

IN NETWORK: THE CASE FOR DECOLONIAL JEWISH THOUGHT

Abstract

In this article I take the blind spots in the liberal interpretation of modern Jewish thought as a starting point to argue for the necessity of adopting a decolonial framework for situating the critical thrust of Jewish intellectuals. I contend that this innovative approach illuminates the existential condition that became the driving force behind the articulation of Jewish subversions of modernity. While most liberal interpreters situate these as a result of the development of the nation-state, I show that this presumption of nineteenth/twentieth centuries (European) Jews leading the critical process ignores centuries of struggles and reproduces Eurocentric liberating qualities. As such it limits critical thought to the same spatial context where oppressive discourses emerged. As an alternative I contend that the critical thrust of Jewish thought is the outcome of a more long-standing process known as coloniality and encompassing the patterns of domination that developed in colonial contexts but exceeded their temporal and spatial dimensions. This process is traced back to the sixteenth century, when Jewish intellectuals became one group among other racialized collectives to attack the core of a 500 years-long process. I conclude by claiming that this framework can offer an invigoration of the field by re-evaluating disciplinary alliances, methodological frames, and geopolitical sensitivities.

Keywords: Jewish thought, decolonialism, postcolonialism, revolution, eurocentric

Revolution(ary Blindness)

It was not long ago that a normative reading of the European Jewish experience sought to account for the entirety of the Jewish universe. For some interpreters, this may have been a simpler historical time: Albert Memmi had not yet protested the forceful inclusion of Arab Jewish history within a European paradigm.² And Shlomo Sand had not explained the geopolitical use of this

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2 Memmi Albert, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Juif-Arabe, Juifs et Arabes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, pp. 57-58. Levieux, trans., *What is an Arab Jew, Jews and Arab*, Chicago, J. Phillip O'Hara, 1975, pp. 27-28.

history by nationalist historiography since the nineteenth century.³ It may have been easier for these same interpreters to construct stereotypical formulations of Jewishness: Ella Shohat had not yet denounced the re-Orientalization of well-educated Middle Eastern Jewish intellectuals to justify Euro-Jewish superiority in the twentieth century.⁴ And Ammiel Alcalay had not followed this critique by deconstructing one of the oldest myths, that of the wandering Jew, by showing how some communities, such as the Levantine, combined sedentarism with intense cultural development for over a millennia.⁵

With just a few exceptions it is only in the last twenty-five years that these epistemological challenges made themselves heard in mainstream discussions. Up until then, and as early as the 1960s, politically liberal approaches to understanding Jewish thought flourished within the context of normative Eurocentrism, developing a provocative framework that some of the best and most committed of the critics reproduce until today. This reading hinges on the characterization of both secular and religious Jewish thinkers in function of a central characteristic that they share: they were trying to subvert the social conditions of the surrounding normative thought and society. These Jewish thinkers became some of the most radical critics of modernity by confronting what we will soon characterize as the combination between evolutionism (forced inclusion) and dualism (forced exclusion), going beyond “accommodation” to European society or constituting one of its “subcultures.” For this interpretative trend, Jewish thought was existentially revolutionary.

This liberal trend has certainly offered a persuasive way of interpreting Jewish thought. Baruch Spinoza, years before the Enlightenment, got rid of the theological mandates that constrained European thinking and action. According to the mythical understanding, not even the parochial Jewish community, fearful after years of living under the shadows of the Inquisition, seemed to be able to come to terms with this pioneering subversion.⁶ An early Marx denounced the theological background of the modern state and analyzed its incompatibility with Jewish assimilation.⁷ In his mature work he attacked the systemic atrocities of Europe, committed both inside and outside the continent, and called for a systemic change that one his most dynamic interpreters, Leon Trotsky, would title

3 Sand Shlomo, *Matai, ve'ekh humtza ha'am hyedhudi*, Tel Aviv, Resling, 2008. Lotan Yael, trans., *The Invention of the Jewish People*, London, Verso, 2009.

4 Shohat Ella, *Sepharadim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims*, *Social Text* 19/20, 1988, pp. 1-35.

5 Alcalay Ammiel, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 1-4.

6 I am pointing out this mythical reading because his known excommunication preceded the popularization and most of the publications of his works. See Nadler Steven, *Spinoza's Heresy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

7 This is erroneously known as the most ‘anti-Semitic’ of Jewish texts. Marx Karl, *Zur Judenfrage (Braunschweig, 1843)*. O'Malley Josep and Davis Richard, trans. & ed. *The Jewish Question, Marx Early Political Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

"permanent revolution."⁸ Emmanuel Levinas denounced Western philosophy as the "imperialist" kingdom of sameness. Employing the "Hebrew," the rabbinical records of Jewish struggle as an alternative and he intended to replace ontology with ethics as "first philosophy."⁹ Walter Benjamin identified the Euro-Christian formula of messianism as a forceful mechanic teleology that ultimately justified a triumphal theodicy of the victors.¹⁰ His call to read history against the grain, what Michael Löwy identifies as the history of the vanquished or defeated, still widely resonates beyond Jewish experiences.¹¹ Intellectuals who study histories from below, from Subaltern Studies in India to Liberation Philosophies in Latin America, periodically find in his work an alternative to Western criminality.¹²

