Meritocracy in the service of ethnocracy

Abstract

Contributing to scholarship on differential citizenship of minority groups, this article asserts that the meritocracy discourse provides a discursive 'cover' for tensions between the economic imperative to integrate and the political desire to exclude ethnic minorities. Analysing the incorporation of Israeli Arabs in hi-tech, the epitome of an inclusive, ethnicity-blind enclave, the article claims that this meritocracy discourse celebrates diversity and inclusion while camouflaging ethnic hierarchies and the denial of the minority's collective rights. Thus the ethnic majority can champion ethnic minority inclusion without risking ethnic equality. The article therefore challenges a core capitalist assumption, that the market is 'the perfect arbiter' and rewards on merit, by underlining the 'ethnocratic' context of Israeli hi-tech's meritocracy: while the liberal citizenship discourse enables the ethnic minority to claim citizenship through economic participation, it cannot be separated in practice from an ethnonational citizenship discourse because ostensibly liberal spaces are infused with ethnonational meaning.

Introduction

In a 'global village' of increasing migration and interdependence, scholars have investigated the forces that sustain or undermine 'ethnicised' perspectives of belonging to the nation-state (e.g. Baumann 2010; Bonjour and Block 2016; Joppke 2003), or the impact of various citizenship discourses on the rights, duties, status and belonging of different population groups within nation-states (e.g. Shafir and Peled 2002). One such force, the (neoliberal) demand for economic incorporation, can be expected to support a liberal and de-ethnicising conception of citizenship (Joppke 2003; Shafir and Peled 2000). This article critiques this expectation by analysing the incorporation of an ethnic minority in an apparently inclusive, ethnicity-blind industry: Israeli Arabs in Israel's hi-tech sector.[1]

The themes most prominent in the widely trumpeted story of 'Arab integration into hi-tech' are talent, merit and diversity. Thus Arab integration is premised on one of capitalism's core implicit, if not explicit, assumptions: that the market is 'the perfect arbiter' and rewards according to merit. This, then, is a discourse of meritocracy. The article claims that this discourse provides a discursive 'cover' for the tension between the economic integration and political exclusion (Preminger 2017) of an ethnic minority. As such, it helps camouflage ethnonational inequalities in the context of an 'ethnocracy' (Yiftachel 2006), defined as a partially democratic state in which the ethnic majority enjoys a disproportionate part of public resources, the official historical narrative sidelines the ethnic minority, and state symbols are associated with the ethnic majority alone. The article thus challenges the widespread association of the hi-tech sector with progress and positive change towards a de-ethnicised citizenship of inclusion: it rejects the idea of hi-tech as a neutral, liberal, open space of equal opportunity, free of the ethnocentric politics that shape Israel as a whole, thereby illustrating how capitalism can co-exist with ethnonational exclusion.

The article first reviews concepts of citizenship and ethnicity, and overviews Israel's status and self-identification as a nation-state for Jews, to which its Arab citizens do not fully belong.[2] It then argues that the hi-tech sector is presented as the epitome of liberal capitalist incorporation into the polity, free of the exclusionary shackles of an ethnonational conception of citizenship, and recounts efforts to integrate Israeli Arabs into this sector – efforts replete with a rhetoric of diversity, individual creativity and talent, and spurred by the economic imperative to compel 'non-productive' populations to participate in the labour force. The following section builds on critiques of the meritocracy discourse to claim that it facilitates the integration of Israeli Arabs in a way that avoids open discrimination and celebrates diversity yet reinforces myths of Arab 'backwardness'; settles the tension between an open, globalized business worldview and a localized, nationalist politics; and trumpets individual success while failing to challenge underlying (collective) ethnic disparities that also constrain individual progress.

The article does not suggest that in Israeli hi-tech meritocracy is imperfectly applied or could improve (see e.g. Breen and Goldthorpe 2001; Driessen, Sleegers and Smit 2008); i.e. it does not discuss the extent or success of social mobility within a state or sector that aspires to be meritocratic, along the lines of debates in the 1990s (Breen and Goldthorpe 1999; Lampard 1996; Saunders 1995). Instead, it unravels the significance for an ethnic minority of the prevalence of this meritocratic ideal, analyzing the role of meritocracy in an ethnonational context of discrimination and exclusion based on ethnicity. Ultimately, the article claims that the meritocracy discourse serves the inclusive liberal citizenship discourse enabling Arab integration (Shafir and Peled 2002) but in practice this cannot be separated from the exclusive ethnonational citizenship discourse, because ostensibly liberal spaces, of which Israeli hi-tech is the epitome, are infused with ethnonational significance. More broadly, the article challenges

the view that markets are indifferent to ethnicity and are politically neutral, by showing how they are impacted by the political context.

