

## The Location of “Jewish Difference”: Coloniality as a Response to Brian Klug’s “Whither Judaism?”

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In the last two decades of the twentieth century, conversations between the fields of Postcolonial and Jewish studies were met with genuine distrust among English-speaking scholars. In the twenty-first century, however, both sympathizers and detractors recognize the emergence of a burgeoning field at the intersection of these two currents.<sup>1</sup> Some acknowledge this with delight, while others denounce it with fear. Brian Klug, in a truly engaging review of my book *Decolonial Judaism*, seems to stand decisively and courageously among the former. He generously puts my work in conversation with some of the most provocative scholarship in this emerging field and offers insightful comments on the historical/conceptual links between Jews and other populations affected by “coloniality.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, he elevates to truly intriguing levels my ultimate question: what are the necessary conditions to undertake a Jewish “decolonial” reading of the geopolitical scene? Shortly before the publication of *Orientalism*, Edward Said’s English-language landmark book in the field of Postcolonial studies, Emmanuel Levinas expressed as an imperative the need for an ethical “orientation” in the task of interpretation/translation.<sup>3</sup> Klug’s reflection represents a superb post-Saidian example of this Levinasian imperative.

It is precisely in his commitment to this ethical orientation that Klug does not veil his argument behind niceties. His review “Whither Judaism?” becomes both a challenge to my work and an invitation to a rich dialogue that I could only imagine while writing the book. For Klug, the communication between Jewish and Postcolonial intellectuals is full of “ambiguities” and, to affirm his interpretation, tensions. He quickly recognizes that a book that carries the “paradoxical subtitle” of *Triumphal Failures* does end up exploring some of these tensions. In other words, the text delves into the inability of Jewish intellectuals to successfully integrate into a decolonial community after 1945/1948. Klug does affirm that my construction is “convincing,” “thought-provoking,” and “ground-breaking.” But he suggests that both my proposal and its ramifications should be further re-examined. In sum, he believes that in my impetus to employ historical-conceptual lenses that include Jews among other peoples affected by “coloniality” (coloniality, not necessarily colonialism, a point to which I shall return when I challenge Klug’s interpretation of my project), the breadth of my lens may have led me to overlook “Jewish difference.”

From the outset of his review, Klug generously asserts that my interpretation is actually “more nuanced” than that portrayed in the above statement and that

sometimes “it is necessary to paint in broad brushstrokes in order to bring an important truth to light.” This does not mean, however, that the breadth of my approach is without consequences. Klug points out that, first of all, I may have deflated the “intimacy” and the “hidden complexity” of the (European) Jewish-Christian relation, features that set Jews apart from other racialized groups. And second, by linking “internal” colonialism (Klug refers to European Jews) to “external” colonialism (everyone else?) as part of a common project, I may have overlooked the distinction between different kinds of “colonialisms.” This distinction is not just conceptual. While he implicitly and quickly acknowledges our common ethical commitment, Klug explains that the conceptual understanding of Jews as one more group among the many affected by coloniality can be used by ideologues who do not share our commitment and who uncritically support nationalistic enterprises. In other words, others could use my argument to paradoxically recover the very same project that Levinas and Memmi represented and that I critiqued: to view the state of Israel as the locus from which to include Jews in a global decolonial community.

Both Klug’s critique and subsequent argument are worthy of the most attentive of responses. I could provide fast, simplistic answers that would, perhaps too quickly, try to get my project off the hook. Let me enumerate three of these rushed answers and explain why they do not adequately challenge Klug’s argument. First, I could argue that the perception of Jews as the exceptional “internal other” of Europe, an “internal other” that is divorced from other experiences in modern times, reproduces the problematic notion that Jewish history only takes place on “the” continent.<sup>4</sup> I contradict this notion in my book by exploring Jewish alternatives beyond European experiences. I conclude that the most provocative confrontations with coloniality may not emerge from London, Paris, Warsaw, Tel Aviv or New York, but from locations such as Tunis. It is, perhaps unsurprising that the most poignant critique of coloniality is the experiences of those Jews who have suffered actual political colonization and struggled against it.<sup>5</sup> The key example of Albert Memmi puts in question the European location of Judaism (and by extension, of Jewishness) in my book in particular and in the project in general. Just as today, major fields in academia would not dare to assert that European history represents universal history, I could argue that we must not generalize European Jewish history as universal Jewish history. As such, the representation of Jews as exclusively Europe’s internal other should be contested.