Spinoza, Marx, Levinas or Benjamin were not exceptions. One only need to look at Hebert Marcuse's powerful critique against consumerist totalitarianism, Sigmund Freud's acutely discontented critique of civilization, Franz Rosenzweig's intense break with the Euro-Christian monopoly of redemption, Hannah Arendt's relational links between European imperialism, totalitarianism and anti-Semitism, or Martin Buber's challenge to rational asymmetrical relations of love. These are examples of how this interpretation of Jewish thought encompassed much more than exceptional or isolated cases. The fact that the liberal trend of thought illuminates the critical drive of these proposals does not mean that we can ignore the latter were children of their own time. As was the case with racialized communities around the world, the above-mentioned intellectuals were contextually Westernized adopting some aspects of normative thought, or the only acceptable way of thinking. As a consequence, at times they reproduced some aspects of the same Eurocentric projects, including racisms, sexism and imperialisms that were part of the oppressive design. But the championing liberal interpretations of these authors pointed out that beyond, their contextual limitations (which we will soon analyze), their projects intended to offer a means of resistance against an oppressive system. During the universalization of European Jewish thought as global Judaism, such liberal interpretative trends found a common denominator in the Jewish experience: the critical subversion of the European Christian system of thought (in its theological, evolutionist, imperialist, capitalist, or developmentist versions) was an omnipresent entry-

8 Marx Karl, *Das Kapital*, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1961, I, p. 791. Folken Ben, trans., *The Capital*, Penguin Books, London, 1976, I, p. 916.

9 Levinas Emmanuel, *Une religion d'adultes*, 26. Hand, trans. A Religion for Adults, pp. 11–12.

10 Benjamin Walter, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in *Walter Benjamin Erzählen*, Frankfurt Au Main, Shurkamp, 2007, pp. 129–140. Arendt Hannah, ed., *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, pp. 253–264.

11 Löwy Michael, *Rédemption et Utopie: Le Judaïsme libéral en Europe central*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1988, pp. 7–9. Heaney Hope, trans., *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992, pp. 2–3.

12 See Chakravorty Spivak Gayatri, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, pp. 294–295. Dussel Enrique, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y exclusion*, Madrid, Trotta, 1998, pp. 234–240.

point for interpretation.

I must confess that this framework is truly persuasive. Especially when we realize this is the alternative to a much more parochial interpretative trend. The conservative alternative not only reproduces Euro-Jewish thought as global Jewish thinking, but also ghettoizes the field by circumscribing the analysis to a de-politicization and de-historicization of the contributions of Jewish thinkers. In general descontextualizes Jewish sources written in moments of struggle for policy-making decisions of a community that today has achieved normativity in the US, Europe and Israel. Instead, the liberal interpretative framework takes history and sociology of thought very seriously and employs these interdisciplinary lenses to engage in dialogues beyond post-1948 allies. Since the 1960s general academic circles have focused on the analysis of intellectual resistances, this liberal interpretative trend of Jewish thought offers the possibility of a genuine dialogue with philosophies from around the world and counters the ghettoization of the discipline. Furthermore, by understanding Jewish thought as an-other thinking among critical philosophies from below it potentially opens up the possibility of dismantling the privilege of Jewish thought of believing itself to be representative of all others (as much a consequence of the long-standing relation between Jewish-Christian relation, as of the political universalization of Jewish-Christian difference as a model throughout the world). In this way, the liberal school that interprets Jews as critical theorists breaks the incestuous parochialism that often inundates the field of Jewish thought.

As suggested above, I am deeply sympathetic toward this interpretative school. Yet if the reader ponders whether the Eurocentrism prevalent in this school limits the reach of its interpretation, I may need to acknowledge that this starting point does create blind spots. It is not only that this trend is unable to survey non-European Jewish thought. It is also that the narrowness or generalization in their historical reading occludes us from an accurate understanding of what was at stake in the Euro-Jewish revolutionary critical theory. The suspicious reader may then be right. One of the central arguments of this article is that the inability to take into account both the "colonial question" and "decolonial option" results in a misplacement of the historical starting point of this school, and that the definition of this beginning carries weighty interpretative consequences. Let me, then, explore the consequences of the definition of temporal starting points in two iconic texts of this liberal school. The first locates the beginning of the critical thrust in the first century and end in a mythical a-temporal reading of modern Jewish subversion. The second places it in the nineteenth century, skipping over three hundred years of the colonial process and ends up justifying the Jewish rebellious superiority over other experiences of racialization.

The first case identifies the Jewish subversion of modernity with an atemporal reading of Jewish heterodoxy that runs from the first century of the common era. In the early 1960s Trotskyist Issac Deutscher published the now famous

article the “non-Jewish Jew.” Before the end of the decade his daughter included it as the first article in a collection that provides the right context for this text. Deutscher, a former *chaver-yeshiva*, starts the original article with a Midrash. Rabbi Meir, the light of the orthodoxy was walking during a Shabbat by the side of his mentor, the excommunicated “heretic” Elisha ben-Abuya. The master, pejoratively called *Akher* in rabbinical circles, was riding a donkey, a forbidden action during the holy day. When they arrive at the limits of the city, the teacher advises his pupil to return to the Jewish community while he symbolically goes beyond its bounds (of the collectivity/city).¹³

Deutscher implicitly argues that Jewish orthodoxy and radical hereticism drink from the same well. And, much more explicitly, he shows that Jewish heretics belong to a long subterranean tradition that fulfills two roles. First, it instructs orthodoxy. And second, from the very first century, it has been bringing the “Jewish genus,” the spark of liberation, well beyond the community. Deutscher draws a direct historical line between the prototypical *Akher* and “the great revolutionaries of modern thought” including “Spinoza, Heine, Marx, Freud, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky.”¹⁴ Deutscher identifies a hidden core of the Jewish tradition defined by these people who, finding the communal life too constraining, brought liberationist proposals beyond the community against the forces that were oppressing the collectivity. Whether in Palestine during Roman times or in Europe during the development of modernity, Jews always behaved as critical theorists and revolutionaries.