Citizenship, ethnicity and Arab citizens of Israel

In an article from 2003, Joppke discusses the citizenship dynamics of two recent tendencies in modern nation states: On one hand, immigration compels states to de-ethnicise citizenship, anchoring citizenship and rights less on filiation and increasingly on territory and birth; on the other hand, emigration compels states to re-ethnicise citizenship to retain links with those outside its borders. Joppke's study repoliticises a discussion around contemporary forms of citizenship that often implies linearity (e.g. from national citizenship to post-national citizenship; Sassen 2002). Importantly, he emphasises that ethnicity is political and contested, and can be used by the state to shape the distribution of rights and bestowal of belonging: de-ethnicisation suits a liberal conception of citizenship, popular with the universalistic political left; the political right tends towards re-ethnicisation (2003, 432).

The citizenship discourse thesis put forward by Shafir and Peled (2002) makes a similar argument but emphasises differentiation between various groups within a given polity. In their study of identity and citizenship, Shafir and Peled show how access to rights and public resources is mediated through conceptions of citizenship, and not simply conferred by dint of formal status. The complex interactions and tensions between the liberal citizenship discourse (akin to Joppke's de-ethnicisation) and ethnonational citizenship discourse (re-ethnicisation), conveyed through cultural, political and discursive practices of competing groups, confer varying levels of legitimacy and incorporation on different populations within the state.

Joppke asserts that two additional conditions must be met in order that the liberal, de-ethnicised approach can flourish: the state must be de-coupled from nation-building; and there must be a political force willing to promote this approach. Moreover, he adds that states can

only de-couple from nation-building when state borders coincide with the nation's boundaries: 'Only then can a profoundly illiberal sense that the state is "owned" by a particular nation recede into the background, and the liberal-democratic imperative of integrating foreign migrant populations becomes more urgently felt' (2003, 437).

The modern State of Israel does not meet these conditions. Israel declares itself to be a Jewish state, whose *raison d'être* is the ingathering of Jewish people from around the world (Yiftachel 2006; Shafir and Peled 2002). While nation-building is not an overt objective today, it is still enshrined in laws that favour one ethnic group over others (Harpaz and Herzog 2018), in political practices that ensure disproportional distribution of public resources, and in cultural and political discourses that unequivocally assert the nation-state's ethnic character (Molavi 2013; Yiftachel 1999). Its identity, its national symbols and anthem, the calendar it uses and national holidays are all associated with Judaism (Jamal 2007; Ram 2009) – non-Jews have little part in this state ethos, and this is particularly true of Arabs, who have long been seen by Israel's Jewish citizens as enemies of the state. Israeli Arabs face discrimination on a personal level in the workplace and in the workforce in general (Haidar 2008). But discrimination goes much deeper, and is reflected in the lack of investment in and state support of services and infrastructure in Arab towns (Arar 2012), underfunded Arab education (Golan-Agnon 2006), and in a slew of laws which are discriminatory in practice (see for example the ACRI report on anti-democratic legislation).[3]

In 2013, the Supreme Court confirmed the strong relationship between the State and its Jewish citizens by rejecting the idea that there could be such a thing as an 'Israeli'. The court said the different 'nations' ('Jewish' or 'Arab') in Israel cannot be 'united' into one 'Israeli nation,' which would undermine Israel's Jewish character (Hovel 2013): the fact that Israel is constitutionally defined as 'Jewish' means an 'Israeli nation' cannot be acknowledged. In its submission to the court, the State Attorney's Office asserted that writing 'Israeli' on ID cards

even undermines the basis for the establishment of the State of Israel (Yoaz 2004). This basic orientation is accepted by the vast majority, including NGOs and philanthropic organisations associated with the liberal left such as the Abraham Fund, which works towards equality and coexistence between Arabs and Jews yet is committed to the idea of a Jewish state.[4]

Crucially, Israel still occupies territories conquered in 1967, whose inhabitants have not been granted citizenship; its vague sovereign borders clearly fail to coincide with the boundaries of 'the nation' as conceived by official Israeli discourse. Thus, as Shafir and Peled (2002) conclude, the liberal conception of citizenship is continually challenged by the ethnonational conception.

However, there is another force that powerfully promotes the liberal conception: a liberal, globalised capitalism which Israel has embraced very successfully (Ram 2008; Shafir and Peled 2000, 2002). In this contemporary iteration of capitalism, human capital and the ethos of *homo economicus* rule, shaping a neoliberal subject expected to sell themselves in the free market: 'neoliberal reason configures both soul and state as contemporary firms, rather than as polities' (Brown 2015, 27). This force is manifest in the neoliberal imperative to participate in the workforce, 'as the idea that the market is the best mediator of morality, social justice, and identity infiltrates the hegemonic ethno-national-cum-patriarchal logic of belonging' (Sa'ar 2015, 14). In her study of the workforce participation of Palestinian women citizens, Sa'ar (2015) argues that the drive towards diversity in the workforce is one expression of this imperative, emerging with the idea of economic citizenship, which she defines as 'the linking of civil entitlement and civil contribution to economic productivity' (2015, 14). Indeed, the state 'has become actively involved in a wide range of social economy projects [that support economic incorporation] that bring together agents from three main sectors: the state and municipal apparatuses, the business community, and grassroots social-change organizations' (2015, 17). Sa'ar also notes that organisations like the Jewish National Fund, historically active

in developing Jewish society in Palestine/Israel, are now involved in supporting such programmes (2015, 17). In other words, such actors now operate according to the premises of the liberal citizenship discourse. Economic citizenship, Sa'ar says, 'does not replace existing ideas of civic inclusion, which continue to give primacy to collective, ethno-national affiliation' (2015, 15), but she recognises the support it provides to the liberal conception of incorporation.

