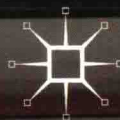


New Approaches to Religion and Power

DECOLONIAL JUDAISM

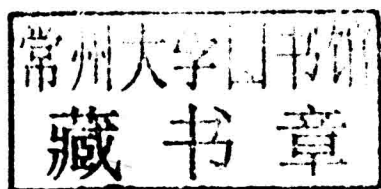
Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking

Santiago Slabodsky

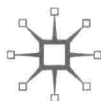


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DECOLONIAL JUDAISM

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NEW APPROACHES TO RELIGION AND POWER

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While the relationship of religion and power is a perennial topic, it only continues to grow in importance and scope in our increasingly globalized and diverse world. Religion, on a global scale, has openly joined power struggles, often in support of the powers that be. But at the same time, religion has made major contributions to resistance movements. In this context, current methods in the study of religion and theology have created a deeper awareness of the issue of power: Critical theory, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, and working class studies are contributing to a new quality of study in the field. This series is a place for both studies of particular problems in the relation of religion and power as well as for more general interpretations of this relation. It undergirds the growing recognition that religion can no longer be studied without the study of power.

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To my abuelas/abuelos

Gita/Arnoldo

Clara/Santiago

East/South

Socialist/Radical

Cosmopolitan/Laborer

Jews

Latin Americans

Barbarians

Acknowledgments

It is customary to start this section in a straightforward manner acknowledging the writer's networks of support. The responsibility is to extend gratitude and exculpate extraordinarily generous individuals and institutions of the mistakes contained in one's volume. I learned from the history of barbarism, however, that co-conspirators are usually blamed for *culpas ajenas* (foreign transgressions). While a civilized gesture would be to exculpate my interlocutors, my barbaric impulse impels me to do the contrary. Since this book responds to challenges my comrades presented to me over the years in four continents and no intellectual contribution is made in isolation from a community, I show my gratitude by making them co-guilty in this enterprise.

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Initiating my conclusion, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional love. Even though learning to hug, smile, and cry by skype is not the easiest task, they have always been my primary source of spiritual guidance and wisdom. My parents Mabel and Jorge taught me the value of responsibility in times of despair and permanent struggle in moments of certainty. My sister Silvina is the source of inspiration for my struggle in Jewish Latin America and my sister Deborah my accomplice in the subversion of global networks while entrenched in eminently local problems. My nephew Alejandro and my niece Nahara taught this parachute uncle how love can fundamentally defy and defeat both spatial and temporal distances. My uncle Daniel and my aunt Julia initiated me in alternative readings and have been models for committed intellectualism.

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SANTIAGO EITAN SLABODSKY

Buenos Aires, Argentina/

Berkeley, California

October, 2013

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INTRODUCTION

The Past Was Worse (and We Miss It)

Barbaric Rubble

I was so immersed in the book that I became unaware of the desolate setting in which I found myself. But another young Argentinean Jew grabbed my shoulder and shattered my reverie: "Please Santiago, snap out of it" she pleaded "don't you realize you are sitting atop the rubble of a library nearly reduced to ashes? We have only a few hours to *save* hundreds of other books!" My comrade was right. In the years to follow I would locate more traditionally inspiring places to read a good novel from the Global South. I remember encountering Isabel Allende in an edgy library in Jerusalem, Chinua Achebe in a smoky Marxist cafe in Havana, and Salman Rushdie in a sunny public garden in Paris. This time, however, I was attempting to read a Tunisian Jewish decolonialist in the remains of a building that only weeks before was incinerated by a car-bomb attack. Though the setting was sinister, I was unable to part with the book. The novel did not have covers, was missing over thirty pages, and contained more dust than my allergies could tolerate. Perhaps the tattered covers made the rallying cry of Albert Memmi even more evocative and resonant. While comparing the elusive temptation of European civilization with the life of Global South Jewry, he proclaimed: "I am an incurable barbarian."¹ It is this statement that prompted the question I intend to answer in this book.

