Abstract: This article is based on a months-long investigation and aims to contribute to the scientific understanding of the process of racialisation of the sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia. The starting point of our research was the speech given by the Tunisian president, Kais Saied, in February 2023. In the light of new negotiations with the EU for technical, administrative, and financial support in the management of migration in the Mediterranean, the president emphasised the importance of Tunisia being and remaining Arab and Muslim. The sub-Saharan migrants who have penetrated the Mediterranean area in large numbers, mostly via Libya or Algeria, are black. Many of them are also Christians. The Tunisian case regarding the racialisation of migrants is similar to the dynamics of political discourses and actions of systemic racialisation in European countries. Our thesis is that racialisation based on religion and/or skin colour is part of a more complex dynamic, defined by the capitalist mode of production, which, due to its inner contradictions, simultaneously requires and expels human labour force. We claim that the permanently expelled constitute surplus populations that are, due to not being disciplined by the capitalist markets, considered dangerous, which is why they fall under police jurisdiction. This process of policing surplus populations is what constitutes contemporary systemic racism as a special mode of state politics, whereby “race” is the result of said process and not determined by its biological, religious, ethnic, or cultural characteristics. We support our thesis by a fieldwork study consisting of qualitative interviews with Tunisian experts, conducted based on purposive sampling and subsequent qualitative coding, as well as of three personal narrative interviews, which were conducted with sub-Saharan migrants from Cameroon, who had been living in a refugee “village” in the north of Tunisia for more than a year.

Keywords: black Christians; Sub-Saharan Africans; religion; surplus populations; systemic racism; post-fascism; migrations; Tunisian case

1. Introduction

The issue of migrations worries the Tunisian and the wider public in Tunisia for various reasons, including the following: Firstly, Tunisia has already experienced major migrations during the civil war in Libya; and secondly, Tunisia has, in the last decade, been dealing with a significant increase in the illegal emigration of Tunisians and citizens of third countries via overseas refugee routes, which has been linked to many accidents at sea that have left many refugees and migrants dead and/or missing. Since 2014, however, it has also recorded an increase in the number of Sub-Saharan migrants and refugees, which has resulted in the increase of xenophobic and racist acts. According to data provided by Ben Khalifa and Mabrouk, the number of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia has tripled from 7000 to 21,400 between 2014 and 2021 (Ben Khalifa and Mabrouk 2023, p. 92). Due to the greater influx of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, the Tunisian president, Kais Saied, convened a meeting of the National Security Council on 21 February 2023. His speech on this topic, which was published online, ignited discussions, which largely characterised him as a xenophobe and racist and accused him of an anti-Black campaign.
summarised and analysed the presidential speech, in which the president claimed that there had been a criminal arrangement since the beginning of this century in order to change the demographic composition of Tunisia, thereby making the country “a purely African country with no affiliation with the Arab and Islamic nations” (Parikh 2023). To this statement, the president added that it is necessary to put an end to illegal immigration, mainly because “hordes of immigrants” from sub-Saharan Africa still carry out violence and resort to criminal acts. The president’s statement triggered many violent reactions towards sub-Saharans among the Tunisian population and fuelled the fear of losing the “Arab Muslim” identity as a consequence of becoming too African based on the “great sub-Saharan replacement” (Parikh 2023).

Our previous research on the attitude of the (European) public towards the issue of migration during the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016 (Zalta 2018, 2020) has pinpointed an increase of Islamophobia, especially towards those refugees who fled to the European continent from predominantly Muslim areas (Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey). We emphasised the importance of religious illiteracy and problematic political discourses, which abuse the ignorance of religious heterogeneity and the specifics of world (including religious) conflicts to score political points and to spread hatred towards migrants. In order to better understand this phenomenon, we introduced the concept of new racism, which, unlike biological racism, introduces a discourse based on cultural differences and on differences between value systems that arbitrarily distinguish between “civilised” and “inferior barbaric, undemocratic.” (Jalušić 2015, p. 30). The usage of metaphors to distinguish between “our” world, which is normal, acceptable, domestic, and logical, and the world of “others”, which is presented as the antipode of all of the above, is a manipulation that enables the reduction of religions, cultures, ethnicities, etc., to stereotypes that germinate mainly in times of deep uncertainty as a result of war, imperialism, migration, or some other sudden changes (Said 2003, p. 75). In our present research case, it is not Islamophobia, but the so-called Afrophobia, even Christianophobia to some extent, but the mechanism is very similar, so they can be studied in a similar way.