The extension of Deutscher’s historical reading, from the first century until his days, however, is what makes his proposal problematic. Deutscher is a brilliant left-wing Hegelian who shows that history marches from East to West and emphasizes that European (Jewish in this case) thought is the culmination of 2000 years of struggles. His proposal enables us to recognize a diachronic relation between oppressions. Yet, his assimilation of the modern revolutionaries to the ancient heretic, obscures the specific reason that made Marx, Freud, Luxemburg (or Spinoza himself) rebels. The latter radicals were not just responding to the temptation of “universal thinking,” as some interpreters argue Elisha ben-Abuya was.¹⁵ They were confronting a very modern two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, the forced assimilation to a society that was simultaneously presenting European thought as the only possible (redemptive/salvific/rational/democratic, etc.) path of thinking and regulating the assimilation of non-normative populations by the construction of a hierarchy of not only

13 Deutscher Isaac, *The Non-Jewish Jew: The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 25-26.

14 *Ibid*, 26.

15 See scholarly discussion about his role in Rabbinic literature in Goshen-Gottstein Alon and Badie Bertrand, *The Sinner and The Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arch*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. 21-22.

knowledges but also bodies. Deutscher, then, is able to create a provocative line of Jewish revolutionaries. Yet the extended length of his periodization ultimately veiled what made Jews rebel against modernity: the criminality that emerged from the simultaneous combination of the forced exclusion that disarmed them epistemologically, and the forced inclusion that fixed them racially.

The recognition of the modernizing dynamics is at the core of my second example, John Murray Cuddihy's proposal. He does take into account the interplay between forced exclusion/inclusion, but by insisting that tension does not emerge until the 19th century, his proposal misplaces the role of Jewish thinkers in the process. Let's, then, return to the question asked by my suspicious reader. In the early 1970s, ten years after Deutscher's text, the longtime professor of CUNY-Graduate Center published the iconic book *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss and the Jewish Struggle for Modernity*. Cuddihy takes Jewish thought as a case study of "cultural shock" in modern times. He argues that the secularized European society had promised Jews complete assimilation. But this "promise" was "never delivered." To account for this failure, Jewish thinkers engaged with an "apologetical" discourse to explain and ultimately "exculpate" Jews from the clash they seemed to have with modern society. They emphasized that the problem was internal to the European context, going on to become some of the most lucid critics and took on the stereotypical accusation of Jews as "troublemakers." It was not Jewish fault, but, rather, "exploitation," "delusion" or ultimately "racism" that created this insuperable tension. Jewish thought became a revolutionary form of critical thinking because of the existential conditions in which they, as externally and/or internally recognized Jews, were placed.¹⁶

Cuddihy's characterization of this experience of Jews is interesting for the decolonial argument I will make in the next section. Cuddihy considers that this experience of Jews made their discourse a model for other oppressed people around the world. In his own words, they were the "avant-grade" for the post-1940s African and Asian "decolonized people."¹⁷ This is where the problems for Cuddihy's periodization can be found. He does not fall, as Deutscher does, into the timeless construction of Jewish subversion. Yet he ignores that the interplay between forced inclusion/exclusion characteristics of modern times started 300 years before the nineteenth century. His reading misplaces the role of Jewish thought in two different ways. First, Jews -mostly Sephardim including Uriel Da Acosta or Baruch Spinoza- have suffered the same dynamics since the seventeenth century and were the predecessors of the German-French European Jews that he explores. Deutscher's long-duree recognizes this connection, but Cuddihy's temporal narrowness fails to acknowledge it. And second, populations in the colonies suffered the colonial/modern two-pronged dynamics parallel to Jews

16 Cuddihy John Murray, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1974, pp. 3-14.

17 *Ibid*, 4.

since the sixteenth century. They have developed resistances and generating alternative knowledges that then served post-1940s anti-colonial intellectuals. While it is impossible to negate the influence of Marx and Freud, it cannot be ignored that they were not interpreted in the vacuum but as a result of centuries of struggles. So Jewish intellectuals are not the avant-grade of the freedom fighters. They are part of a larger ancestry that requires the acknowledgement the alternatives to the system did not emerge only in Europe.

As such the presumption of nineteenth-century (European) Jews leading the critical process ignores centuries of struggles and reproduces Eurocentric liberating qualities, limiting critical thought to the same spatial context where oppressive discourses emerged. If the Jewish case was popularized, it was not because Jewish subversion temporally precedes the others or because it is conceptually more powerful. It is because, in the path of the universalization European thinking, the Jewish case was forced as a global modern model of otherness. But a modern globalized history of oppression and rebellions existed before the nineteenth century... and Jewish history and Jewish thought have existed beyond France and Germany.

Existentially Jewish in the Modern/Colonial World

The reader may have noticed that I have had no intention of denying my sympathy for the liberal model of Jewish thought to explain the source of their critical writing. Yet I acknowledge that if she/he questions the epistemological Eurocentrism of this interpretative model she/he may be on to something. It is true that this trend obscures the existential condition that precedes the formulation of Jewish thought in general, and of critical revolutionary thinking in particular. If situating its beginning in the 1st century was too extended and in the 19th too narrow, we need to find an alternative framework for a more accurate understanding of the existential condition that precedes the radicalism of modern Jewish thought. I will argue then that we will find it in a symbolic date: 1492. This reading is intended as an alternative to the modes of understanding we have surveyed above: the existence of a timeless Jewish genus that was a timeless critic of society. Or the late starting point, simultaneous to the formation of the central European nation-state (or as expressed by more descontextualized parochial trends in the work of Moses Mendelssohn, who situates it a few years before Cuddihy's date).

