

## BOOK REVIEWS

### WHITHER JUDAISM?

**Santiago Slabodsky. *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014. Hardcover. ISBN 9781137365316. Paperback. ISBN 9781137520289. 259 pp. + introduction, notes, bibliography, index**

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In *Black Skin, White Masks*, reflecting on “the Jew and I”, Frantz Fanon tells the following anecdote: “It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who recalled the fact to me one day: ‘Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you.’” Fanon adds: “And I found that he was universally right – by which I meant that I was answerable in my body and in my heart for what was done to my brother.”<sup>1</sup>

Santiago Slabodsky recalls this passage in Chapter 1 of *Decolonial Judaism*. Fanon’s views were more complex than might first appear (a point to which I shall return). Nonetheless, as Slabodsky says, his words testify to “the history of suffering and resistance that connects Jews to other colonized peoples.”<sup>2</sup> This connection, which Slabodsky makes convincingly, is the historical basis for the enquiry he pursues in his ground-breaking and thought-provoking book. However, this connection is complicated and the complications, along with the profound ambiguities to which they give rise, have a crucial bearing on the project to which his book is a kind of prolegomenon; or so I shall argue. *Decolonial Judaism* ends by putting this project in the form of a question: “What are the conditions according to which one could undertake a Jewish decolonial reading of the geopolitical scene?” This essay gives the beginning of a response to this question.

Slabodsky’s question is about the present and future. His book is intended to prepare the ground for this enquiry by casting an eye back to the period between the 1940s and 1980s, when a number of prominent Jewish thinkers tried to formulate a Jewish decolonialism based on the commonalities between “modern Jewish experiences,” especially in Europe, and the experiences of non-European peoples colonized by European powers. In the same period, however, there was “a historical turn” affecting Jews: their “ultimate integration into Western society.” The West, ancient incubator of anti-Judaism and the cradle of modern antisemitism, now “portrays itself as the protector and liberator” of the Jews. This is both an oversimplification and an over-generalization. On the one hand, Slabodsky’s

actual discussion of the Jewish “historical turn” is more nuanced than it seems from this description. On the other hand, sometimes it is necessary to paint in broad brushstrokes in order to bring an important truth to light.

The change in the status of Jews in the West (despite the persistence of anti-semitism) is a case in point. It is a process that began after the Second World War and continues into the present, a set of developments in which the creation of the State of Israel and the geopolitical role it has come to play loom large. For Slabodsky, this “systemic change” is the spanner in the works of the Jewish decolonial projects that he examines. The thinkers in question do not succeed in resisting its tendency to split Jews off from “other collectives affected by colonial discourse.” Yet they make a valiant attempt. It might, he believes, profit us to take stock of their achievements, while diagnosing how they went wrong. In short, *Decolonial Judaism* “is a study of resistances: provocative, powerful, problematic, and unsuccessful resistances ...” Hence, the paradoxical subtitle, *Triumphal Failures*.

But why *Barbaric Thinking*? Well, who are the barbarians? It is a moot point. One answer to this question is given in the “narrative of barbarism” (as Slabodsky calls it), a story that Europe (and, by extension, the West in general) tends to tell about humankind across space and time. In this self-serving narrative, Europe (or the West) owns the title deeds to the word “civilization,” with all its positive connotations. The opposite – barbarism – is a state either of backwardness or of innate inferiority. It follows that Europe, depending on its mood or on which version of the story it tells at any given time, has either a mission to civilize – “the White Man’s burden” (in Kipling’s phrase) – or a license to subjugate – call this “the White Man’s privilege” – or both. (In practice, the two have tended to go hand in hand.) Thus, the “narrative of barbarism,” as Slabodsky emphasizes, is *racialized*: its subject is the *White Man*. (It is also *gendered*, the *White Man*, although this is not a topic of discussion in his book, presumably because it is not a theme in the literature that the book examines.) So, in the context of this European narrative, the phrase “barbaric thinking” is part of a racist lexicon that stigmatizes the non-white peoples of the world.