Therefore, analysing the attitude that generates this racist rhetoric is of key importance. This is the only way to understand how and on what basis are collective memories transmitted and how are racist policies integrated into conflicts in the region and beyond. The reduction of identity to a purely religious and/or ethnic is problematic, since it could be used as a part of racist discourses which regard members of a certain religious and/or ethnic community as a monolith. At the same time, reductionist religious identification can be abused in a political–nationalist discourse, namely by introducing a religious and/or national essence, which reductively defines national identity, and which leaves at the door all who do not belong to this marker. Yet the question of religion is a part of a much more complex process of racialisation and racism as a form of management of excess (surplus) populations.

Based on what has been said, we defend the thesis that racialisation based on religion, ethnicity, and/or skin colour is a part of a more complex dynamic, defined by the capitalist mode of production, which, due to its inner contradictions, simultaneously requires and expels human labour force. Those permanently expelled constitute surplus populations that are considered dangerous and fall under police jurisdiction. This process of policing surplus populations is what constitutes contemporary systemic racism as a special mode of state politics, whereby race is the result of said process and not determined by its biological, religious, ethnic, or cultural characteristics. We support our thesis by a fieldwork study, which consists of qualitative interviews with Tunisian experts, conducted based on purposive sampling, and subsequent qualitative coding, as well as of three personal narrative interviews, which were conducted with sub-Saharan migrants from Cameroon, who had been living in a refugee “village” in the north of Tunisia for more than a year.
2. The Arbitrariness of Race and the Process of Racialisation

Race was historically conceived outside the early European capitalism, in a process of colonial conquest and plunder that, while not directly part of the emerging capitalism, was its necessary pre-condition (Gerstenberger 2022, pp. 37–110). Conceptually, race was a by-product of the dark side of the Enlightenment. As modern, scientific rationality replaced earlier religious cosmologies, the myth of the common origin of humanity, which, before the Enlightenment, had not been divided into (biologically determined) races but according to religious affiliation instead, was also abolished. Of course, both slavery and colonial expansion existed long before capitalism, but before capitalism, they were not justified by appealing to science and the biological differences between people (Goldner 2010a).

This pseudoscientific justification of differences between people invented the concept of race as consisting of empirically verifiable biological differences between people. Those who had been racially designated were reduced to animality—they were slaves and unfree labourers, who might have been wage-earners but could not freely sell their labour power, meaning they were personally dependent on their employers (Goldner 2010b). From the very beginnings of capitalism, race (or racism as a process of social attribution of race) has been a form of social domination that was tied to the relationship between the inside and the outside of capitalist society. In other words, race designates those who are outside and socially excluded. This division is not so much (or at least not entirely) geographical as it is social. From the perspective of relations of social domination, those who are racialised are those who are (partially or completely) outside the capital relation, i.e., those who are not directly involved in either social production or reproduction (Chen 2013).

Contrary to the biological definitions of race, according to which certain biological characteristics of particular “races” determine their “culture”, it is, in fact, the other way around—a form of social domination, based on (partial or total) exclusion from relations of social production (and reproduction), imposes a certain culture of life and work on certain skin colours. What is crucial for understanding the workings of racial segregation under capitalism is not the link between biology and society, but the one between the logic of social exclusion and domination that attaches itself to distinctions based on skin colour and other biological characteristics (Robinson 2021). The link between race as a relation of social domination and the biological characteristics to which it is attached to is relatively elastic—just as individual black people can break into the world of wage labour, so too can white people slip into poverty and total social exclusion, thereby becoming part of a race. For example, the Irish were, during the historical period of the Industrial Revolution when they were poor and socially excluded, considered a separate race (Nelson 2012), but they later rejoined the world of whiteness. On the other hand, for example, the Spanish in Europe, where they are socially included, are considered part of the white race, while Spanish-speaking people in the USA are considered as a separate, non-white race. The production and reproduction of race are not necessarily always linked to biological differences—cultural characteristics can take their place, like in the case of the “racialisation” of Muslims in today’s EU (Zalta 2018; Zalta 2020). Race is not a thing, but a social relation.