1492 is symbolically not only the starting point of European expansion throughout the world, but also the beginning of modern/colonial racism inside and outside of the evolving European borders. In other words, 1492 is the starting point of a local history becoming global(ized) and universal(ized). The same year Spain, the first modern empire, finished its colonization of the Iberian Peninsula and started that of the Americas, the first wrested from he

hands of a variety of Muslim rulers who held it for seven centuries and the latter inhabited by a multiplicity of populations that were categorized as "Indians." The consequences of colonization were not limited to these two collectives, as they rapidly and directly affected Jews who were expelled from the continent (many of whom found refuge in Muslim-ruled lands), as well as Africans who, unable to find refuge, were kidnapped and, in a massive operation of human trafficking, transported to the Americas as forced slave labor.¹⁸

For a large number of scholars, 1492 marks the beginning of the modern world as we know it today. Some argue that Europe could only leave behind its peripheral history and present itself as universal by developing economically with the expropriation of resources and/or labor that followed both colonizations. The combination of the theft of wealth following the expulsions and the extraction of gold and silver by free labor created what would have been known to Marxists as the primitive (mercantile) accumulation that opened the door for capitalist revolutions. Others point out that the Spaniards launched the first truly modern bureaucracy with their model of the inquisition whose disciplinary function continues until today. The structure of the institution went beyond theological fanaticism, as it created a network of social control that was ignored as a beginning of modernity when Max Weber defined the period for its bureaucratic capability.¹⁹ A third group simply remarks that the double colonization was a first step toward the conquest of the whole world under European (and then Euro-American) boots. By the end of the so-called First War World over two-thirds of the world was a colony of Europe. And the rest of the world had their systems deeply permated by Westernization, whether they had been a colony, were Europe in itself or one of the few places that escaped political colonization.²⁰

All these factors are relevant aspects to study the Jewish existential condition that precedes and permeates the writing. But here I would like to focus on a particular aspect of the modern model that affected with deep intensity the development of Jewish thought: the interplay between evolutionism and dualism in the context of four interrelated epistemological genocides. In other words I would like to explain how Jews were inserted in a network of colonization (and ultimate coloniality) that arrogated itself superiority by making others subject to the interplay between forceful inclusion and forceful exclusion.

1492 was not only a catastrophe for the bodies, but also for the knowledges of the populations under colonization. One of the key factors that defined the modern/colonial project is the establishment of monopolistic paths for human liberation and the strength to enforce them throughout the world. At

18 I provide a more extended overview of this relation of causality in Slabodsky Santiago, *Decolonial Judaism*, New York: Palgrave, 2015, pp. 50-66.

19 Silverblatt Irene, *Modern Inquisitions*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 55-98.

20 See an introduction to world-system theory in Wallerstein Immanuel, *World-Systems Analysis*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004.

the beginning, these were called salvation then redemption, historical and economical development, and, in our current days, democracy. But virtually all European(ized) powers thought of themselves as having some kind of manifest destiny (this includes Spain, Portugal, Netherlands, England, Germany and now the US, and, some may even argue, the post-1924 USSR). They not only arrogated themselves the ownership of the unique path for ultimate liberation, but they also were confident that they had the moral responsibility of implementing it. Any and all other paths that could emerge from alternative knowledges that have a different conception of time, space, community, economy, etc. have been sublated as part of history or were invisibilized. The colonized communities, then, become epistemologically stripped. This was the beginning of the four cultural genocides that were suffered by people identified as Muslims, Jews, Africans and Indians. Throughout the last 500 years and on repeated occasions each one of these groups was forced to assimilate to the unique evolutionary path set by European thought.²¹

While the global scale of the evolutionary trend was novel, the propelling force was not. It is not hard to identify other imperialisms that have tried to convert the subjugated to their ways. What was novel is that the force of evolutionism encountered a second factor, a dualism that limited the possibility of access to the promised liberation. In other words when one of the forces was claiming the existence of a unique path for liberation drawn by European minds, the nature of non-European –pre-Holocaust Jews included– were defined as having a nature that limited their possibilities of achieving the goal. This left the communities both epistemologically stripped and heavily restricted in their access to the normative status. The mechanism was employed in order to create a hierarchy among colonized showing that the closer one got to the European model, the more the system would favor him/her/them, while making clear this achievement would be heavily regulated by a colonial difference that would always regard the colonized with deep suspicion. It is important to clarify that this doesn't mean that all of the above mentioned racializations of collectives have been the same in time and space. Populations were pitted against each other and the types of exclusion, forced labor, expropriation, genocidal practices were often different. Furthermore, to construct these hierarchies, some populations were offered intermediary status with the aim of preventing potential rebellious alliances. But one can find the interplay between evolutionism and dualism, forced inclusion and forced exclusion, cultural stripping and regulation of access throughout the struggles of a large number of these racialized populations.

The two-pronged dynamics I describe above is the existential condition of colonization that preceded the development of a network of modern Jewish

21 See the construction of the four epistemological genocides in Grosfoguel Ramon, *The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/ Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century, Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11.1, 2013, pp. 73-89.

intellectuals. One does not need to be physically colonized (though many Jews were) to suffer the consequences of coloniality (or the patterns and structures of domination that complement colonization and survive political colonization). While a number of Jews did suffer political colonization, virtually all Jewish populations were deeply affected by coloniality. Examples of this development abound. To avoid the risk of finding obscure (or purposefully obscured) events to build my framework, I will pick three of the most important events in modern Jewish history to demonstrate that the pernicious dynamic between evolutionism and dualism is at the center of the existential condition even among the orthodox selective reading of what constitutes the historical core of Jewish existence. For this reason I will explore the expulsion from Spain/Inquisition, the generation of Zionism during the Dreyfus Affair in France, and the inescapable Holocaust that started in Germany.