In the subtitle of the book, however, there is a twist. The same phrase is used ironically or (better) defiantly. It is a defiant appropriation of the word “barbaric,” a refusal to play by the rules Europe sets. The version of decolonial thinking (Jewish or otherwise) that most interests Slabodsky is one in which the “barbarians” lay claim to the word “barbaric” and assert it positively, over and against its opposite, “civilized”, reversing the usual polarity of these terms and returning the favor (so to speak) to the European stigmatizer. He calls this the *positive* counter-narrative to the European narrative of barbarism. Among Jewish intellectuals, he finds it in the work of Emmanuel Levinas (from the 1970s on) and Albert Memmi.<sup>3</sup>

The Introduction quotes Memmi's line "I am an incurable barbarian": a perfect expression of the defiant appropriation of the word.<sup>4</sup>

But if Levinas and Memmi are the heroes of the book, they are also its villains, and if *Decolonial Judaism* is "a study of resistances," their resistances are what constitute the *Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking*. The *triumphal* aspect of their decolonial thought consists in the inclusion of Jews in "the community of barbarians," a constellation in which Jews "and other colonized peoples" link arms in solidarity. Their *failure*, he argues, lies in their embrace, in the name of this solidarity, of the State of Israel and their inability to see the contradiction this generates. The contradiction arises from the fact that "the Jewish state" situates itself "as a Western outpost against barbarism," employing the European narrative of barbarism in its portrayal of the Arab world in whose midst the state exists, including the Palestinian inhabitants of the territory on which the state was formed in 1948 (and into which it has expanded since 1967). Thus, Levinas and Memmi endorse a state that reproduces the very narrative that they themselves denounce. They "insist on describing Israel as the path to the integration of Jews into a barbaric Third World community." This, says the author, is "the central paradox animating our analysis." It prompts the question (which Slabodsky asks explicitly), How was it possible? How could Levinas and Memmi end up in contradiction to themselves?

This is certainly a conundrum to conjure with. But, in a way, it floats on the surface of a deeper conundrum, one that the book raises without quite posing. To the question "How was it possible?" the author gives a disarmingly simple answer in the Epilogue: "I argue that the positive counter-narratives failed because they were unable to make an internal critique of the new Jewish status." To be sure, but why? If both Levinas and Memmi were "barbaric thinkers" (in the positive sense), if this means affirming resources contained within Judaism, and if an *internal* critique means a critique that utilizes these resources, then what explains their inability to make one?<sup>5</sup> Their failure suggests that something profound impeded their vision, something prevented them from critiquing "the new Jewish status" from the inside. I suggest that this "something" lies coiled in the *old* Jewish status, the very status that leads Slabodsky (and others) to regard the Jews of Europe down the centuries as a colonized population. The old Jewish status turned into the new. How was *this* possible? This is the deeper conundrum underlying Slabodsky's book.

Some riddles are easy to solve. Others are like the one the Mad Hatter posed at the tea party in Wonderland: "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" After pondering the question, Alice gives up. "What's the answer?" she asks. "I haven't the slightest idea" is the Hatter's reply. The deeper conundrum raised by *Decolonial Judaism* is at least as puzzling as the Mad Hatter's riddle. And at the risk of seeming even madder than the Hatter, I shall approach it via another conundrum, one

that might seem to come out of the blue but which brings us back to Fanon: Are Jews white? Fanon's answer in the passage with which this essay began appears, at first sight, to be "No."<sup>6</sup> But elsewhere it seems to be "Yes."<sup>7</sup> Is this uncertainty? Or is it the certain knowledge that there is no black-and-white answer?

Fanon has his own way of exploring black and Jewish difference.<sup>8</sup> But without following him further, which would take us too far afield, I find his equivocation (if that is what it is) suggestive. It suggests that the "internal colonialism" (to borrow a phrase from Jonathan Hess) to which the Jews of Europe were subject *is and is not* equivalent to the "external colonialism" experienced by non-European peoples.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, Jews *are* and *are not* "black." To elucidate this ambiguity, we must revisit the historical premise on which *Decolonial Judaism* rests – "the history of suffering and resistance that connects Jews to other colonized peoples" – and bring it into sharper focus.