Seeing race as an “identity” and racism as a set of subjective reactions to this “identity” confuses cause and effect. Biological differences between different groups of people exist, of course—in the colour of hair, eyes and skin, in the shape of faces. But these differences do not in themselves constitute particular “races”, nor do they explain violent and exclusionary attitudes towards social groups with a particular skin colour or facial shape. Without taking into account the workings of systemic racism, we cannot explain why certain physical differences (as well as ethnic or religious differences) may condemn people to police violence, the risk of deportation, social and political exclusion, while other differences (such as the size of ears) are not socially relevant and are barely, if at all, noticed (Wilderson 2010).

To further illustrate this point, consider the case of racism in the USA. There, modern racism began with slavery. Slaves, having been brought from Africa, were clearly distinguished from the majority population by the colour of their skin. But it was slavery, i.e., the social relation, not the colour of the skin, that was decisive for the formation of American
It was not a mass psychological reaction to the radical strangeness of Africans and their dark skin that led to slavery; on the contrary, it was slavery that produced black people as inferior. The hatred, violence, and contempt for black people was not triggered by their skin colour as such, but only inasmuch their skin colour was a “material carrier” of racist social relations. As far as slavery in the USA was concerned, the key social difference was not so much the material, biological difference between whites and blacks, but the difference between slaves and free people—the ideological and institutional construction of a supposed black inferiority meant the ideological “translation” of this difference into a racial one (Hartman 1997).

The arbitrariness of race—i.e., that race is not the primary, natural, or biological essence of racism, but its product or result—becomes even more apparent when we move from the American context, where race-as-social-difference is, due to the history of slavery, more closely attached to skin colour, to the European one, where the lines of racial division are much more fluid and unstable. In the history of European racism, the fact that race is a relation of social exclusion and segregation, which can be arbitrarily attached to any biological or cultural differences, is even more obvious.

Although racism was historically conceived in biological terms, contemporary (systemic) racism is no longer based (exclusively) on biological differences. Instead, it is in many cases based on (real or invented) cultural differences, which are, such as in the treatment of Muslim migrants in the EU, used in the same way as skin colour or the shape of the face was used in the originary biological racism(s)—as markers of social and political exclusion. The basic mechanism of systemic racism thus remains the same regardless of whether the markers of social and political exclusion are biological or cultural.

Let us now turn to the Tunisian case, which is especially interesting since it combines the elements of both, biological (black) as well as cultural (Christian) racism. The problematic speech of the Tunisian president, who racialised sub-Saharan migrants and called them Africans, postulates the idea of a homogenous category that negates the individual specificities of the subjects, their ethnic, religious, political belonging, but at the same time raises the question of how Tunisia understands itself and other North African countries. Does Tunisia belong to the Middle East or the Muslim Maghreb? Since Tunisia is geographically a part of Africa and therefore Tunisians are also geographically African, we will be interested in how and why the racialisation of sub-Saharan migrants occurs. If the problem of the socially constructed Maghreb is a colonial formation, does the colonised become the coloniser (Fanon 1986, pp. 83–108) in the case of the Tunisian attitude towards the sub-Saharans as well? Can we detect the copying the implementation of the European (Western) racialisation of migrants?

3. Methods

We conducted the first round of our investigation between July and August 2023. During the first phase, we conducted 11 in-depth or qualitative interviews with Tunisian experts, sociologists, journalists, activists, teachers and professors, as well as an in-depth interview with a migration expert from Guinea. We used purposive or judgmental sampling, which means that the experts were chosen on purpose, because they were judged to possess the knowledge and characteristics that we needed to obtain the best information to achieve the study’s objectives. Five interviews were conducted in person and six online via Zoom. We anonymised all interviewees.

The description of the expert sample is as follows: We interviewed 11 Tunisians, of whom 9 were men, 2 were women, while the average age was 46 years. Each interviewee had obtained a degree in higher education, of which the majority were sociologists (five), one anthropologist, two lawyers, and one pharmacist. The rest merely confirmed that they had obtained university education. Two experts held PhDs. Six experts came from Tunis, two from Nefta/Tozeur, and three from Sfax, Siliana, Hammamet, respectively. Other experts included a representative of the L’Observatoire national des droits de l’homme (The National Observatory for Human Rights) and two university professors with expertise in
migration. As a special expert, we also interviewed an activist from Guinea (man, 35 years old, highly educated, lived in Tunisia for 15 years, first as a student before working in various organisations for the protection of migrants).

Three sets of questions covered the following topics:

1. What does it mean to be a Tunisian? (personal, narrative part of the interview)
2. The role of Islam in Tunisian Society (expert interview).
3. How to understand the attitude of Tunisians to Sub-Saharan (expert interview).