This is not the only quick response that one can offer to Klug’s challenge. Second, I could also argue that, as I explained in the book, coloniality had developed varieties of racializing narratives to create a spectrum that was mapped in relation to multiple others. Some of these narratives affected Jews, while others did not. The book analyzes one particular narrative (barbarism) and its counter-narratives, examining how it connects Jews to other populations affected by

coloniality. This move is necessary because the multiplicity of (Jewish and non-Jewish) social theorists that I analyze explore this conceptual and historical affinity. Yet I repeatedly insist that not all racializations have been equal and that we must confront the naturalized hierarchies of race in different times and places throughout modernity. This is why I explicitly explain that my work does not aspire to encyclopedic completeness. On the contrary, in my introduction, I assert that my contribution has a particular focus, and that to build a robust decolonial project, one could only hope that other intellectuals who specialize in other times, periods, regions, narratives, and disciplinary lenses could complement my reading and challenge it.<sup>6</sup> Yet while I insist on this incompleteness and do share Klug's suspicion of discourses that argue that "all miseries are one," I do find value in the study of the common roots in the construction of racialization. As a sociologist of knowledge, I argue that the narrative of barbarism is an avenue through which we can explain how structural modes of thinking have helped to reproduce coloniality through modernity. Jews, in this case and perhaps to the discomfort of some people in the formal field of Jewish studies, are one group among others who were placed in a network of coloniality. More broadly, I argue that it is precisely by privileging a relational methodology over a comparative one that one can recognize this connection and illuminate history of both the Jewish people and coloniality (a point to which I shall return).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, and perhaps more simply, I could question the insistence on Jewish uniqueness, perhaps a secularization of the notion of chosenness—an argument that has been used repeatedly by prophets of the incomparability of the Holocaust as if the event had taken place outside of history and no precedent or corollary could be explored. The fact is that every genealogy of racialization, persecution, and genocide in the modern/colonial world (or before) has particularities. But the specificities that mark differences happen not only in the relation between one community and the other, but also within the broad communities themselves ("African," "Native," "Muslim"). It can even happen among Jews (Western European Jews, "Ostjuden," Levantine Jews, Arab Jews, Maghrebi Jews, Latina/o Jews, African Jews, Afro-American Jews, etc.) who have transited through alternative experiences. So, if we want to emphasize Jewish difference because Jewish experience did not fully match with other experiences, I would ask my critic to continue this same logic of thinking and question the existence of a unified Jewish experience that is generally molded on the European experience. My fear is that engaging in one task and not the other may pose the danger of leading to trans-historical notions of Jewish history, chosenness, and anti-Semitism, and ultimately reify once again Euro-Judaism as universal Judaism.<sup>8</sup>

But I would not want to exculpate myself so easily. I consider the three arguments made above to be insufficient. In the first case, I do extend the book beyond

the boundaries of Europe but, just as Klug does, I still insist on the importance of analyzing the role of the normative construction of Judaism and Jewishness in order to understand its relation with coloniality. I do so primarily because the intellectuals I explore presupposed this notion and then because we can explain better the luck of European Jews and the multiplicity of non-European Jews when we recognize how “the Jew” is presented normatively in the Western imaginary. Second, while I do limit my analysis to one narrative throughout my text, it is not because I am practicing an anachronistic philological study, but because I carry out a transdisciplinary genealogy of the concept. The study of barbarism is a lens through which to explore the changing role of coloniality and its relation to Jews, among others. So the analysis of barbarism is relevant insofar as it explains geopolitical designs beyond just this particular narrative. And finally, I could contend that all experiences (even within each of the collectives constructed as Africana, Native, Muslims, and Jews) are different and have particularities. But this would prevent the mobilization of these identities from finding a common relational structure. But, again, Klug may well be correct in suggesting that I cannot dismiss particularities (Christianity emerging from—and as an erasure of—Judaism) in order to explain the rhetoric of particular racisms. As a consequence, I must resist the temptation of easy answers that could get my book off the hook too easily.