The Israeli hi-tech sector

One sector of the Israeli economy appears to epitomise the ideal of liberal incorporation, having shaken off the exclusionary shackles of the ethnonational conception of citizenship: the hi-tech sector. This sector is perceived to be Israel's 'growth engine' (Shtrasler 2017) and crucial to the country's self-identity (Senor and Singer 2009; Tawil 2015). In 2016, the sector employed some 300,000 people (Frenkel and Somfalvi 2016). Nonetheless, the sector was short of workers, and companies were relocating to India, China and elsewhere (Orbach 2017). Thus in 2017 a government programme was launched to train more people, especially in underrepresented groups including Israeli Arabs, women and Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews).

Attempts to integrate Arab citizens into the sector have received extensive positive media coverage in Israel. Politicians from across the political spectrum and heads of well-known hi-tech companies have made ambitious claims about how this will benefit Arab Israeli society and boost Israel's economy, supplying much-needed human capital to the sector (e.g. Bassok 2017; Bennett 2013; Ministry for Social Equality et al. 2016; Shtrasler 2017). The drive to integrate Israeli Arabs into the sector is supported by myriad initiatives and organisations rooted in the ethos of entrepreneurialism, creativity, individual self-fulfilment and the economy's urgent need for all three. These work to increase the integration of minorities, especially the educated, into the labour market, with a focus on hi-tech. Tsofen, for example,

aims to assist Arab citizens into this sector.[5] In doing so, it says, it will help integrate Israeli Arabs into civil society, and make Israel a more just and equitable society. It wants to tap the 'wealth of talent not utilized' and notes the economic implications of failing to reach this talent. *The Jewish Chronicle*, paraphrasing Tsofen's co-CEO, noted that increasing 'Arab women's stake in the start-up nation will not only help them and their families out of poverty, but will also help fill a drastic shortfall of engineers in the Jewish state' (Tabachnick 2016). Other initiatives include Hiya-Tech, a web-based technology forum for Arab women; AT-Link, set up to assist Arab citizens in networking, considered crucial to successful job hunting in hi-tech;[6] and Kif-el-Hal, a programme which distributes grants to increase Arab participation in this sector.

One such initiative, launched to great fanfare by then President Shimon Peres in 2011, is Ma'an-Tech (MFA 2011). This initiative, essentially a web-based service offering information, consultation and placement for Israeli Arabs in hi-tech, was a partnership with the private sector, involving leading Israeli and international hi-tech firms including Intel, Cisco, Microsoft, Oracle and Checkpoint. At the time, it was estimated that only 1% of hi-tech employees were Arab (by 2016, this had risen to about 3%; Frenkel and Somfalvi 2016).

At the launch, Peres noted the economic drive behind the initiative: 'I believe this initiative is not a philanthropic one, but rather a real economic need for the Israeli economy which is based on technology and hi-tech.' The initiative, he said, is 'good for the Arab sector, good for the country, good for the economy, and good for hi-tech companies' (MFA 2011). An Arab computer sciences student also spoke at the launch, supplying the 'Arab stamp of approval': 'I say to the Arab sector: "Give it your best shot and don't give up. If you believe in yourselves, you can make it happen"' (Etzion 2011).

Diversity is central to the rhetoric of individual creativity and talent – the 'human and cultural variety,' as the (then) economics minister put it. Israel, he said, is a state of immigrants:

'This is an advantage. It's what's so great about Israel, and even greater about our job market,' and he quoted research that 'proves' the economic advantages of diversity (Bennett 2013). The director of the Israeli Forum for Employment Diversity also noted the economic importance of diversity in encouraging creativity (Ben Yehuda 2012),[7] as did the chair of a leading Israeli corporation, the Strauss Group (Weisberg 2013c). After all, talent does not distinguish between race, religion or gender, as the economics minister said (Weisberg 2013c). The Intel director of corporate responsibility in Israel also noted Intel's agenda to increase diversity to boost creativity and productivity (Barmali 2014). Similarly, a report in 2013 from Kav Mashve, an organisation set up by prominent industrialist Dov Lautman to promote Arab participation in hi-tech by nurturing career development skills, emphasizes the importance of 'diversity' (Weisberg 2013b).[8] This is diversity not as 'private virtue' but as 'economic necessity' (Florida 2012: ix).