4. Results

Purposive sampling and qualitative coding analysis were carried out in batches. The first narrative part of the interview sought a personal understanding of Tunisian identity. According to the qualitative coding, six of the interviewees understood the Tunisian identity as an amalgam or interweaving of different civilisations and cultures as follows:

- Tunisians are not only Muslims and Arabs; they are also Berbers (Amazigh), etc. They are connected by tradition and customs, common history, archaeology.
- The Tunisian identity is a fusion of different identities—Ottoman, Islamic, Arab, Italian, French, Lebanese, African.
- The Tunisian identity is not a Muslim Arab identity. It is a mixture of Mediterranean identity. What it means to be Tunisian is a matter of politics. Politics creates identity. During the Olympic Games in 1967, a Mediterranean, African, and international identity was formed. The question of Muslim identity is more contemporary. Why and when does this become important? It is a populist discourse that suits the people—being popular, instrumentalisation of identity, manipulation of identity.

Four pointed out that the identity is tied to the territory or to the state, and two of these individuals answered intersectionally, connecting the identity with the territory, and with and Islam as a political factor:

- Identity is homeland, pluralism in the religious-ethnic sense, civilisation of history.
- Tunisians are mostly Muslim. Islam is more politics than religion. We are very open towards the West, so we do not have excessive Islamic accents. The economic and political situation shows that we are under the influence of colonialism and do not want to accept changes.
- There is no identity; there are strategic identities. Tunisian identity is a territorial identity.

Two interviewees explicitly linked the Tunisian identity with Islam, and Islam with morality:

- Tunisian identity means belonging to the country. Islam is no longer as important a part of identity as it once was. The traditional role of Islam in society has declined and, with it, morals in society have declined.
- Islam is a fundamental element of Tunisian identity; 95% are Muslims, so they have the morals of Muslims.

The second expert topic dealt with the role of Islam in Tunisian society. According to the answers, it is obvious that Islam remains a key element of integration, cooperation, and definition of the Tunisian identity. The qualitative coding of the answers showed that Islam is indeed a constitutive part of Tunisian society, but it is primarily a measure of cultural belonging, not (only) believing.

- Islam is one of the constitutive foundations. But there are many Islam—different practices and ways of thinking.
- Islam is more than a religion. It is a connecting element (glue), as it determines ways of behaviour, habits, is a source of morals and values, connects families, reanimation of relationship (if families or family members are at odds, the celebration of Islamic holidays connects them).
- Islam is part of Tunisian culture. Tunisians are not very religious, but this is their way of life—socialisation. However, they do not pray as much as Arabs in other cultures.
It is in the Tunisian constitution that we are Muslim, but this does not constitute a specific identity. We are trying to modernise the country and separate religion from the state, but, for once, we have failed.

- Islam is one of the factors in the formation of Tunisian identity. It defends a just society. Maliki Islam—no fanaticism in it.

The third section examined how to understand the attitude of Tunisians towards sub-Saharan in light of the president’s speech. Qualitative coding of the answers, based on the experts’ answers, highlighted the intersection of racism with the increasing size of the population:

- They do not want to see too many blacks because they think they would become criminals. It is a matter of security. There is not enough food and resources for everyone.
- As the numbers rise, Tunisians become fearful of filth, beggars, crime. Migrants work for little money and are competition for Tunisians.
- Sub-Saharan want to stay in Tunisia because the situation for women is better than in sub-Saharan Africa. But sub-Saharan do not have the same culture and values. It is a problem for many Tunisians. They are without food and without money in Tunisia. Tunisians cannot help them either because of the economic crisis. Sub-Saharan migrants need labour laws to help them work in Tunisia. For 2000 students from sub-Saharan Africa, there is no problem because they have a scholarship.
- Tunisians are racist towards blacks, sub-Saharan. Tunisians are very rigid; they do not want their daughters to marry a sub-Saharan. They are also racist towards homosexuals and towards the poor, destitute, and abandoned. Education, culture, political system is to blame for this. We are a very rigid society based on religion and family. Everything is: “This is *haram*”.
- Racism against sub-Saharan is propaganda, because we have many Tunisians who are black. The problem is the working rights for sub-Saharan—they are paid less; they do not have regulated contracts. We, Tunisians, are experiencing an economic breakdown and are looking for reasons why we are suffering, so we use the rhetoric that migrants are to blame. The country is under pressure, the economy is collapsing, the president made a mistake in his speech, but he does not repeat this rhetoric.
- When the number of Sub-Saharan Africans increases, people become racist. If the number was lower, people would help.