Is Klug, then, correct in his critique of my work? My critic and I share a common ethical-political orientation, but we have very different epistemology, analytical framework, and methodological tools. If my book had followed a traditional Anglophone model which emphasizes the emergence of colonialism after the late-eighteenth century, Klug’s assessment might have been correct. This is a model that has been particularly applied by Anglophone scholarship to the pre-Holocaust German Jewry; Klug summarizes this model very well, and I have explored it in my book largely in the third chapter. This model portrays Jews largely as a European population and ascribes them two distinct characteristics. It points out that they have been “internally” colonized, since they have not gone through a loss of territory, and that they have/had an intimate relation with Christianity, as they are/were an integral part of (the ever-changing conception of) the “Judeo-Christian” tradition. Comparatively, then, “Jewish difference” emerges from both its “internal colonization” and from its “intimate connection” to Christianity.

The book, however, is not titled “*Postcolonial* Judaism” but “*Decolonial* Judaism.” This distinction is crucial because it shows that Klug and I are using different tools that lead us to different places. In the first chapter of the book, “Jewish Thought, Postcolonialism, and Decoloniality,” I explore the contributions made by Jewish scholars studying European contexts in Postcolonial Anglophone scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Klug shows—much better than I could—some of the limits of, for example, models of “internal colonialism.” Since I largely analyze intellectual

proposals that emerged at the intersection of the French-Spanish decolonialisms, I explain how I am choosing an alternative framework: the tools of the school of modernity/coloniality, or decoloniality, emergent in Latin America (whose leading scholars Walter Dignolo and Enrique Dussel were trained in Paris, just as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon before them).<sup>10</sup> It is precisely the tools of the decolonial school that open the opportunity to confront the twofold (territorial and conceptual-historical) “Jewish difference” that Klug is challenging me to revisit.

It should be pointed out that one of the key contributions of this school of thought is the distinction between colonialism and coloniality. The former refers to the forced imposition of one power over another, independently of the type of colonialism—settler, extractivist, and so on. The latter accounts for the pernicious patterns of domination that were developed during colonial times in colonial networks and that ultimately transcended time/space affecting populations under the European yoke throughout the world. In the book, I analyze Jewish experiences in Europe, the Maghreb, the Middle East, and Latin America (my Southern Trans-Atlantic framework). While some of these populations were colonized, some were not. In the language of Anglophone Postcolonial studies, some were colonized internally, some externally, and some both. Yet all of them were deeply affected by the patterns of racial domination developed during colonialism in/outside colonial locations; this dynamic involves coloniality in general and the narrative of barbarism in particular. It is not a coincidence, then, that Césaire and Dignolo insightfully agree that the Holocaust cannot exclusively be interpreted in light of European history.<sup>11</sup> This is because coloniality developed patterns of domination that would become transnational. Lessons from plantations in the Caribbean and the Southern US or the genocides in African territory were studied and applied in the concentration and extermination camps in Nazi Germany. Lessons from the Holocaust, in turn, influenced modes to persecute, torture, and “disappear” freedom fighters between 1940s and 1960s in the postcolonial struggles waged across the Maghreb, and between 1960s and 1980s in the clandestine camps of the military dictatorships across Latin America.