Let's start with the seventeenth century because is not only at the very beginning of the process but also explains the communities from which Uriel Da Acosta and Baruch Spinoza emerged. Well-accepted typologies of anti-Semitism, Salo Baron's for example, point out that the distinction between medieval anti-Judaism and modern anti-Semitism stems from the difference between theological and racial construction of otherness.²² This is generally manifested by the impossibility of escaping one's externally identified background. There are only counted occasions before the seventeenth century when a Jew would be still suspected and persecuted after conversion.²³ Yet it is during this period that the interplay between evolutionism and dualism will heavily regulate this conversion. Jews were given the choice between leaving their homes or being forcefully included in the system. Historians point out that at least half of the Jewish population stayed or was forcefully converted after fleeing to Portugal. The *Conversos*, however, were under permanent surveillance and daily suspicion making them *Marranos* (or "pigs") among the Spanish population. The structural correlation of this exclusionary social force was the instauration of the *Leyes de Pureza de Sangre* (Purity of Blood laws) and of persecution through the Inquisition. During the parallel colonization of the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas, Jews were forcefully included into a Christian system that would simultaneously forcefully exclude them because of their natural impurity.

A second prototypical example that is an integral part of the orthodox reading of modern Jewish history and also shows the same 500-years forceful inclusion/exclusion interplay is the mythical genesis of Western political Zionism at the end of the nineteenth century. According to the mythical narrative, journalist (and iconic father of political Zionism) Theodor Herzl, attended the

22 Baron Salo, *Changing Patterns of Anti-Semitism*, *Jewish Social Studies*, v. xxxviii, 1976, pp. 5-7.

23 This role of Jews was particularly prevalent under an Augustinian paradigm regarding the necessity of Jewish existence. See an exploration of its transition and abandonment in modernity in Suttcliffe Adam, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 23-57.

trial of Alfred Dreyfus in France and realized that his early solution for the Jewish problem, full assimilation into Europe was impossible in the context of rampant anti-Semitic exclusion. So he slightly transformed his proposal: before the trial, Herzl considered that Jews needed to be normalized by becoming like any other European individual. Now, Herzl affirmed that they were to be normalized by becoming like any other European nation-state.²⁴ Notwithstanding the consequences of this objectionable solution that carried deep consequences for Palestinians and non-Western Jews, what was at stake in the Dreyfus case narrates the dynamics we have been sustaining as a central characteristic of modern Jewish experiences. The French revolution had promised all rights to Jews as citizens but none as a community.

Following this mandate, an individual Jew had escalated the ranks of the French army and became the highest Jewish officer before being accused of treason with fabricated evidence. While rhetorically Jews were forcefully included under the nation, the escalation of Jews in the ranks of the state administration led to a forceful exclusion that was supported by virtually half of French public intellectuals and population. The interplay between evolutionism and dualism, present in the exclusion of Natives, Muslims, Africans, and Jews since the sixteenth century, became in the nineteenth exclusion at the level of the nation-state. But this exclusion becomes a reality of the nation-state, but is just one stage more of the dualism that has been reproduced since the sixteenth century. Jews, and other populations under coloniality, were affected by multiple versions. The nation state is just one of them. This is where Herzl was mistaken. The solution for Jews was not to leave the European nation-state, as Herzl urged them to do, but to combat coloniality. The sad outcome of the reproduction of coloniality by the State of Israel is further testimony to the erroneous assessment of the iconic father of political Zionism who was unable to see the long-standing of the problem.

The third and last case is perhaps the most prototypical case in orthodox modern Jewish history: the Holocaust. A large number of critics have asked how it was possible that the genocide took place in the culturally “most advanced” society in Europe where Jews had achieved the highest level of assimilation. But, if we analyze the events under the dynamics between evolutionism and dualism, rather than appearing as a contradiction, this is understood as a rule. Starting in the eighteenth, numerous statesmen and intellectuals tried to “improve” the “condition” of Jews and “ameliorate” their “uncivilized” status.²⁵ Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Jews were forcefully included into a secularized version of the Christian state. This aspect is well denounced by Marx

24 Massad Joseph, *The Post-Colonial: Time, Space, and Bodies in Israel/Palestine*, *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, Afzal-Khan Fawzia et al., eds., Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 313–314.

25 Hess Jonathan, *Germans, Jews, and the Claims of Modernity*, New Heaven, Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 68–84.

in what was wrongly perceived as a self-hating text.²⁶ By the time of the Weimar republic there were thousands of titles on the Jewish Question on the market. The Holocaust was not a historical accident in the process of Jewish assimilation to the West (as Cuddihy argues), nor was it a consequence of 2000-years of anti-Semitism (as we can extend Deutscher to contend). It was a natural outcome of the modern/colonial dynamics between evolutionism and dualism that was practiced toward Jews among others. So it is no surprise that most of the practices we have seen in the Holocaust had already been implemented in the colonies. The Holocaust is not an aberration of modernity but one of its natural consequences.

Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet and critical theorist, was one of the most lucid interpreters of this relation. He calls the Holocaust the “crown” of colonialism. While a straightforward reading of his interpretation may try to dislocate the centrality of the Holocaust, the interpretation should be that he was integrating Jewish suffering into a much more broader framework. He very well explains that Hitler was not an accident to Europe but very much its “representation.” Jews, as a consequence, were one group of populations among many that suffered the consequence of the interplay between evolutionism and dualism, forced exclusion, forced inclusion, epistemological and physical genocide. Jews were not the first nor were the last. Jews intellectuals were among those who understood the pernicious game of modernity/coloniality, and denounced it from their spatial and temporal positions. Jewish critical thought is one then existentially a consequence of coloniality, one more among revolutionary proposals against coloniality and can be analyzed through decolonial lenses.²⁷

Jewish Thought, Decolonial Lenses

Césaire, a Caribbean intellectual, could provide excellent insight into the nature of the Holocaust (and modern Jewish existential conditions in general). He was able to do so because he understood that this process was integral part of a dynamics practiced before, during, and after the Holocaust in the colonies. A simple survey of the orthodox landmarks of Jewish history, the structural persecution of Jews in Spain, the equivocal genesis of Western political Zionism, and the Holocaust starting in the German context, persuasively validates his position. In this way we realize that colonialism had generated certain practices that coloniality applied well beyond the formal colonies and in central Europe itself. Jewish revolutionary thinking is a consequence of the existential confrontation with what Peruvian intellectual Anibal Quijano, not coincidentally in collaboration with Jewish sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, calls the dynamics between evolutionism/dualism and includes an interplay between

²⁶ See note n. 6.