The example emphasised that the refugees from Syria are Muslims. When there were fewer refugees from Syria, Tunisians gave them food, money, and a place to live. But when the number of refugees increased, that changed, even though they were Muslims and Arabs from Syria. It is clear from the answer that the differences between Muslim and non-Muslim refugees, or the differences in religious affiliation and differences in skin colour, were nullified when the number of refugees exceeded a critical number.

During the second round of research undertaken in February and March 2024, we conducted in-depth narrative interviews in person in Tunisia with three refugees from Cameroon—M (M, 18), N (M, 25), O (M, 29). All of them were Christians with secondary education in technical fields. They had been living in the countryside in the north of Tunisia, in tents, for a year and a half. According to them, there were more than 50,000 sub-Saharan, including children and women in the camp. Many women had been raped in the fields outside of the camp. Everyone wants to go to Europe, but they do not have the money for a trip that costs thousands of Euros.

- Tunisians call us Africans. They spit after me. They hold their noses when they see me on the bus. We are like garbage. (M)
- They call us Africans. It is difficult to stay in Tunisia. We get stopped by the police all the time. We cannot arrange a residence permit. (N)
- Water, which costs 1 dinar, is sold to us in some shops for 1.30 dinars. Because we are Africans. (O)
It is precisely in the answers regarding their search for jobs that racism against Christians is revealed:

- We are trying to find work to survive. Illegal work in construction, etc. They pay us less than the Tunisians. For example, they pay us, instead of 7 days, 4 days. If we want to protest, they say they will report us to the police. (N)

- We have to change our names to get work. Everyone who can give us work asks us if we are Muslims. If you are a Muslim, you can work, if you are a Christian, they do not give us work. They do not want to work with Christians. (M)

- Double racism because we are black and because we are Christians. (O)

- I lost my job twice for saying I was a Christian. Now, I say I am Muslim because I need a job. They need us for heavy work. But if they find out that we are Christians, they do not give us hard work either (M).

Additional answers confirmed our theoretical position, that the poor “migrant” or the “refugee” becomes a depersonalised category of excess that needs to be gotten rid of. They no longer have their own names and values; instead, they are just a burden, a toxic category. Even an interaction with them is punishable, as can be seen from the following:

- When the police arrive, some friendly Tunisians (locals) warn us to run because the police are chasing migrants and contacting us is also illegal. If the police see that the Tunisian gave me bread, they may have a problem (M).

- Despite the fact that I had a document that I was a refugee, the policeman had me arrested (O).

5. Surplus Populations and Capitalist Mode of Production

Based on the obtained answers, our thesis is that neither the colour of the skin nor person’s religious affiliation causes the original racialisation, but both are the result of the racialisation of the surplus population dictated by the capitalist mode of production.

The basic aim of the capitalist mode of production is the accumulation of capital for accumulation’s sake, the unlimited and infinite increase of surplus value. The production of surplus value also implies the use of human labour power, but the contradictory internal dynamics of capitalist development are currently leaving more and more people on the sidelines due to increasing automation and financialisation. The expanded reproduction of capital can thus go hand in hand with a contraction of social reproduction, where an increasing proportion of people are no longer engaged in wage labour and constitute not just a classical “reserve army” of labour, but a completely redundant population (Endnotes 2010).

This surplus population, which remains at the margins or completely outside of the capitalist social development (Davis 2006, pp. 174–98), is the specifically capitalist social form of race, i.e., the social form produced by capitalism itself, and is not anachronistic remnant of the pre-capitalist social formations or the result of prejudice, but an objective social relation of domination and segregation. Racial minorities are outside the (formal) wage relation but are nevertheless formally determined by capital (Chen 2013). Indeed, the racially designated are no less existentially dependent on their access to money for their livelihoods than the proletarians, except that, unlike the proletarians, they have neither direct access to free wage labour nor to indirect forms of state-organised social welfare (the social wage).