The drive to encourage Israeli Arabs to enter hi-tech is part of broader efforts to goad 'non-productive' populations to participate in the workforce. These efforts are relatively new: until recently, 'economic productivity has played almost no role in local mythologies of contribution. Instead, the most important determinant of Israeli citizenship has been national belonging, followed by contribution to the Jewish collective' (Sa'ar 2015, 15). The largest of these 'non-productive' groups are Israeli Arabs and Haredim – it has been estimated that by 2059, these two groups will constitute half the citizen population (Weisberg 2013a). Arab citizens comprise just 13.1% of the workforce though they constitute 20% of citizens and 18% of those of working age (Yashiv and Kasir 2013). Thus unemployment and poverty rates among Israel's Arab citizens are also high: some 53% live below the poverty line, meaning that around 40% of all Israeli citizens below the poverty line are Arab (Kav Laoved 2013). This situation troubles the government, as reflected by the Programme for Economic Integration of Arab Society drawn up in 2016 (Ministry for Social Equality et al. 2016).

The Ma'an-Tech launch emphasised the economic importance of integrating 'minorities':

> According to the Authority for the Economic Development of the Arab, Druze and Circassian Sectors in the Prime Minister's Office, the lost potential of the Israeli economy as a result of not implementing the potential workforce of Arab men and women totals NIS 31 billion ($8.39 billion) annually. (Etzion 2011)

In 2013, the newly-appointed Bank of Israel governor voiced similar concerns: 'The Arab population in Israel contains immense untapped potential from the standpoint of the Israeli economy's growth capability.' The integration of Arab citizens into the labour market, she said, 'is a very important, even essential, component of the Israeli economy's ability to continue to grow, and to support a higher standard of living for all Israelis' (Elis 2013). In 2013, the president of the Manufacturers Association and chair of the Coordinating Bureau of Economic Organisations said Israeli Arab society must be 'told' that work is the best option, implying that low rates of workforce participation was the Arabs' fault (Weisberg 2013c). In 2014, the prime minister defined the integration of Israeli Arabs in the workforce as one of that year's main challenges, and emphasized the economic benefits this would bring (Barmali 2014). The Abraham Fund,[9] which strives to promote equality and improve coexistence between Israeli Arabs and Jews, perceives Arab society's productivity and self-sufficiency as critical to Israel's future economic success.

Meritocracy in the service of ethnocracy

The themes most prominent in the discourse of 'Arab integration into hi-tech' are talent, merit and diversity. This is a discourse of meritocracy, intertwined with competition, the individualisation of responsibility for economic welfare, and equal opportunity assured through education. The increasing participation of this national minority in the top-end workforce is

held to be a quantifiable 'objective fact' indicating reduced inequality and therefore an unassailable public 'good'. Briefly, more Arab Israelis in hi-tech is considered progress; by implication it is also thought to reflect an enlightened social order which does not discriminate among citizens on the basis of ethnicity but on their own merits.

Meritocracy is a persuasive political ideal, linked conceptually to social mobility, equality of opportunity and social justice. As Littler (2013, 53) asserts, 'Today, in many countries across the global North, the idea that we *should* live in a meritocracy has become integral to contemporary structures of feeling: assumed by both right-wing and left-wing political parties, heavily promoted in educational discourse, and animating popular culture,' meritocracy as an idea has become politically uncontroversial. In the UK, Blairite New Labour claimed to be the party of meritocracy, and former Prime Minister Theresa May has extolled the idea, as have US presidents Obama and Trump (Littler 2018, 1). Other scholars measure society's 'progress' towards meritocracy (Breen and Goldthorpe 2001; Driessen, Sleegers and Smit 2008).

Nonetheless, meritocracy has also been widely critiqued. Allen (2012, 15) calls it a 'social technology' which delimits the ways in which we strive, a 'system of coercion that seeks to govern us through the manipulation of our hopes' (Allen 2012, 15). Amongst other things, the meritocratic discourse has been criticised for promoting a narrow definition of 'merit' and what is valued by society (Lister 2006, 234-5): what is 'valued' is what boosts capital accumulation. Indeed, Lister (2006, 234-6) suggests meritocracy undermines the very idea of equal worth among human beings: it creates inequality because of its 'winner takes all' tendency while legitimizing this inequality as a 'natural' outcome of innate abilities plus effort. Those at the 'bottom', who have failed to 'shine', are deemed to 'lack merit', and are therefore in a very tangible sense considered less worthy.

Thus meritocracy informs a 'psychologised' and individualised view of distinction as rooted in personal qualities (Gillies 2005), and is embraced by elites to justify their privileges (see Khan and Jerolmack 2013). Indeed, the meritocratic discourse is particularly appealing to the already-privileged: 'Thinking of the world as an open horizon (rather than, say, a stacked deck of cards) is consistent with the meritocratic frame: the world is yours; all that is required is hard work and talent' (Khan and Jerolmack 2013, 15). Thus too, meritocracy is entwined with the logic of free-market capitalism and entrepreneurialism. As one of its most vocal advocates put it, it promotes economic efficiency and social justice 'by allocating jobs to the able rather than the well-connected' (Woolridge 1995, 7). This is a very specific concept of social justice – one based on equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome. Indeed, meritocracy's appeal is based on 'procedural equality' and social mobility, considered to be symbolically crucial as inequalities increase (Reay 2013, 665).