It is illuminating to think of the Jews of Europe down the centuries as a colonized people, but it is also misleading. Their status as the *internal* Other of Europe is significantly different from the status of the *external* Other.<sup>10</sup> The difference complicates the connection between Jews and other peoples who have been under the yoke of Europe. It gives rise to ambiguities that have played – and continue to play – havoc in several spheres: in relations between Jews and postcolonial peoples, in the polarized debates over Zionism and the State of Israel, and in the mutual incomprehension between postcolonial studies and Jewish studies. If I am right, moreover, these ambiguities will also help explain the "triumphal failures" of Levinas's and Memmi's "barbaric thinking." But in a brief essay, I shall stop short of putting any of this to the test. I shall confine myself to setting out my stall.

Otherness is not all of a piece. The difference between the *internal* Other of Europe – the Jews – and the *external* Other – the others – is twofold. The first difference is territorial. In contrast with the non-European peoples colonized by European powers in modernity, the Jews of Europe have not inhabited a territory over which they were sovereign and which was conquered or subdued by an invader.<sup>11</sup> They have, of course, suffered at the hands of invaders, along with the peoples in whose midst they have lived. And at various times they have, as Jews, undergone displacement, expulsion, and exclusion from various parts of the European continent. But none of this is the same as having a country of your own which is conquered or colonized by an external power. The locution "*internal* colonialism" (at least in the case of the Jews) speaks precisely to this difference. The difference *makes* a difference, not least when it comes to thinking about what *postcolonial* might mean for Jewry. For, if this difference is overlooked, and if the *imagined* Jewish homeland (Zion) is treated as the *real* or *actual* homeland, then Zionism – specifically Zionism in the form of the political project of creating a Jewish state in Palestine – presents itself as decolonial.<sup>12</sup> Which is just how it *has*

presented itself to many Jewish Zionists on the left (as well as sympathizers on the left who are not Jewish). The mistake is understandable but (in more ways than one) fatal.

Furthermore, being Europe's *internal* Other is not merely a matter of location. It is also conceptual or constitutional. As the soil from which Christianity sought to uproot itself (and yet root itself), as the foil against which it defined itself (yet from which it derived itself), Judaism has been intimately present in Europe's idea of itself *ab initio*. You might almost say that, Jews, as the *internal* Other, are the Other *inside* the European Self. Concomitantly, over time, Jews have tended to internalize Europeanness. It is not that similar processes have not, up to a point, occurred with other Others. But there is a difference, a difference measured by the breadth of a hyphen: the hyphen that joins – or separates – the two elements in the signifier "Judeo-Christian." The sense of this hyphen is variable, changes radically over time, and is even contradictory.<sup>13</sup> But you never (or hardly ever) see Christianity harnessed by a hyphen to any other tradition or identity. Such is the intimacy of Judeo to Christian – even when it is the intimacy of infinite negation and even when the negation of Judaism is transposed (as it was in the European Enlightenment) into a secular key. This complexity is bound to complicate the meaning of certain political events, such as the Balfour Declaration and Holocaust Memorial Day, and the way these events are perceived by different parties. It is liable not only to condition relations between colonizer (Europe) and colonized (the Jews), but also between one kind of colonized (internal) and the other (external).

None of this is to deny or diminish "the history of suffering and resistance that connects Jews to other colonized peoples," the historical basis for a decolonial Judaism. Nor is it to reject the solidarity of the oppressed. "The Jew and I," muses Fanon: "the Jew, my brother in misery."<sup>14</sup> But misery is not all of a piece, not even among the colonized. And resistance, when it misunderstands itself, can end up being oppressive to others – as we see with the State of Israel. My intention is only to bring the phrase "other colonized peoples" into sharper focus by uncovering some of the complexity that lies beneath the surface of the word "colonized."