²⁷ Césaire Aimé, *Discours sur le colonialism*, Dakar, Présence africaine, 1955, pp. 12-23.

forced inclusion/exclusion, and epistemological stripping/regulation of access to normative society and status.²⁸

The reader who had questioned the liberal approach to Jewish thought is now beginning to find an answer to her/his pondering. When we incorporate Jews to this network, we radically change the consequences of Deutscher and Cuddihy's historical readings. The former is right that there is a long-standing line of Jewish revolutionaries in modernity. Yet if the reader follows the existential questions of the first century model and not a modern development that included the forces of exclusion/inclusion as a key component, it is impossible to understand why those intellectuals in the colonies understand the depths of Jewish history, perhaps even better than post-1945 Jewish thinkers. Cuddihy is also right that his models –Marx, Freud and Levi-Strauss (or beyond his reading, Benjamin, Levinas and Arendt)– had a deep impact on Global South thinking. But this is not because their fight preceded the ones of the colonizers, as he argues. It is because they were connected in their confrontation of a pernicious system that, adapting itself to time and place, was reproducing the two-pronged dynamics. A large number of populations under coloniality, including Jews, suffered this structure. I have explored elsewhere that it is impossible to understand the late thought of Levinas without taking into account the work of Enrique Dussel or the proposal of Albert Memmi without considering the influence of the Négritude movement.²⁹ But if we have more information about Marx's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean than about Césaire's influence on European Jews, it is not because Jews had a temporal or conceptual priority. Perhaps those who follow Cuddihy's school may want to explore how the Jewish case has been universalized to signify otherness.

In light of Césaire's understanding of the genealogy that led to the Holocaust and Quijano's of the interplay that connects the Inquisition, the Dreyfus Affair and the Final Solution for Jews, I propose to start employing Southern theoretical formulations to provide an alternative framework to interpret revolutionary Jewish thought. My espousal of this framework, which I consider to be more accurate, obeys two central reasons. In the first place, as I argued earlier, the weight of Euro-American thinking in interpreting Jewish thought has led to blind spots that could be uncovered by an openness to alternative critical modalities. This framework will thus enable us to explore hidden connections that were veiled because the global North positioned the subject generating theory while the South was the objective space to apply it. And second, perhaps more importantly, such a framework becomes necessary because coloniality affected networks thought the world, but its crudest effects were suffered in

28 Quijano Anibal, Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America, *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1.3, 2000, pp. 533-580.

29 Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking*, pp. 93-113, for Levinas/Dussel and pp. 115-143 for Césaire and Memmi.

the global south. As such the theory emerging from Southern thought is able to acknowledge, theorize and recognize the problem with more poignancy. For this reason I propose to resort to these formulations in order to re-evaluate the decolonial stance of what was thought until now exclusively universal thought.

The role of the intellectual in the development of global south thinking has been extensively developed. There is no more popular model than what Homi Bhabha, the Indian intellectual who identifies his ethnicity (Parsis) as "The Jews of the East," calls the hybrid.³⁰ The hybrid is the space of liminality developed under the colonial situation. The intellectual of the otherized people may have learned the dominant culture but the racism of the structure does not let him/her identify externally with it. Yet the effects of colonialism displaced the authority outside traditional thought in such a way that she/he cannot be identified, neither internally nor externally, with this community either. As a result, in the context of the anxious space, she/he creates a third space where the ambiguity can survive.

Interpreters who still hold Cuddhy's model as their framework may be attracted to this model as his interpretation also favors this third space beyond the historical "backwardness" of the community and the "criminality" of normative thought. But the most well known postcolonial model for conceptualizing the intellectual will be a misfit for our framework for a number of reasons. Some of them stem from intrinsic problems of the model in general, and, others, from their particular application to the Jewish case in particular. Among the former it is important to point out that one of the key elements of our model is that the intellectual recognizes the asymmetry between the two sides of the colonial divide. Yet the hybrid, as critics have argued, in its ambiguity is generally unable to recognize the different weights of the two sides of the dualism. This engagement with both sides of the divide to overcome them as if each was on the same level has two consequences. It both naturalizes the unequal relation, and is unable to denounce the strength of the powerful side in the formation of the new space. In the second place, a core of our model recognizes that the intellectuals' drive was not to save themselves from ambiguity, but to offer a revolutionary, liberationist proposal that denounced the limits of dualism. Yet, the Bhabhian model opts to find a solution to the ambiguity by theoretically effacing the divide. This ultimately disarticulates any liberationist discourse that attempts to confront the hegemonic discourse with a political alternative emerging from the vanquished. In all fairness, the accusation of the hybrid intellectual as being elitist, may not be a wholly unjustifiable characterization.³¹

The Bhabhian model has a third obstacle, this time, not intrinsic to the

30 Bhabha Homi, *Joking Aside: The Idea of a Self-Critical Community, Modernity, Culture and the Jew*, Brian Cheyette and Marcus, eds., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, xv.