From an entrepreneurial perspective, meritocracy is inclusive – a neoliberal invitation to participate, to take one's rightful place in a world of entrepreneurial individuals (Brown 2015; Littler 2018, 179-211; Santos 2017). Meritocracy embodies a view of the self as a 'constantly open site for the accrual of value that might potentially lead to the development of capital' (Gerard 2014, 876). Meritocratic principles make individuals responsible for social inequality – 'addressing inequality becomes "responsibilized" as an individual's moral meritocratic task' (Littler 2013, 66). Thus responsibility is foisted on the individual: 'the relationship between abilities and rewards has been deeply personalized' (Allen 2012, 5), and we are in competition with ourselves. Littler (2013, 53) goes further, asserting that contemporary meritocracy 'operates to *marketise the very idea of equality*'. Meritocracy has become 'a key ideological means by which plutocracy – or government by a wealthy elite – perpetuates itself through neoliberal culture' (Littler 2013, 53). It is an imperative to be merited,

to be valued (Skeggs 2011), to shape ourselves as individuals in order to climb the social ladder (Allen 2011).[10]

This is the individual progress being promised to Israel's Arab citizens, yet it conceals the continued prevalence of the ethnonational citizenship discourse not just in Israel as a whole but within this ostensibly neutral bubble of Israel's hi-tech industry. Particularly relevant to an ethnonational perspective is meritocracy's disciplining role. As Allen (2012) has it, at the same time as driving us, the meritocratic discourse also urges us to keep things in perspective. 'We require an *economic morality* in order to restrain our hopes. Practices of self-care, taught in schools, help ensure that aspiration drives efforts within acceptable channels of restraint; they help prevent self-loss and subsequent dissatisfaction with the global order' (2012, 15). The Arab student's call to 'give it your best shot' places responsibility for success on individual (Arab) shoulders: '[T]he ability to "believe in yourself"… is primary. This is a discourse which vests not only power but *moral virtue* in the very act of hope, in the mental and emotional capacity to believe and aspire' (Littler 2013, 65). This is personal aspiration as driver for social mobility (see Reay 2013, 663). But failure too must be dealt with on an individual level: thus the legitimacy of collective political channels for collective betterment are undermined. This view of success on an individual level is what makes it possible for government representatives who promote increased workforce participation to lump Haredim, Arabs and women together: seen from a meritocratic, individualist point of view, their 'problems' – the barriers to their participation – are identical.

Moreover, in its current form meritocracy 'is no longer a grand scheme of scientific repositioning. This form of highly administrative approach would entail a form of social engineering that is no longer seen as acceptable government practice' (Allen 2012, 15). Elites, who 'fear the label of "social engineer",' (Allen 2012, 13), thus have a legitimate reason to avoid (for example) positive discrimination. Thus Arabs remain underrepresented in many

sectors, despite government rhetoric that this should be remedied (Haidar 2008; Yashiv and Kasir 2013).

Among her criticisms of meritocracy, Littler (2013, 54) notes that its logic 'assumes that "talent" or "intelligence" is inborn from birth: it depends… on an essentialised conception of intellect and aptitude.' By implication, Jews have this intellect and aptitude – an idea that chimes with the hi-tech sector's self-image as a ground-breaking, creative showcase of the great Jewish brain (see Tawil [2015], who connects this 'excellence' to Israel's narrative of 'exceptionalism'). Arabs lack this aptitude, except for a few bright individuals who can be assisted into the fold. The situation of other Arabs is a 'natural' condition – a claim which resonates with Jewish Israeli perceptions of Arab society as backward and undeveloped (Yonah, Ram and Markovich 2010). Moreover, as meritocracy 'endorses a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which by definition people must be left behind' (Littler 2013, 54), it is 'natural' that Arab society as a whole remains 'backward' even though some individuals are able to pull themselves out of this backwardness. Indeed, meritocracy weakens solidarity because it offers individual progress only. It 'weakens community and the task of common betterment; and… "sweetens the poison of hierarchy" by offering growth through merit rather than birth whilst retaining a commitment to the very notion of hierarchy itself' (Littler 2018, 3, quoting Raymond Williams). Bringing Arabs into hi-tech has the added advantage of showing how 'we' do not prevent those 'who really can' from getting ahead. If the way is open for 'talented individuals' ('give it your best shot,' as the Arab student said) then charges of collective discrimination are negated.