This was not the first time I read a radical Jewish manifesto in a dusty and dark room in Buenos Aires. My hometown is not only home to the largest concentration of Jews in the South, but it is also well known for her old bookstores that serve as functional libraries and loci of leftist congregation. If one spends enough time plotting impossible revolutions with radical activists, one could be invited to hidden storage

spaces behind second walls that were constructed when reading was considered a crime. During the convoluted 1970s, South American military dictatorships besieged a generation of revolutionaries who went underground with their books and the incendiary proposals they contained. The dictatorships were instigated and supported by Western powers during the Cold War, allegedly for the purposes of defending Christian civilization against its barbaric enemies. The Argentinean dictatorship (1976–1983) was not only one of the bloodiest of these genocidal systems; it also found in the Jewish community one of its central targets. Of the total number of people “disappeared” (kidnapped, tortured, and murdered without leaving a trace), Jews represented over twelve percent when they comprised less than one percent of the entire population. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, these Argentinean Jews were cast as a threat to civilization. Perhaps reading Memmi in a dark and dusty room in the South was an ideal place to reflect on the affirmation of Jewish barbarism after all.²

I read the Arab Jewish social theorist, however, in a different dark and dusty room of Buenos Aires. I formed part of a cohort of young Jews whose mission was to retrieve books buried under the rubble. In 1994, the Jewish headquarters that hosted the library were destroyed by an attack whose perpetrators are yet to be found. The car bomb transited the same streets from which seditious Jews had been kidnapped by the genocidal forces of civilization only twenty years before. The dominant narratives of both events, however, clashed in one major respect. According to the reading that rapidly came to predominate, the attack was perpetrated by an unholy alliance, held together only by their timeless and irrational hate for the (now) “Judeo”-Christian civilization: international Muslims and local Neo-Nazis. Soon thereafter, the unholy alliance was transformed into a profane trinity, as regional Marxists were added to the list of antagonists. After 9/11 this unlikely front of “new barbarians” became an almost normative portrayal of the global threat to civilization. In South America this Manichean dualism was reproduced, even as Jews appeared to have ceded their pride of place to the new instantiations of late twentieth-century barbarism. The narrative of eternal anti-Semitism may have persisted, but the rationale was modified: while in the 1970s Jews were attacked because they were perceived as a threat to civilization, two decades later it was their civilized status that rendered them victims. Reading Memmi in a dark and dusty room in 1990s Buenos Aires made me realize that Jews (even in the South!) may have found the cure for their incurable barbarism.³

I was able to encounter Memmi in Spanish because local Jews had already explored their elective affinities between his Maghrebi decolonial theory and Latin American struggles.⁴ The records of the experiences of the two Global South Jewries not only concurred in their Third World re-evaluation of Marxist theory but also corresponded in a historical turn. In just a few decades, both went from being victims of the portrayal of Jewish barbarism to being complicit in a narrative of new barbarism, often questioning their historical loyalties. Some Latin American Jews, explicitly influenced by Memmi, penned decolonial works of apologetics explaining to perplexed revolutionaries how former friends were now enemies and vice versa.⁵ Memmi himself would eventually acknowledge Jewish ultimate integration into Western society and abandon the barbaric project.⁶ Twenty years after their re-affirmation of barbarism, they largely reproduced and advocated a geopolitical design that strengthened the civilization that had hitherto victimized them. Were I a cynic, I would argue that Global South Jews were co-opted by an imperial design that benefited the North (including its Jewry) to the detriment of the barbaric relationship between local Jewries and the South. For now (and just for now) I will suggest that some Southern Jewish voices were among the last to fall in a long, systemic process of racial reconfigurations that required Jews to be civilized and shorn of their alleged barbarism.

A Decolonial Judaism is a study of resistances; provocative, powerful, problematic, and unsuccessful resistances, to this systemic change. It is an analysis of intellectual Jewish projects that emerged during the ultimate re-articulation of this transformation spanning the late 1940s and late 1980s. I focus on social theorists who inverted and fundamentally reconceived the Manichean dichotomy that had racialized Jews, among other barbarians, until this period. These projects did not draw from nuanced deconstructionist persuasions, but they rather combated the dualism by imagining of themselves as belonging to an alternative community, often times consciously barbaric in self-conception and orientation. Furthermore, several of them challenged the dualism through recourse to Southern epistemologies. Unfortunately they ultimately became prisoners of a systemic change that isolated them from the barbaric collective. As a consequence, their projects suffered from conceptual limitations, the persuasiveness of which became especially circumscribed in their post-9/11 legacies. I argue that an analysis of these Jewish proposals can shed considerable light on the possibilities and limitations of both colonial designs and decolonial resistances. Since regnant racial dualisms are presumed to be immutable, the analysis of a

community in historical transition between two exclusive poles exposes the cruel nakedness of the design and the difficult ambiguities associated with a resistance thereof.