The transnational (and transversal) character of coloniality, then, is what challenges the distinction between internal/external colonialisms. But global designs were not alone in this. The resistances against coloniality also took place on a transnational/transversal scale and offer an additional layer that challenges the usefulness of the internal/external distinction. One should not be surprised when Lithuanian Jew Emmanuel Levinas employs an anti-imperialist concept coined by Argentinean-Mexican liberationist Enrique Dussel, as I explore in Chapter 4. And it should be logical that South American intellectual-activists, such as Marcos Aguinis, find inspiration in the struggle of Tunisian Jew Albert Memmi, as I survey in Chapter 7. As I explain in Chapter 5, this is far from being an exclusive reality

among Jews and Global South intellectuals. The Bandung spirit led, just to name a few examples, the Caribbean Fanon to fight in Algeria and Cuban freedom fighters to participate in Angola or in the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa. If resistance to colonialism appears as soon as colonialism emerges, the transnational/transversal networks of resistance to coloniality emerge as soon as coloniality becomes a transnational reality. Both coloniality and its resistances question the analytical usefulness of the distinction between internal and external colonialisms. This does not mean that all locations suffer the same way. Throughout my book, I explain that, actually, colonized locations may have suffered extreme forms of racializing narratives and, as such, can analyze them in a more poignant fashion. Yet it is a constant that coloniality links racialization throughout the world.

By focusing on the networks of coloniality and the networks of resistances that they spur, we can recognize a much broader reality, one that, in the past, was understood by intellectual-activists much more easily (“provocatively, powerfully, and problematically”) than by their current counterparts. But in the interest of illuminating this reality, we need to change our methodology. It is imperative that we leave behind the competitive comparative framework that invariably reaches an impasse in an “Olympics of suffering” in which representatives of collectives fight for recognition and the top place on the suffering podium vis-à-vis their counterparts. Instead, we need to welcome a relational analysis that brings into view the transnational and transversal nature of both coloniality and its resistances. Without disregarding the existence of particularities and naturalized hierarchies among racialized populations, coloniality has created modes of domination that continue to be perpetuated until the present, and both this structure and its resistances challenge the exclusive emphasis on territorial definitions of internal/external natures as the key factor in the analysis of racialization in a colonized world. A relational decolonial framework is precisely what can illuminate us.

The previous critique particularly challenges the conception of territoriality. Still, more work can be done in light of Klug’s well-thought argument about a second problem: the conceptual-historical limitation. He explains that given their history, Jewish-Christian relations are “intimate,” “complex,” and, others may add, unique. Furthermore, Klug asks me to “recognize the difference made by Jewish difference.” Once again, I find in Klug’s challenge an excellent invitation and a wonderful opportunity to build a decolonial Judaism from our very distinct epistemological perspectives. Against a traditional Anglophone conception of colonialism (that focuses on post-late-eighteenth century enterprises), Enrique Dussel (drawing from Spanish and Caribbean sources) explains that a new world started to develop at the end of the fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth century with the simultaneous defeat of el-Andalus, the intensification of the Transatlantic slave-trade, and the conquest of the Americas. These events set a new global stage

(world-system some may argue) that would ultimately dominate, through colonialism, over 80 per cent of the world and, through coloniality, virtually the entire planet.<sup>12</sup> In the Trans-Atlantic, and eventually the Mediterranean, the construction of “the Muslim/Arab,” “the Jew/Israelite,” “the Indian/Native,” and “the African/Black” would be linked inextricably from then on. This link would give a global dimension to anti-Semitism, not for its particularities, but for its breadth. If, instead of comparing, we seek to trace connections between the roots of persecution, as I explain in my second chapter, it will become clear that Jews have been interrelated with other others for the last five hundred years. They served as a model through which to interpret the culture and origin of Natives in the Americas, they were called the Blacks of Europe and blamed for building alliances with Africans to impurify the continent, and were referred to by Western luminaries as “Oriental,” “Asiatic refugees,” or (interestingly) “A Palestinian Race.”<sup>13</sup> So it is important to point out that in modernity the hatred against Jews (or anti-Semitism) is not independent of coloniality but that it is, rather, a consequence of coloniality that permanently interrelated them with other others.

