a similar typology. He differentiates between *passive* and *activ*e citizenship, depending on whether citizenship is developed from above (via the state) or from below (via more participatory institutions, such as trade unions).
4. Citizenship entails full civil, political and social rights accorded to groups that are considered 'full members' of the polity and society. Denizenship is an 'in between' category that refers to foreigners who have been recognized as permanent residents and enjoy relatively secure rights of residence, entitlements to family reunification, and equal rights in systems of social security, but on the other hand lack full political rights (Hammar 1994, pp. 187–98).
5. See, for example, Schoeneberg 1985; Schmitter-Heisler 1986; Basch 1987; Jenkins 1988; Kasinitz 1992.
6. See among others Sassen-Koob 1979; Gitmez and Wilpert 1987; Verdok *et al.* 1987; Jenkins 1988.
7. Schmitter 1980; Basch 1987; Campani *et al.* 1987; Jaakkola 1987; Kasinitz 1992.
8. The decreasing number of non-citizen Palestinians in the Israeli labour market is concomitant to the increasing number of foreign workers concentrated in specific occupational niches. For example, in 1992 there were 85,900 Palestinians working in the construction industry, while in 1994 their number was reduced to half of it (42,100 Palestinians). At the same time, the number of work permits given to foreign workers in construction and agriculture increased from 1,730 in January 1993 to 64,230 in February 1995 (State Comptroller 1996, p. 479).
9. For a detailed analysis of the political configuration that led to the decision on massive recruitment of foreign workers, see Bartram 1998.
10. According to data provided by the Ministry of Interior, undocumented non-Jewish

labour migrants come from literally every corner of the world: East Europe; South Asia; Africa and Latin America.

11. The exact number of migrant workers has become typically a highly controversial and politicized matter, especially in the light of recent years' high rates of unemployment and economic recession. See, for example, the Social Security Office researcher Condor 1997.

12. For a debate on the nature of the Israeli 'regime of incorporation' regarding different social groups, see Peled 1992, Smooha 1993 and Yiftachel 1997.

13. For reasons of confidentiality, we deliberately refrain from giving the full names of individuals and institutions in both communities.

14. Overstaying the tourist visa is not the only path to illegality. Another way is for workers to enter the country with work permits and then leave their employers.

15. There was never any formal agency for recruitment of black African workers. However, the particular history of political and economic relationships between Israel and black African countries set the initial stage for informal patterns of recruitment. Several paths of entry can be discerned: (1) academic, technological and cultural exchange programmes between Israel and several black African countries; (2) pilgrimage: Israel, the 'Holy Land', has always been a magnet for Christians all over the world; (3) informal recruitment of domestic labour by Israelis working in black African countries, either independently or as representatives of Israeli companies. While these informal mechanisms initiated the migration flows, social networks of black African migrants that developed in the host country contributed to their perpetuation. Indeed, social networks constitute the main source of informal recruitment.

16. Manding is a tribe that cuts across several countries: Senegal, Mali, Burkina-Faso and Chad.

17. Like black Africans, Latino migrant workers have not been formally recruited. However, several paths of entry can be discerned: (1) informal recruitment of domestic labour by Israeli families of Latino origin; (2) pilgrimage; (3) travel agencies in Latin America; (4) social networks of Latino migrant workers already living in Israel. In the late 1980s there was official recruitment of Chilean workers for the textile industry.

18. *Latinoamericanos en Israel* 1997 by Felix Madriz Lovera.

19. On the lack of ethnic solidarity among Latino immigrants in Washington DC see Pessar 1987, pp. 103–30.

20. Even the attempts at creating national-based organizations had feeble results. An exception is the census conducted by the Ecuadorian community living in Israel in 1998. The census aimed at collecting information about their community and recruiting funds for use in emergency cases. This success served as a model for other Latino groups such as Bolivians, Peruvians, Chileans, Colombians and Argentineans.

21. Besides the above mentioned visits to the Israeli Knesset and meetings with members of the Knesset Committee on Migrant Workers, members of the AWU have been involved in a series of lobbying attempts with members of the Knesset from various political parties, with the Students Association, with local neighbourhood representatives, among others. The latest and most salient example has been the general 'emergency' assembly called by the local newspaper *Ha'ir* and various NGO on the massive deportation policy of the Israeli government. The media coverage of the event focused almost solely on the black African community situation. See, for example, Levy Gideon, *Ha'aretz,* 30 August 1998.

22. The analysis of claim-raising is based on various sources: the policy proposal submitted by the black African leaders to the Israeli Knesset in August 1997; the AWU registration petition as a non-profit association submitted to the Registrar of Associations in the Ministry of Interior; speeches given by black African leaders at the Knesset in August 1997, at the founding meeting of the AWU in September 1997, at the general assembly of the AWU and black African community leaders in October 1997, and interviews given by members of the black African and Latin communities with local newspapers.

23. It should be noted that the State of Israel has consistently refused to accord recognition to the refugee status on the ground that it might provide a legal precedent for Palestinians' plight to return to their lands as refugees.
24. Personal interview.
25. Ron Huldahi, City mayor of Tel-Aviv. Workshop on 'Are Foreign Workers Settling in Israel?' organized by the Department of Welfare, Municipality of Tel-Aviv, February 28, 1999.

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——17 July 1998 'Either Black or legal' by Einat Fishbein in "The New Tel-Avivians" Series
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