Civilizational Construction

A Decolonial Judaism is a reading of modern Jewish experiences through the optic of the Manichean civilization/barbarism dualism. For most of the modern period, European discourses portrayed Jews as non-Westerners. While the descriptions varied depending on geopolitical context, normative descriptions of Jews often oscillated between assimilable primitivity and irremediable barbarity.⁷ The specific narrative of Jewish barbarism proved particularly persistent across time, space, and ideological persuasion. Even champions of liberal values—Spanish humanists, English deists, French *philosophes*, and German idealists—considered Jews a threat to civilization and permanently interrelated them to other barbarians of the Mediterranean and Atlantic including Muslims, Sub-Saharan Africans, and Amerindians.

These discourses regularly posited Jewish masterminding of and participation in plots to destroy European civilization, whether defined as Christendom or capitalist imperialism. The irrational desire to regress the forward march of history challenged a core component of the modern project, its reified teleological nature. This accounts for the persistence of such narratives, which still resonate powerfully today. Following 9/11, but with antecedents in, for example, the Jewish headquarters in Buenos Aires, Euro-American discourse combined the adversaries of the Second World War (Nazism), the Cold War (Marxism), and the War on Terror (Islam) into a single barbaric front, reproducing one of the most enduring narratives of Western history.

The construction of Jewish barbarism, however, deteriorated following the Holocaust and during the formal postcolonial period. Throughout the transitional period the civilizational portrayal became normative. This process, however, was not completely novel, immediate, or uniform. As we shall consider below, instances of Jewish “aspirancy” to civilization are in evidence throughout the modern period, especially after the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In this period, a minority of Jews were extended civil rights and/or appointed as intermediaries between colonizers and colonized. While some of these processes immediately precipitated backlashes and obstacles, others eventually reinforced the normative re-articulation after the 1940s. This progressive change does not perforce mean that all Jews were converted

immediately or unambiguously. This book canvases instances of intra-communal discrimination that accomplished a re-racialization of, especially, non-Europeans Jews. Some of these voices, which range from Argentinean activists to Israeli Black Panthers, developed resistances that put in question this systemic change. Perhaps the alternatives were not limited to the Global South or Fourth World but could explain Jewish overrepresentation in the United States and Europe during the civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam war protests, or the uprising of 1968. While the process was not new, uniform, or immediate, it progressively transformed the normative portrayal of Judaism. In the twenty-first century, the refusal to accept (or the inability to be identified with) this reified civilizational identity results in accusations of parochial self-hatred, historical anti-Semitism, and, in more extreme cases, straightforward denial of Jewishness *tout court*.

Over eighty percent of global Jewry is concentrated in North America, Europe, and Israel/Palestine, and they are typically (and uniformly) portrayed as integral members of Western civilization. In the United States, the largest diasporic community in the Northern hemisphere, Jews became integrated into a civilized white society in order to reinforce racial binarisms in the post-war era. In the twenty-first century, when Latinas/os and Muslims (or Afro-American Jews?) challenge this dualism, organized communal Jewry can hardly be distinguished from the myriad declining mainline white Protestant denominations.⁸ In Europe, homeland of the old majority, Jews often became token spokespeople, used in the service of challenging the social adaptation of immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Today public intellectuals in the largest metropolitan areas, such as Paris or London, support racist and xenophobic discourses that disempower immigrants of the Global South. Ironically this represents a permutation of the same narrative that racialized their grandparents and even parents until as recently as a few decades ago.⁹