The relationship between contemporary forms of racism and the capitalist mode of production is thus not direct. Race is a human “residue” that capitalism cannot or will not absorb productively. Since, under capitalism, the aim of social production is not the fulfilment of human needs but the accumulation of profit, capitalist societies will always (and especially in times of crisis) include people that are economically redundant. Capitalism does not strive toward full employment or material well-being of all (Heinrich 2012, pp. 127–35). On the contrary, it strives for profitable use of both capital and labour power, which means that, due to technological innovation, crises or other unpredictable factors, a part of humanity is always surplus to requirements. Race represents that part of
the total population, which is permanently economically (and therefore socially) redundant. Thus, contemporary systemic racism is a process of economic and social exclusion and simultaneously a result of segregational state management of a redundant and excluded population (SIC 2015).

Excluded from the formal economy, surplus populations are left with the informal economy and crime to survive. Since race is not part of the normal processes of social production and reproduction, it automatically becomes not only a social problem but, above all, a political one. Since race, unlike the working class, is not privately managed through capital, the state takes control over it. And because it is not subject to the mute compulsion of market relations (Mau 2023), direct, overt violence is used to manage race and to discipline racial antagonisms (Chen 2013).

Take the U.S. for example, where the increasing rate of incarceration and the increase in the severity and repressiveness of the prison apparatus and the powers and violence of the police are directly linked to the shrinking access to wage labour, the precarisation of existing wage labour, and the shrinking of social rights and the social wage. Contrary to the ideology of the “lean state”, the power, authority, and scope of the state increased in the neoliberal period, especially in its repressive dimension (Harcourt 2011)—what decreased was only the scope of its social dimension. At the same time, legal definitions of crime were tightened—many misdemeanours are now treated as felonies and many activities typical of life in metropolitan ghettos are newly criminalised. At some point, prisons in the U.S. became a special type of social housing, which is not a cynical observation, but a realistic description of the state’s priorities over the last three decades, when investment in social housing is almost non-existent, while new prisons are being built all the time. The way of life of a race at the margins of society is being criminalised, subjected to constant policing, and largely relegated to prisons (Wacquant 2009).

This new race, unlike the early capitalist slaves and colonised peoples, is in fact a capitalist race, or a form of race that corresponds to advanced capitalism. Such a social form of race is produced and managed by state violence and repression. The exclusion of race from social production, and its separation from access to wage labour, is not absolute; however, wage labour that is accessible to race is unfree. Race can only be incorporated into wage labour in ways that do not fit the classical definition of the “double freedom” of the worker (Heinrich 2012, pp. 90–93), i.e., as forced labour or new forms of slavery (Brass 2009).

However, as Heinrich (2012, p. 13) also pointed out, the capitalist mode of production does not exhaust the whole of capitalist society, and neither is the rest of capitalist society determined by its economy in any linear and/or mechanical way. In our case, this means that capitalist mode of production also produces surplus populations, but how they are treated depends on historical, cultural, and political factors and does not follow directly from capitalist economy as such. On the other hand, surplus populations can be produced by factors other than capitalist economy, for example, by displacement or caused by war, but are still later treated in a similar systemic racist way as if they were produced by a capitalist economy. Our point is thus not that contemporary systemic racism is “derived” from capitalist economy, but rather that capitalist economy plays a part in it inasmuch it produces surplus populations.

To now turn to the management of the surplus population in the EU. The increase in precarity, poverty, and unemployment following neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s also meant tighter policing of migrants, stricter segregation of ethnic minorities, and increasing marginalisation of the already fragile and meagre livelihoods of the socially excluded. This is similar to the U.S., where, in the wake of the neoliberal turn, the repressive apparatuses of the state reacted to the crisis by criminalising poverty and the informal economy, intensifying police repression and filling prisons with black people. Today’s EU is also tightening its border and migration policies as well as policing methods to manage its surplus population, accompanied by propaganda campaigns about “refugee crises” and racial threats (Zorn 2006). We thus defend the thesis that systemic racism—which the EU
also implements in the North African strategic partnerships—as a process of political and police management of the excess population and that it became more severe especially after the period of crisis and austerity measures in the 2010s.

As surplus and thus racially designated populations are excluded from direct access to formal wage employment in contemporary capitalism, they are also not subject to the automatic disciplining effects of the labour market. Since they are also not full citizens, the management of the surplus populations falls under the purview of the repressive apparatuses of the state. In concrete terms, this means confinement in both ordinary prisons as well as in immigration detention centres; police surveillance and harassment; urban segregation; and the denial of access to political and social rights that are reserved for the “productive” part of the population. With no direct access to either individual or social wages (in the form of social transfers), socially and economically excluded and racially designated people have to support themselves through unfree forms of work, undocumented work, servitude, or the grey/black economy (Chen 2013). The key dimensions of state or systemic racism are the criminalisation and control of these activities internally and the control of borders and migrant flows externally.