31 The critique is inspired in the enagement of Ashcroft Bill and Griffiths Gareth, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, Oxon and New York, 2013, pp. 49-68.

proposal but stemming from the particularity of the external racial construction of Jewishness. Sander Gilman, the prolific leading cultural theorist, argues that this construction requires this undecided ambivalence. Yet, he points out, that throughout modern history, largely interpreted as beginning in the eighteenth century, the in-betweenness of Jews was rarely seen. Jews were either portrayed as defenseless Orientalized victims of oppression or as the best and most original embodiment of Western triumphant cosmopolitanism. As a consequence, Jews were prototypically viewed with an eternal timelessness, unaffected by either the space that they inhabited or the currents of thought that challenged the Western discourse that also racialized them. A committed Gilman –this clarification is necessary, as his project is different from ours– uses this critique as an opportunity to analyze the possibility of exploring Jewish hybridities.³² Given the strength of his critique, however, I follow his diagnosis but find an alternative path to a solution.

Since “the hybrid” is a misfit to explain the Jewish case, I propose to find an alternative in the figure of the “border thinker” developed by Walter Mignolo and frequently used by Spanish-speaking decolonialists. While acknowledging the particularities of each experience under coloniality, Mignolo argues that in the genocides of the Atlantic, “Blacks,” “Natives,” and “Jews,” are “logically linked to the colonial matrix of power.”³³ This is the first reason behind my espousal of this theoretical framework. Bhabha and English-speaking Postcolonialists tend to place the development of the imperialist model in the nineteenth century, and, in the best of the cases, the eighteenth century when they suffer the effects of the colonial matrix. During this time several Jews did suffer the effects of coloniality but they understood them as the effect of the nation-state. Not to mention the role Jews played many times post-1870s as intermediaries between colonizers and colonized. Mignolo, however, doesn’t shy away from analyzing the *longue durée* of the system. Tracing the experiences throughout the Atlantic, he finds that the struggles of the eighteenth/nineteenth century cannot be explained without considering the matrix of power generated by global coloniality since the sixteenth century. This reading is able to go beyond one of the key limits of Bhabha’s interpretative framework, where, for historical reasons, the Jew could not be seen as a prototypical hybrid. Given the two-pronged dynamics that they have experienced from the very beginning of the system, Jews have, as we explained earlier, been placed in an anxious space. This defines the existential context of the Spinozas, Marxes, Bubers, and Levinases. This positioning allows us to place/understand Jewish experiences as part of/constituting a network,

32 Gilman is at the forefront of the theoretical analysis of Jewish culture and thought. See “We’re not Jews”: Imagining Jewish History and Jewish Bodies in Contemporary Multicultural Literature, *Orientalism and the Jews*, Kalmar and Penslar, eds., pp. 201–204.

33 Mignolo Walter, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 77.

one that can be best understood in its relation to the norm of coloniality, rather than as an exception to colonialism.³⁴

My proposal of using the model of the border thinker to analyze Jewish thought stems as much from the aforementioned historical reason as it does from theoretical considerations. Mignolo argues that the border thinker is an intellectual who may be forced to inhabit the zone between “the West and the rest,” that area where Bhabha hopes to create a “Third Space.” Mignolo explains that the colonized person? becomes cognizant of the dark side of modernity, conscious of his/her own subject-position, acknowledges “the colonial difference,” and selects a preferable option for the side of the colonized. As Western thought had defined the colonized by her/his incapacity to achieve rationality, the colonized herself/himself affirms that there is an alternative to the monopolistic rationality of civilization. This affirmation affords the intellectual an epistemological advantage defined as a double register. She/he is acquainted with regnant understandings of civilizational rationality given that it was imposed on the colonized as the only acceptable framework of thought. But her/his experience within her/his community enables the intellectual to not only understand the dark outcomes of the system’s rationality but also to imagine alternatives that arise from modes of thinking that had been previously discarded. This critical engagement with her/his double register is what constitutes Mignolo’s conception of border thinker. Mignolo’s work centers in unveiling the border thinkers in Native and intellectuals that depart from Native thinking in what is today considered Latin America.³⁵ Others have done this with Caribbean and/or Africana intellectuals.³⁶ My objective is to do it with Jews.

The model of the border thinker developed above overcomes three of the central limitations of the concept of hybridity. In the first place, it acknowledges the asymmetry of power between parties in the struggle. Second, it does not seek to playfully deconstruct these polarities. The border thinker constructs an alternative by prioritizing the colonized epistemologies, thereby breaking with the two central features of the narrative: her/his racialization and the presumption of the inexistence of alternatives to Western thought. Lastly, since it remarks the existence of the system since the sixteenth century, it enables us to incorporate Jews as part of the matrix of those populations affected by coloniality, and to include Jewish voices from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, from Spinoza to Marx to Levinas.

This interpretative framework is especially suited to interpreting the position of Jewish intellectuals/thinkers. In general, they will not try to efface the binarism.

34 *Ibid*, pp. 209–303.

35 Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, pp. 209–303.

36 See Afro-Jewish philosopher Gordon Lewis, *Existencia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*, New York, Routledge, 2000, and Maldonado-Torres Nelson, *Against War*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 93–164.

Rather they will privilege the knowledge of the colonized to subvert normative thinking in the midst of the colonial divide. Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps an exemplary case. He blames the imperialism of ontology and finds in the Hebrew (or the rabbinical texts) the possibility of offering an alternative to the monopolist system of thought. Franz Rosenzweig, for his part, also finds in the sociology of Jewish life an alternative not only to critique the Christian civilization that he categorizes as imperialist, but also to offer a second path toward the redemption of mankind, one that is independent from the bloody conquest of the cross. Inspired by Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin trusts in the mystical interpretation of the Messianic as an alternative to the mechanistic teleological conception that has captured Western imagination (and some previous Jewish revolutionaries). As explained above these intellectuals are border thinkers. They do not try to efface the divide, but find in the negated Jewish sources an alternative to the colonial imposition of one system of thought.