Barriers to integration in the labour market are then identified only at the level of the individual. Kav Mashve, for example, identifies 'insufficient early career guidance; inadequate solutions for soft skills training; [and] lack of professional networks' as the main barriers to the integration of Arab degree-holders, along with 'prejudice' understood as an individual

characteristic.[11] Similarly, Tsofen 'aims to dramatically increase the participation of Arab engineers in the hi-tech industry, and to leverage this growth to advance the economic sustainability of Arab citizens of Israel, thus enhancing Israel's overall socio-economic wellbeing and creating a more just society.'[12] These are individual solutions to a collective problem, aiming for broad improvement ('creating a more just society') while skirting a root cause of these barriers to integration (the positioning of the Arab ethnic minority in this 'Jewish' state). When the president, at the Ma'an-Tech launch, claimed 'There is nothing in Israeli law that discriminates against Israeli Arabs. What discriminates against them is the economic gaps [i.e. socioeconomic disparities] and we must correct this discrimination' (MFA 2011), he was being doubly disingenuous: firstly by ignoring the discriminatory character of many Israeli laws *de facto* if not *de jure*,[13] and secondly by asserting that one *result* of discrimination – 'economic gaps' – is the cause.[14]

Littler (2013, 54) also critiques meritocracy's 'hierarchical ranking of professions and the status it endorses. Certain professions are positioned at the "top", but *why* they are there – and whether they *should* be there – tends to be less discussed.' This is particularly salient to the case of Israel's hi-tech, which is a *Jewish* industry, marketed as such and linked to the mythical Jewish genius (Senor and Singer 2009; Tawil 2015). Diversity is celebrated, because it is part of the new dynamism of innovation and progress: culture in this dynamic creative world is perceived as a personal resource, a personal attribute, to be used entrepreneurially to create economic value (Bodirsky 2012, 463). But it must be the right kind of diversity ('diversity, not difference'; Eriksen 2006), stripped of collective belonging and collective rights. In the context of migration discussed by Bodirsky (2012), migrants are expected to integrate – to contribute diversity but not difference – but in the context of Israel, those required to 'integrate' in hi-tech are formally citizens, albeit Arab: their belonging is predicated on their integration within a sector considered to be a showcase for Jewish genius and a symbol of the

'miracle' of the Jewish state. By 'bringing in' Arabs from outside, inviting them as it were to take part in this Jewish sector, in this more valued sector higher up the professional hierarchy, Arab being is again constituted as inferior: there is no 'Palestinian' hi-tech sector. *Individually*, Arabs can contribute to hi-tech diversity, but *collectively*, they remain 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 1987).

Similarly, meritocracy celebrates the culture of the upper echelons of the hierarchy: it validates 'upper-class values as norms to aspire to' and renders 'working-class cultures as abject' (Littler 2013, 55; Gillies 2005; Loveday 2015). When the move from the lower to the upper rungs of the ladder is a move from one ethnonational group 'into' another, the value and validity of the former is undermined. Put simply, 'better' is escaping the professions filled with Arabs and joining the Jewish hi-tech world. Clearly the high profits to be gleaned from hi-tech make it a (socially) valued sector, which is why the team of economists who forecast the growth of 'non-productive' populations recommended educational programmes to boost employment and productivity (Weisberg 2013a). Yet these same educational programmes are inadvertently liable to underscore the inferiority of 'Arab' culture: thus for example alongside 'culturally adjusted' entrance and psychometric exams there is an emphasis on Arabs learning Hebrew 'properly', in order to be integrated into the Jewish hi-tech sector (Ben Yehuda 2012). For Israeli Arabs in hi-tech, the price of performing as a 'subject of value' (Skeggs 2011, 506) is to a certain extent the abandonment of their Arabness.

Moreover, Israeli hi-tech is inextricably linked to the military: the skills and personal contacts made during military service are crucial for hi-tech professionals' careers (Swed and Butler 2015; Dover 2016; Shtrasler 2017). Arabs struggle to make these professional networks since they do not do military service (Frenkel 2016). In 2013, the (then) finance minister suggested that Arab citizens were not 'doing their bit' for the country because they do not serve in the army, and called on them to volunteer for the non-military option of national service

which would enable them to advance professionally (NRG 2013). Similarly, the director of the national service program noted the professional benefits of national service for Arabs, stressing its contribution to the development of good 'work habits' (Barmali 2014). These approaches imply that Arabs are responsible for their lack of professional contacts and good work habits. However, as Tawil (2015) notes, creativity in Israeli hi-tech is linked to security issues – military technologies and the close personal ties between military figures and hi-tech entrepreneurs (see also Swed and Butler 2015). As former enemies of the Jewish community in pre-Israel Mandatory Palestine, as 'cousins' of Palestinians under Israel's military regime in the occupied territories, and as (still) occasionally active opposers of the Jewish-Israeli state, Israeli Arabs are necessarily outside this military-hi-tech industry, for which they are anyway rarely granted security clearance – the finance minister was *not* calling on Arabs to join the army. Ghanem and Khatib assert that the military is 'Jewish' in an even more fundamental way, showing how Israel has 'linked the defence of its national security to defence of its Jewish character' (2017, 899). Arabs, then, are positioned as outside the creative Jewish 'us', as members of the amassed enemy at the gates, part of the larger 'Arab nation' Goliath that surrounds Israel's plucky David. The *military*-hi-tech industry is inaccessible to them, and thus important parts of the hi-tech industry are also inaccessible.