This relation can be better explained by viewing it structurally. We learn from Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano that the coloniality of power/knowledge was developed by the encounter between two discursive forces: evolutionism and dualism. While the former insisted on the existence of only one path to redemption (later on, to civilization, liberation, development, and lately democracy) and would force all racialized populations to adhere to it, the latter will imply that there was a limiting force among these populations (natural inferiority or incorrigibility) that would prevent them from achieving the goal even if they desired—or were structurally forced—to do so.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, these populations would permanently be under suspicion for their inability to become Christian/modern/civilized/liberated/developed/democratic/etc. The narrative of barbarism was a key feature of this pernicious rhetoric of coloniality. As I explain in the second chapter, it reified its own history by retrieving and reframing the evolutionism contained in Christian theopolitics and the dualism of a particular lineage of Greek ethnopolitics. In this way, the narrative of barbarism operated as a powerful tool of coloniality in the construction of modern racisms, including anti-Semitism.

Decades prior to the current debate between Postcolonial and Decolonial methodologies, Salo Baron wrote one of the most classical contributions to the study of anti-Semitism. Baron was one of the foremost authorities on anti-Semitism and is continuously honored by normative Jewish scholarship. He challenged the conception that anti-Semitism was a trans-historical phenomenon. Without downplaying the fact that there are continuities among historical periods, he points out that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represent a turning point, precisely, I add, at the same time that coloniality emerges. It is not until this time that Jews would be

simultaneously forced to convert to Christianity as the only path to salvation and placed under permanent suspicion for their inability to achieve this goal. The “impurity” of Jewish blood led to this suspicion of incorrigibility as, in the next three centuries, forced attempts of assimilation to achieve civilized or modern status would be met with suspicion, persecution, and negation.<sup>15</sup> In other words, Jews encountered throughout modernity the pernicious combination between evolutionism and dualism observed by Quijano. But they were not alone as this same interplay worked on different levels and balances to racialize all “barbarians.”

Any orthodox reader of modern Jewish persecution will quickly recognize that the model structured from Peru can explain the iconic events of modern Jewish history: the Spanish Inquisition, the French Dreyfus Affair, and the Holocaust in Germany, Poland, and elsewhere, including the Maghreb. Furthermore, it would even explain one of the key unanswerable questions about the Holocaust: How could it originate in the place where Jews had assimilated the most? Actually, given the interplay between evolutionism/dualism, it is precisely this “successful” attempt at assimilation (or evolutionism) that created the condition for genocide in the Jewish case (or extreme reinforcement of dualism). This is perhaps a lesson that communities in the US or France may want to learn in the current context. But, overall, it is not surprising that the Peruvian perspective allows us to understand modern anti-Semitism, since the construction of racialization linked Jews with other others under coloniality.

Yet one can wonder how an heterodox Jew like myself who tries to downplay “Jewish difference” in the modern construction of anti-Semitism returns to both orthodox scholarship (Baron) and history (the path from Spain to Germany) to make his case. My training is in very traditional Jewish studies both at the seminary and university levels where I have been overly exposed to “Jewish difference” and the “intimate” Jewish-Christian relation. While I do not deny biographical reasons, my choice is epistemological. My purpose is to show that even the most orthodox conceptual and historical readings of anti-Semitism can easily be interpreted by focusing on the role of coloniality in the construction of anti-Semitism. This places Jews as one among a number of groups who suffer in this process. This does not mean that I cannot identify particularities in the construction of anti-Semitism. The fact is that anti-Black racism has particularities, Islamophobia has particularities, and anti-Semitism has them as well. Klug is correct in stating that the reification of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a form of “Jewish difference.” But these bushes do not grow without a forest and the particularities do not undermine the fact that anti-Semitism was an integral part of a network of coloniality for the last five hundred years.