The role of Tunisia in the EU external migration policy has a long tradition. According to Vasja Badalić, since the late 1990s, “the EU has sought to outsource “migration management” to third countries in order to prevent irregular migrants, including asylum seekers, from reaching EU territory” (Badalić 2018, p. 86). On 16 July 2023, Tunisia and the EU concluded yet another strategic partnership to prevent illegal migration. According to the so-called Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the EU and Tunisia, Tunisia should receive 105 million euros to prevent illegal migration by strengthening the Tunisian coast guard, which would prevent illegal migration by sea with the help of additional surveillance boats equipped with thermal cameras. Therefore, the Memorandum is about so-called border management, even though there remains ambiguity as to who this agreement should be implemented, “since the agreement was signed “with no human right conditions in place, no assessment or monitoring of its human rights impact, and no mechanism to suspend cooperation in case of abuse” (Tamma 2023). European critical media and activists have accused the EU of not having learned anything from the case of EU cooperation with Libya. This cooperation encompassed EU’s support for the Libyan security forces, which made it complicit in violence against migrants and refugees, including rape, beatings, forced deportations, illegal killings, and arbitrary detention.

6. Discussion: (European) Systemic Racism and/as State Racism

In February 2024, we conducted an in-depth expert interview via the Zoom application with an activist from Guinea, who lived in Tunisia for 15 years, where he had studied and participated in various organisations for the protection of migrants.

According to him, the violence against sub-Saharan is a consequence of racists’ speech, propagated by the media. In his opinion, EU’s pressuring of Tunisia to curb migrant flows has led to an increase in racism. Additionally, Tunisia’s government is strained by the thousands of refugees, which resulted in the government’s xenophobic or racist reactions, which are, in turn, the result of EU’s economic and technical aid, e.g., many black Africans are being arrested on the street. The interviewee specially emphasised that racism towards sub-Saharan in Tunisia depends on material conditions, as follows:

- If sub-Saharan are wealthy, regularly enrolled in schools or enter Tunisia with a work visa, racism is not pronounced. But if they are poor refugees, they are subject to police violence and the National Guard, who do not care whether they die at sea or are pushed to the borders of Algeria and Libya.
- Only political refugees can go to Europe because they have their documents. The official position of the Italian government is not realistic. It is the mafia that regulates the passage of refugees. 6000 euros per refugee. The mafia is stronger than the state. The mafia coordinates with the Libyans.
As we have already mentioned, racism is not a matter of personal psychology or prejudice, but of certain institutional arrangements and segregational social processes. Racism is, contrary to theories that reduce it to individual (or mass) psychology or ideology, in reality, a state policy of denial of rights and consequent political and social exclusion of certain sections of the population. This is not to say that hatred and prejudice against refugees, migrants, and foreigners does not exist. However, they are not the starting point or motivation for racism, but rather its result. Racism is a set of institutionalised practices of social segregation and exclusion, whereby race is not the starting point but the result.

Racism is therefore, in contemporary capitalism, always state racism. It defines and maintains both internal (who, under what circumstances, and to what degree deserves citizenship status and access to regular employment) and external borders. In the more concrete case of the EU, however, the situation is somewhat more complex, as border and migration policies are not entirely determined by individual states but are determined at a supranational level.

In order to understand the way systemic racism is formed, both at the level of individual states and at the supranational level of the EU, we first need to take a short detour through the general theory of the capitalist state. What is the relationship between the state and capital? First, for capitalist relations of production to exist at all, the state must enforce and uphold the rule of law as a general, and objective legal framework. More concretely, the state must protect private property and guarantee legal freedom (the freedom to dispose of one’s own private property) and equality (everyone has access to the market, and the exchange that takes place there is an exchange of equivalents). Concrete class domination can only be established on the basis of abstract legal freedom and equality, while such abstract freedom and equality can only be enforced by a political instance separate from individual private interests—the bourgeois state (Pashukanis 2003). Of course, any given capitalist state does much more than establishing and protecting the legal order (Clarke 1988), but this is a minimum necessary condition for a given state to be capitalist at all (Gerstenberger 2011).