This new portrayal also takes place in Israel, today home to over forty percent of world Jewry. The Jewish state is largely portrayed as a civilizational force that, allied to Western powers, was able to create the “only” democracy of the Middle East. As most Occidental replacements, it is important to point out, Israel achieved her political status by racializing non-Westerners including natives (Palestinians), foreign workers (Subsaharan Africans and South-East Asians), and Jews (*Mizrahim*/Orientals and *Beta Israel*/Ethiopians). This enterprise, far from challenging her credentials, reinforced her normative portrayal as a triumphant, if besieged, Western enclave, engulfed by the forces

of barbarism. The widespread support among European and American Jewries—now integrated into local mainstream societies—for political Zionism as a constitutive commandment of faith further, if not anachronistically, naturalizes global Jewry and Israel as eternal Western formations. This portrayal effectively becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of the utopian dreams of the founder of the central European branch of the nationalist project. In his seminal manifesto (1896), Theodor Herzl had clearly affirmed that the ambition of the movement was to create “a rampart of Europe in the Middle East” or, more precisely, “an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism.”¹⁰

Herzl’s program represents but one of the several intellectual precursors of civilizational Jewish projects analyzed in this book. These antecedents are not, however, limited to European Jewish aspirations. They also include the experiences of a limited number of non-European Jewries who interfaced with colonial designs and became associated with settlers shortly before and after Herzl’s manifesto.¹¹ These experiences are not accidents in an otherwise streamlined history of Jewish barbaric victimization. In hindsight, they are on the historical vanguard of a position that steadily increased in persuasiveness until it achieved normativity. Such antecedents, furthermore, catalyzed new historical processes. Following the Holocaust, Herzl’s project was instantiated. Israel became not only a force in the normativization of civilizational Judaism but also a keystone in the global alliance against post-war barbarians. Jews associated with settlers fled the postcolonial states. In Euro-America they were predominantly integrated into mainstream societies and, as outlined below, strong voices within these communities employed a narrative of barbarism to oppose immigration and/or neo-colonial policies. In Israel/Palestine, their experiences were forcefully reinterpreted to support a portrayal of the irrational and timeless hatred of Muslims for Jews and the West, a *sine qua non* of post-9/11 narratives of barbarism.¹²

Though the new normative portrayal of Jews as civilized subjects found support outside a European Jewish constituency, it was conceived as a response to a particular event of European origin. The integration of normative Jewries into the positive side of Manichean dualism served as a guarantee that there would be no second Holocaust. Some analysts have argued that the process of transformation could be explained by the Western need to assuage its guilt. Indeed, in recent decades, several scholars have pointed to the existence of a new “ecumenical deal” in religious and political secular forms that enables Western Christianity to expiate her sins incurred from her ideological and material complicity

(or leadership) during the Holocaust.¹³ The outcome of the new Judeo-Christian project, dissident voices argue, goes even further than ethno-religious exculpation. It has enabled the West to perpetuate the same civilizational atrocities by, ironically, justifying their reproduction with the excuse of protecting its former victims. In this way Jews became re-inscribed into the same dualistic paradigm that was responsible for the annihilation of one-third of their population during World War II.

In the new configuration, the normative Jew is portrayed as *the* quintessential victim of history disattached from other experiences of racialization. This universalizes European history as world history and a very specific narrative of European Judaism as world Jewry. Notwithstanding the fact that Jews (including and especially pre-Holocaust European Jews!) were largely victims of civilization and not of barbarism, the West portrays itself as the protector and liberator of the now-civilized Jews (first from Auschwitz, later the Iron Curtain, and now the nuclear threat of Teheran). In some cases, such as the 1994 attack in Buenos Aires, all the barbarians allegedly attack in concert. Western discourses conflate all such enemies, freezing them in a science fiction-esque recapitulation of the Second World War. Imperial actions of the West are justified as an attempt to dissuade the barbarians from perpetrating a new Holocaust. The irony is that the same Western narrative responsible for perpetrating the first Holocaust has assigned itself the role of pre-empting a second. Western civilization, tragically, uses the memory of some of its past victims to justify the perpetuation of the same dualism that annihilated them. Many Jews, most Jews perhaps, joined the new normative portrayal. Some courageous Jews have resisted. While resistances have been growing in the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly difficult for protesters to object outside the rubric of humanist dissident of a civilizational project. Once barbarians among other barbarians, Jews progressively became naturalized as part of Western civilization.

Southern Lenses

A Decolonial Judaism is set during a transitional period. I focus on Jewish political projects that reformulated the Manichean dualism during the last articulation of the normative passage from barbarism to civilization and that, while failing, left a conflicting legacy in the post-9/11 world. In this text, I will take three methodological risks that will hopefully stimulate further conversations about the prospects for a diverse and robust decolonial Judaism. The first risk this project entails is with