While I apologize to my fellow Jewish studies colleagues, I ask that we put “Jewish difference” in perspective. This does not mean the study of “Jewish



difference” should be disregarded. Perhaps it is important to analyze it in order to evaluate Jewish responsibility and collaboration with colonial hierarchies. But one should question whether these are not anachronistic constructions made by scholars that today and only today can naturalize Jewish history as European. It is true that there were racist discourses and practices among Jews before normative Jewry became Western. But being Westernized is not the same as being Western. Coloniality has always found eager collaborationist networks among the colonized and reading these projects as normative Judaism before their time is simply anachronistic. But more importantly, I intend to put “Jewish difference” in perspective for the continuous attempts to segregate and elevate anti-Semitism above others forms of racialization. While there are multiple reasons intellectuals focus on the study of “Jewish difference,” Jewish tokenism is frequently used geopolitically in an US-led West to ignore their own acts of racialization and/or genocides (Native, Afro-American, Japanese, Latinx, etc.) presenting “America” as innocent of the criminality of the old Western leadership (Europe). The reader, then, will probably guess that I do not consider “Jewish difference” primarily responsible for the “failures” that I study in my book. The responsibility, I suggest, lies somewhere else: in the geopolitical projects of Jewish Westernization that, in a context of changing normativity, blindly trusted in Eurocentric constructions (among them the nation-state in Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East) as the solution for anti-Semitism. It is a solution that proved to be both unethical and ineffectual because it reproduced more than disrupted the transversal core of both anti-Semitism and modern racisms: coloniality.

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## Notes

1. Here, it is important to point out the work of courageous pioneers who confronted this distrust, largely drawing from non-European experiences and social theory. See, for example, Ella Shohat (1988), Marc Ellis (1989), Ammiel Alcalay (1992), and their twenty-first century extension in Gil Anidjar (2003), Gil Hochberg (2016), and the new collected volume of Shohat’s writings during this period (2017).
2. Klug offers an excellent selection of English-speaking scholarship that largely explores Jewish “internal colonialism” in Europe. This includes the works of Jonathan Hess (2002), Brian Cheyette (2005), Ivan Kalmar/Derek Penslar (2005), Michael Rothberg (2009), Anya Topolsky (2016), and the earlier work of Susannah Heschel (1998) cited in Kalmar/Penslar. Unfortunately,

- this review of the literature between Postcolonial and Jewish Studies does not include the pioneering works described above, and as such remains within the confines of European Judaism.
3. Emmanuel Levinas (1972/2013: 35-8/23-36).
  4. To be fair to the argument, I do explore the uses of “internal colonialism,” but I limit them to the analysis of one counter narrative in Central/Eastern Europe. See especially Chapter 3 (pages 70-5).
  5. See particularly the introduction to my book (pages 1-3) and Chapter 5 (pages 115-43).
  6. See the introduction (particularly page 11).
  7. See the formulation of “methodological risks” in the above-mentioned introduction (pages 7-11), the confrontation with limitations in the first chapter (pages 30-7), and the acknowledgment of differences, hierarchies, and spectrums in the same chapter and the following two chapters (pages 26-9, 40-1, and 59).
  8. I started developing some of these thoughts in the epilogue (pages 205-7) with attention to the work of Shohat, Alcalay, and the most recent work of Shlomo Sand (2008/2009).
  9. See Chapter 1 (pages 17-20 and 30-3) and Chapter 3 (pages 70-5).
  10. See Chapter 1 (pages 24-30) explaining the connection.
  11. See argument developed in Chapter 1 (pages 35-7) based on Cesaire (1955/2000) and Mignolo (2000).
  12. See *ibid* based on Dussel (1995).
  13. See “Jews Among Barbarians” in Chapter 2 (pages 59-66) and throughout the rest of the book.
  14. See page 36 based on Quijano (2000).
  15. See Salo Baron (1976: 5-8). I extended this reading in Santiago Slabodsky (2016).

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