What do we do with the non-religious thinkers such as Marx and Freud? Some may argue that they do not acknowledge the Jewish tradition, nor employ its resources as alternatives. This is where, after showing the limits a few paragraphs above, I want to return to the value of both Deutscher and Cuddihy's proposals. From the former, we have learned the existence of a long-standing Jewish tradition of heretics, situated at the core of the Jewish tradition. From the second, we learned that these proposals were actual apologetics constructed after realizing the inability of the Western world of fulfill its promise (a problem we identified as a result of the dualism between evolutionism and dualism existing since the sixteenth century). Therefore Marx's proposals of going beyond "Christianity" and "Capitalism" or Freud's accusations of the deep psychological issues that are carried through parricide (in a moment in which Christianity was thought to descend and to have been cut from Judaism) can be seen under the new light of the decolonial framework of Jewish thought.

New Directions: Jewish Thought in Network

In this article we have explored a relational decolonial framework to interpret modern Jewish thought. We particularly pointed out that the traditional liberal models are short-sighted when analyzing the existential conditions that precedes the proposals. Jews, whether politically colonized or not, have suffered the force of colonality and their reaction to the pernicious interplay between evolutionism and dualism, between forced inclusion and forced exclusion, parallels the experience of many otherized or negated populations, including Natives, Africans and Muslims, since the sixteenth century. Here, we should clarify once again that we are not equating all thinking that is not European. The particularities in the racialization of different groups should not be lost. Issues of, for example, labor or space, should be part of the discussion. Still, it should

be acknowledged that all of them are linked to the matrix of the coloniality of power and share the effects of the colonial interplay. My proposal, then, is to employ this new framework of decoloniality to show how the social mechanisms (two-pronged evolutionism/dualism) illuminate the drive that made Jewish intellectuals (border thinker) subvert the system, an aspect long explored by liberal interpretative frameworks. This framework/ interpretative proposal offers opportunities in three different realms: disciplinary partnerships, methodology, and geopolitics.

In the first place a Decolonial framework enables the interpreters of Jewish thought to find alternative conversation partners. Now there is no need to insist, as the field has been doing to exhaustion, on the comparison of Jewish thought with Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. I do not intend to negate the influence that these intellectuals have had on Jewish thought. Yet, given the matrix of coloniality, these European Christian thinkers were given a primary role setting the agenda of philosophy and social theory. Since Jewish thought often tried to subvert this agenda, it would be interesting to analyze how this subversive disruption can be connected to the one generated by Africans, Muslims, Latin Americans and other colonized. Jews, in this way, were neither constructing normative universality nor fighting for recognition within the matrix of power. They were, like many others affected by coloniality, seeking a to develop an alternative to this matrix.

If we follow this path, and as a second opportunity, there will be no need to limit our analysis to conceptual comparisons, a methodology that disregards the importance of historical contexts. Since the effects of coloniality have been widespread among these communities there is a common historical background that allows us to make the discipline relational instead of comparative. By exploring the relation between the different systems created to confront coloniality, we will distinguish the contribution Jewish thought can offer to revolutionary thinking, while addressing blind spots in dialogue with of other interlocutors. This space will not only generate opportunities to welcome other conversation partners in relation, but will also bring to the discussion some a much-needed humility by ceasing to present Jews as the (only) vanguard of revolutionary thinking, one that needs to be adapted to other experiences in places where people presumably cannot think for themselves.

Finally, and perhaps more explicitly, will offer an opportunity of understanding how the geopolitical center may be an obstacle instead of an advantage in the generation of alternative modalities of thinking. At a basic level we will start by disentangling the separation between "high" universal Jewish philosophies generated Europe, America or Israel and "low" Jewish literatures generated in the rest of the Jewish world. And on a broader scale it will understand what the center can learn from the periphery. It is, after all, when we understand the peripherality of European Jewish thought, that we can start pondering what we

have been missing by insisting time and again that our eyes focus on/look at and from the center.

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УМРЕЖЕНИ: СЛУЧАЈ ДЕКОЛОНИЈАЛНЕ ЈЕВРЕЈСКЕ МИСЛИ

Сажетак

Као полазно место овог рада аутор узима слепу тачку у либералној интерпретацији модерне јеврејске мисли и сматра да је нужно усвојити деколонијални оквир за разумевање критичког покретача јеврејских интелектуалаца. Аутор сматра да овај иновативни приступ баца светло на егзистенцијалне услове који су постали главна сила иза које се артикулисала јеврејска субверзија модерности. Док већина либерала сматра да је ово резултат развоја нације-државе, аутор показује да ова претпоставка из 19/20. века (европских) Јевреја игнорише векове борбе и ствара еуроцентричне ослобађајуће квалитете. Као таква, она лимитира критичку мисао на исти просторни контекст у којем је и настао тлачитељски дискурс. Као алтернативу, аутор сматра да је колонијализам, као дугорочан процес, узрок настанка овог покрета обухватајући обрасце доминације који су се развили у колонијалном контексту али и наставили да постоје преко његове временске или територијалне димензије. Овај процес се може пратити од 16. века, када су јеврејски интелектуалци постали једна група међу осталим колективитетима који су напали срж овог 500 година старог процеса. Аутор закључује да предложени оквир може да ојача ово поље истраживања нудећи ре-евалуацију савеза дисциплина, методолошких оквира и геополитичких осетљивости.

Кључне речи: јеврејска мисао, деколонијализам, постколонијализам, револуција, еуроцентричност

Примљен: 12.01.2016.

Прихваћен: 6.08.2016.