A political community of free and equal people is also necessarily a community of productive citizens (Losurdo 2014). Those who are unwilling or unable to participate in (economically) productive social activities are, in the eyes of the capitalist state, an inferior part of the population and a potential budgetary burden that must somehow, through moral and disciplinary pressure—for example, through workfare social policies (Aufheben 2012)—be forced to work, or, if this is not possible due to objective economic conditions or is undesirable due to the political situation, be deported or accommodated in prisons or detention centres. State racism is a method of policing of those people who belong nowhere—the refugees, the undocumented, the ghetto-dwellers, criminalised racial minorities. As such, it is the obverse side of the rule of law. State racism is a “border guard” in both the territorial and the social sense, a way of determining and deciding who can enter a national community and under what conditions, and a method of managing those who find themselves on the territory of a particular national community, even though they do not or cannot belong to it.

Even Foucault (2004, pp. 239–64) defined modern racism as a matter of the state. Modern nation-states, which are otherwise concerned with the length and quality of life and the health and fertility of the population, resort to racism in cases where it is necessary to kill. This does not mean (necessarily) direct killing—this was typical of the exercise of sovereign power before the advent of bio politics—but rather “indirect murder: the fact that we expose someone to death, that we expose some to a greater danger of life, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, etc.” (Foucault 2004, p. 256).

7. Conclusions

In order to strengthen our understanding of the racialisation of migrants and refugees in Tunisia, in the first round of research, we conducted in-depth or qualitative interviews with Tunisian experts. The purpose of these interviews was, firstly, to understand the
socio-cultural patterns of Tunisian identity formation and the role that Islam plays in Tunisian society, and secondly, to understand the attitudes they have towards sub-Saharan migrants and refugees, who are mostly dark-skinned and many of whom are Christians. The questions within the thematic sections were designed to address the key issue raised by the president’s speech in February 2023. As results showed that the Tunisian identity is mainly perceived as an amalgam of different civilisations and cultures, tied to the territory, and although Islam as a constitutive part of the Tunisian society remains one of the key elements of integration and cooperation, the qualitative coding of the answers showed that Islam is primarily a measure of cultural belonging. In the second round of research, we conducted in-depth narrative interviews with Christian refugees from Cameroon in Tunisia. Based on their answers, we confirmed the thesis that neither the colour of the skin nor the religious affiliation causes the original racialisation.

Among other things, the answers highlighted the case of Syrian refugees, mostly Muslims, who had fled to Tunisia in small numbers in 2011 at the start of the war in Syria and received a lot of help from the local population, who helped them with food, money, and even lodging. But as their numbers began to rise, the aid for refugees declined despite the fact that the refugees were Muslim and Arab. This is just one of the examples that can confirm our thesis that differences in religious affiliation are nullified when the number of refugees exceeds a critical number. To confirm the thesis that the colour of the skin is also not decisive, is that, as the results showed, racism towards sub-Saharanists in Tunisia depends on material conditions, where if sub-Saharans were wealthy, regularly enrolled in schools, or entered Tunisia with a work visa, racism would not be pronounced. But if they were poor refugees, they would be subject to police violence and the National Guard, who do not care whether they die at sea or are pushed to the borders of Algeria and Libya.

The qualitative coding of the experts’ answers, which highlighted the intersection of racism with the increase in the size of the population, confirmed our thesis that the capitalist mode of production, due to its inner contradictions, simultaneously requires and expels human labour force. Those permanently expelled constitute surplus populations that are, due to not being disciplined by the capitalist markets, considered dangerous and fall under police jurisdiction. This process of policing surplus populations is what constitutes contemporary systemic racism as a special mode of state politics, whereby “race” is the result of said process and not determined by its biological, religious, ethnic, or cultural characteristics. Tunisian attitude towards migrants and refugees adopts the characteristics of the European model, which is close to what Balibar (2018) calls neo-racism. Refugees are denied access to citizenship and political rights partly because of the risk of disease and crime that they supposedly involve, and partly because of cultural and moral characteristics that prevent them from accepting and respecting the host society and its values. In the EU and its North African partner states, such as Tunisia, racism operates as a policy of systemic social exclusion and segregation of a very heterogeneous and diverse set of social and ethnic groups, which do not share any particular biological or cultural characteristic, but are all targets of deportation, detention in immigration detention centres, police violence and harassment, and urban segregation. The subordinate race is not any social group clearly demarcated by cultural or biological characteristics, but the amorphous social group of refugees and migrants. They are not defined by their common origin, appearance, religion or culture, but by the political and social relations in which they are embedded as refugees or migrants.

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