Which brings me back to the question that Slabodsky poses at the end of his book: "What are the conditions according to which one could undertake a Jewish decolonial reading of the geopolitical scene?" My (incipient and limited) response is this: The first condition is to recognize the difference made by Jewish difference and to confront the hidden complexity that the word "colonized" conceals. I wager that paying attention to the specificity of the Jewish case will shed light on other questions that have surfaced in this essay. How could Levinas and Memmi end up in contradiction to themselves? (How was it possible?) Why were they unable to make an internal critique of "the new Jewish status"? And how did the *old* Jewish status turn into the *new*? (How was *this* possible?) But the most pressing issue, the

one to which all the others lead, the burning question to which the book points like a finger, is this: What now? Whither Judaism?<sup>15</sup>

In the Epilogue, Slabodsky remarks that the question he poses at the end of the book “could have preceded it.” I beg to differ. The previous seven chapters had to come first. They give the question its substance and its weight. Moreover, ending with this question makes the point that the ending is a beginning. In the Introduction, the author says he seeks to “enter a conversation,” and in the Epilogue he calls for “a critical dialogue ... perhaps one that exceeds the limits of academia.” *Decolonial Judaism* is an opening gambit. It is essential reading for any reader who also aspires to this dialogue. I firmly believe, moreover, that somewhere in its scholarly pages there lies the answer to a question that has confounded the greatest minds: “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

1. Fanon (1986): 92.
2. This connection has been made by other scholars. Kalmar and Penslar single out Susannah Heschel and Jonathan Hess who, they say, “have produced interesting work that explains the parallels between imperialist and anti-Jewish orientalism on the premise that European Jews were a kind of colonized population, subject to quasi-colonial domination by the Gentiles”: Kalmar and Penslar (2005): xvi.
3. Slabodsky finds a *negative* counter-narrative in a European Jewish Marxist tradition, which culminates in the Frankfurt School, notably Adorno and Horkheimer. The negative counter-narrative reverses the *accusation* of barbarism, accusing the West of being barbaric, rather than inverting the *value* of barbarism. A whole chapter is devoted to “negative barbarism.” Slabodsky also finds a negative counter-narrative in Levinas’s earlier work, prior to his encounter with the Argentinean Enrique Dussel in the 1970s. Dussel is one of a number of thinkers from “the Global South” – Aimé Césaire and Walter Mignolo are two others – on whose work the author draws and whom he discerns in the background of the Jewish decolonialism of Memmi and Levinas. Drawing on their “Southern frameworks” and “Southern epistemologies” is itself a decolonial move that the author (who hails from Buenos Aires) adopts in this book.
4. At the close of the final chapter, Slabodsky observes that the way forward for Jewish decolonial thinking might or not lie in “the re-affirmation of barbarism.” Even so, he says, “one may want to take note of the central features that a failed history can provide for the future of critical Jewish thought.” This, in a nutshell, is the rationale for the book.
5. I am using “Judaism,” as Slabodsky does, to refer broadly to the cultural heritage of the Jews, not narrowly to the “religion.”
6. This impression is offset somewhat by the sentence with which Fanon concludes his recollection of what his Antillean philosophy professor said: “Later I realized that he meant, quite simply, an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro”: Fanon (1986): 92.
7. For example, “All the same, the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness ... He is a white man, and, apart from some rather debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed”: Fanon (1986): 87.
8. For an illuminating discussion of Fanon’s complex take on black and Jewish difference, see Cheyette (2005). Also see Rothberg (2009), Chapter 3, where the focus is more on Césaire.

9. Hess (2002): 11.
10. This makes it sound as if Jews are the *sole* “internal Other” of Europe, whereas the topic is complicated. I am oversimplifying matters in order to make a distinction that, for the purposes of the argument I am making, needs to be stated boldly.
11. The Iron Age kingdoms of Israel and Judah belong either to ancient history or to the Hebrew scriptures as part of the cultural heritage of Judaism. (On “Judaism,” see note 5.) No serious political theory could justify treating them – or any other state in antiquity – as a basis for claiming political sovereignty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The same applies to their successor states in the region, up to and including the sack of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE. This is not to minimize, let alone dismiss, the fundamental significance that Zion has for Judaism. On the contrary, it is to insist on a necessary condition for being able to recognize that significance for what it is.
12. I say “specifically” because not all kinds of Zionism are political and not all forms of political Zionism advocate a Jewish state (rather than, say, a binational state).
13. Topolski (2016): 268. The term “Judeo-Christianity” was first used in print in 1831: 269.
14. Fanon (1986): 92.
15. See note 5.
16. I wish to thank Azar Dakwar for his decolonial insights in private conversation.

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