The drive to integrate educated members of minority groups into the high-end workforce is not limited to Arab citizens. 'Diversity' embraces other minorities such as Ethiopian Israelis (e.g. Olim Beyahad) and so-called Russians (immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their descendants).[15] 'Russians' in hi-tech have an easier time with greater wage increases over time than Ethiopians (Weisberg 2012) – skin colour seems to be an important factor in discrimination, though 'Russian' immigrants are also popularly perceived to be culturally closer to native-born Ashkenazi Israelis, i.e. the Israeli elites (Yonah, Ram and Markovich 2010). However, both 'Russians' and Ethiopians, as well as all other Jewish

immigrants, are distinguished from Israeli Arabs in that they fit into the discourse of 'Aliyah' – ideologically-driven Jewish immigration to Israel and the 'ingathering of the exiles', which excludes Arabs (see Shafir and Peled 2002). On a very fundamental level, Arabs do not belong in Israel as it is perceived by the (Jewish) majority of its citizens. Success in this Jewish sector, then, is even more a symbolic distancing from the Arab other, and thus – if the hi-tech employee is Arab – from her own society. Israeli Arab success in hi-tech means not only buying into the Jewish Israeli discourse of Jewish genius and abandoning an inferior being, but also entering a world which, suffused with these military links, 'cannot' be Arab.

Individual integration, collective exclusion

In sum, Israel's globalised economy feels the imperative to increase Israeli Arab participation in the workforce. This is a 'liberal' capitalist imperative, rooted in conceptions of the neoliberal *homo economicus* and drawing on a discourse of diversity and individual talent: a discourse of meritocracy. However, building on critiques that expose meritocracy as an ideological myth that obscures economic and social inequalities (Littler 2013, 55), this article claims that the meritocratic discourse can also provide a discursive 'cover' for the tension between economic integration and political exclusion of an ethnic minority within an ethnocracy. The meritocratic discourse, *de facto*, serves as a mechanism for settling these contradictory imperatives of integration and exclusion, as it enables the integration of Israeli Arabs in a way that most highly benefits a sector perceived to be the epitome of Jewish savvy, identified with the (Jewish) State of Israel, without being openly discriminatory yet avoiding any need to allow political inclusion or voice. It celebrates diversity while perpetuating a hierarchy that leaves 'Arab' professions unvalued, and reinforces myths of 'Jewish' progress and 'Arab' backwardness. According to the meritocratic discourse, meritocratic societies are 'open and fair, non-meritocratic ones are obscure and underhand' (Allen 2011, 368): if Israeli hi-tech is meritocratic, and believed to

showcase the best of Israel, it follows that Israel is open and fair – a discursive sleight of hand that screens institutional discrimination and political exclusion. Indeed, the meritocratic discourse effectively limits the range of rights considered legitimate for an ethnic minority: it celebrates inclusion, but includes individuals within a particular (capitalist) framework which determines the kinds of rights that may be demanded. This is especially significant for a minority whose channels for (collective) voice, such as political parties or labour organizations, are being increasingly suppressed.

Hi-tech capitalism in Israel is *not* indifferent to ethnicity, but plays on the trope of Jewish genius (Tawil 2015). The imperatives of liberal, globalised capitalism that support an individualised, liberal conception of citizenship have not (not yet?) weakened the institutional and discursive links between Israel's hi-tech sector and the Jewish state. Jewish citizens can thrive in this sector as 'talented individuals', unaware of the frameworks that support their success, and have no need to 'de-ethnicise' in order to succeed. So while the sector is de-ethnicising in rhetoric, and apparently opens the way to a de-ethnicised, territorial understanding of citizenship, it actually makes two demands on Palestinian Israelis that are not demanded of their Jewish counterparts: that they accept the liberal imperative of taking individual responsibility for personal welfare via participation in the workforce, and that they also accept the 'Jewish character' of Israel's hi-tech sector. This is a kind of double-pronged 'ethicalisation' (Baumann 2010) of citizenship – on an ethnic level and on the level of neoliberal 'individual responsibilisation'. If the liberalisation of naturalisation, the 'refusal to make cultural assimilation an individually tested prerequisite of citizenship acquisition' (Joppke 2003, 439), is a crucial element of de-ethnicised citizenship, then participation in the hi-tech sector cannot constitute de-ethnicised incorporation for Israeli Arabs.

Moreover, meritocracy resonates with the liberal discourse associated with the political 'left' and centre (Shafir and Peled 2000): it enables those inclined to do so to champion the

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cause of the collectively excluded (Arab citizens) without the risk of having to include them. But those leading the rhetoric of economic inclusion are also often on the political right, notably former economics and education minister Naftali Bennett and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – the same leaders who propagate an extreme Jewish nationalism who might, according to Jopkke (2003), be expected to oppose incorporation and support re-ethnicisation. The political right can support meritocratic inclusion of Israeli Arabs precisely *because* it is not emancipatory: it relieves fiscal pressures on the state through workforce participation yet does not undermine the state's ethnic character: economic incorporation 'represents the possibility of tamed, individualized Palestinians, who may be integrated into the state and the dominant Jewish society at minimal political and economic cost, and without shaking the ethnic status quo' (Sa'ar 2015, 19). In a broader sense, then, the discourse of meritocracy in an ethnocracy facilitates the settlement of the apparent contradiction discussed by others (e.g. Ram 2008) between rightwing capitalist requirements for inclusion and rightwing populist demands for ethnic purity, or between an open, globalized business worldview and a localized, nationalist politics. The former demands innovation and creativity born of diversity and individual talent, and is open to all; the latter aims to construct impermeable boundaries around the chosen ethnic group, and ensure public resources benefit this group above all others while emphasizing the eternal and unbreakable bond between this group and the nation state.

It should be emphasized that the article makes no claims about Israeli Arabs' personal experience in Israel's hi-tech sector; this requires further study in light of the assertion that moving into this Jewish terrain involves abandoning their Arabness, and in light of the discomfort among beneficiaries of social mobility revealed by other studies (e.g. Friedman 2016; Loveday 2014). The article explicitly wishes to avoid thinking of Israeli Arabs only in terms of 'suffering personhood' (Skeggs 2011, 502). Further study is required to investigate the extent to which an ethnic minority might challenge the meritocratic discourse from within

a particular 'mobility regime' (Gugushvili, Budoki and Goldthorpe 2017, 314) dominated by the ethnic majority. Moreover, degrees of incorporation differ even among Arab citizens which this article has not explored: for example, some 'Arabs' (particularly Bedouin and Druze) do serve in Israel's army, which increases their social capital, due among other things to the importance of military service in creating social networks and in gaining access to various jobs, and due to certain benefits linked to military service and 'security clearance' (see e.g. Kav Laoved 2013). This illustrates the continued importance of the republican ethos which mediates the relationship between citizens' duties and benefits (Shafir and Peled 2002) as well as the success of Israel's divide-and-rule approach to suppressing expressions of Arab nationalism. Of course, there are also very significant differences between Arab citizens and non-citizen Palestinians subject to Israel's military occupation (indeed, a study from 2010 suggests that for Jewish citizens, citizenship is an important factor in legitimising claims on public resources even when those citizens are not Jewish; Raijman 2010). Nonetheless, we should be wary of the moral gratification of seeing individual progress which fails to change underlying ethnic inequalities of political power, social relations and distribution of public goods.

To conclude, it must be stated clearly: this article is not arguing 'against' the integration of Israeli Arabs in hi-tech, nor against the reported increase of Arab presence in various public spaces such as the media and public companies (see for example reports from the civic equality NGO, Sikkui).[16] But we need to examine more critically what this 'presence' may mean, and understand how a particular discourse, ostensibly transparent and anti-discriminatory, can obscure wider inequalities. The argument presented here poses a clear challenge to the idea of hi-tech as an apolitical space by underlining the ethnocratic context of Israeli meritocracy: this is not an 'integrative enclave' (Sorek 2003) where an ethnic minority and ethnic majority can come together as citizens within a protected space of equality. While it may be true that 'the liberal [citizenship] discourse remains the only channel for Arabs in Israel to be accepted as

citizens and gain access to resources' (Sorek 2003, 444), this individualist liberal discourse cannot be separated in practice from the collective and exclusive ethnonational citizenship discourse because, as the article has shown, ostensibly liberal spaces are infused with ethnonational meaning.

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[1] Israel's Palestinian citizens are known by various terms, each with its political baggage and adherents. See Levy (2005) for a critique of the term 'Israeli-Arab'.

[2] This is not the place to discuss the social construction of ethnic categories; the article uses the categories 'Jewish' and 'Arab' as commonly understood by Israeli Jews, as essentially mutually exclusive (see e.g. Peled 1998).

[3] Association of Civil Rights in Israel report, available at: http://www.acri.org.il/en/category/democracy-and-civil-liberties/anti-democratic-legislation/.

[4] https://www.abrahamfund.org/mission_statement

[5] http://tsofen.org

[6] https://www.meetup.com/ATLinkForum/

[7] http://diversityisrael.org.il/

[8] http://www.kavmashve.org.il/

[9] https://www.abrahamfund.org/

[10] The concept of meritocracy has a long history (see Allen 2011; Littler 2018). This article discusses only a specific, contemporary perspective linked to the neoliberal subject (Brown 2015).

[11] See www.kavmashve.org.il/english, 'About Us.'

[12] See www.tsofen.org/about-us/

[13] See endnote 6.

[14] This is not to say that discrimination is the *only* cause of socioeconomic disparities.

[15] http://www.olim-beyahad.org.il/

[16] http://www.sikkuy.org.il/?lang=en

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