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Original Article

Psychoanalysis as Decolonial Judaism

Abstract

In some recent work on decolonization, there has been an attempt to claim some Jewish writers of the twentieth century as participating in a rethinking of “barbarism” that aligns Jewish thought with the decolonial movement. This is problematic, especially because post-Shoah and Zionist discourses have positioned Jews normatively as part of European “civilization” opposed to barbarism. Nevertheless, the reclaiming of a radical Jewish tradition allied with other movements of the oppressed may provide resources for “barbaric thinking,” using “barbaric” here in the positive sense to mean that which confronts the hegemony of European colonial thought. The relative absence of psychoanalysis from this discussion is striking. Given the place of psychoanalysis both as a “colonial” discipline and as a contributor to critical and postcolonial thought, can it be seen in the positive tradition of Jewish barbarism? This article offers an account of Jewish barbaric possibilities and suggests ways in which psychoanalysis might connect with them.

Keywords: psychoanalysis; Jewishness; barbarism; colonialism; decolonialism

Embarrassment

I found myself thinking about “Jewish barbarism” in a moment of embarrassment. Planning a short series of lectures on critical theory, I decided to present two talks drawing on Jewish texts. One of them offers a contemporary reading of a Biblical passage and two Yiddish stories, and the other discusses one of Emmanuel Levinas’ (1990) “Talmudic readings” as a route into considering questions of forgiveness following the perpetration of violence (Frosh, 2019). My use of these texts is positive, in a way celebratory, and demonstrates my personal investment in them and in some of the traditions of Jewish thought, traditions which are varied and heterogeneous, just as we Jews are not all the same. My embarrassment was a concern over whether, in doing this, I would be retreating from a more critical engagement with contemporary progressive ideas, particularly around postcolonial and decolonial interventions in the academy, and instead reiterating a rather tired trope in which Jewish intellectualism stands in for radical thinking and occludes the new, vibrant, and necessary voices from the so-called “periphery.” But then I glanced at the British newspapers and the extraordinary prominence of concern over antisemitism both in the UK and (possibly with different dynamics) in Europe; and then too, I thought about those definitely “critical” Jewish thinkers, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and maybe Theodor Adorno, as well as, in the contemporary scene, the luminous social philosopher Judith Butler. Maybe my initial reticence could be construed as a kind of “internalized antisemitism,” an apologetic attitude that reads Jewishness through the eyes of those who disparage it rather than through its own rich resources? My embarrassment would therefore be shameful, failing to appreciate the creativity of Jewish tradition.

Note, however, whatever his wider ambivalence towards Jews, that Frantz Fanon (1952/1967) – more or less ubiquitous in postcolonial and decolonial writings – was quite clear on the parallels and necessary alliances amongst victims of different forms of racism:

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.’ 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. Later I realized that he meant, quite simply, an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro. (p. 92)

Admittedly, the last sentence of this quotation gives pause in that it suggests that the alliance between black people and Jews might be merely contingent – the same people hate them. Indeed, it is clear that Fanon himself, however universally minded he might have been in *Black Skin, White Masks*, held ambivalent views about the relationship between the victims of what he called “Negrophobia” and those of antisemitism. On the one hand, the oppression of the Jew demands solidarity: “Anti-Semitism hits me head-on: I am enraged” (p. 65). On the other, whilst Fanon sees parallels, he notes the differences in the phenomenology of these different forms of racism. Jews are discriminated against because of their assumed intellect and the plotting they supposedly do to support one another to gain leverage; blacks, on the other hand, are feared sensually. This set of associations has some problematic consequences, even though it has resonance in the contemporary appreciation that different discriminatory acts and prejudicial attitudes need to be understood in their specificity as well as what they share (Young-Bruehl, 1996). For instance, it feeds into Fanon’s (1952/1967) rather strange notion that the Jews are hated in a “general” or even “rational” way (“Anti-Semitism can be rationalized on a basic level. It is because he takes over the country that the Jew is a danger”) whilst “Negrophobia” is “to be found on an instinctual, biological level” (pp.123–4). The biological nature of anti-black racism means that the black is attacked in “his corporeality”

(p. 126) – lynched, for instance – whereas “the Jew is attacked in his religious identity, in his history, in his race, in his relations with his ancestors and with his posterity” (pp.125–6), though this too can also involve the Jew being “killed or sterilized” (p. 125), which certainly sounds corporeal. In the end, the Jew might be white, or at least he can pass as such, whereas the black subject is trapped in the skin of one who will always attract attention.

He is a white man, and, apart from some rather debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed. He belongs to the race of those who since the beginning of time have never known cannibalism. [...] Granted, the Jews are harassed—what am I thinking of? They are hunted down, exterminated, cremated. But these are little family quarrels. The Jew is disliked from the moment he is tracked down. But in my case everything takes on a new guise. I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance. (p. 87)

Describing being ‘exterminated, [and] cremated’ as ‘little family quarrels’ does not invite solidarity amongst different oppressed groups, even allowing for Fanon’s sometimes ironic tone. As Brian Cheyette (2013) explains, however, there is more to Fanon’s wavering position (alliance versus differentiation) than ironic provocation. “The references to Jews and anti-Semitism in *Black Skin, White Masks*,” Cheyette argues, are “part of a wider tension concerning the relationship between a particularist anti-colonial nationalism (which excludes ‘the Jew’) and more universalist or cosmopolitan theories of racial oppression (which include ‘the Jew’)” (p. 61). This may be one of the most significant areas of uncertainty around Jewish incorporation into the decolonial struggle and also raises a general question about the multidimensionality of that struggle: Is every specific group defined through a process of national self-determination, or is the core revolutionary, decolonial move that of banding together as oppressed all people aiming to overthrow colonialism? If the former, then we need to acknowledge that, despite fervent and often antagonistic debates about the nature of

Zionism in the period up until the Second World War amongst critical intellectuals (Scholem, Buber and Benjamin amongst others), as well as religious versus secular Jews (the former often being anti-Zionist), plus the continuing presence of non-Zionists and anti-Zionists who nevertheless identify as Jews, the route most Jews have taken is towards attachment to the State of Israel (e.g. Cohen and Kahn-Harris, 2004) – sometimes wholly supportively, sometimes critically in relation to the policies of Israeli governments. This has posed huge obstacles to their incorporation into the decolonial movement, which has been very strongly aligned with the Palestinian cause and is often anti-Zionist. And if, alternatively, decolonization focuses on the solidarity of the oppressed, what about the issue of “whiteness”? Are Jews “white” and can they pass as such in the way Fanon imagines, or does the periodic recrudescence of antisemitism suggest that assimilation to whiteness is unstable and insecure? Fanon wavers, but the wavering is not just his issue; and maybe all that can be said at this point is that the assertion that anti-black racism is distinct from antisemitism is well founded, just as is the recognition that “an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro” (Fanon, 1952/1967, p. 92).

For its reciprocation of the compliment that the hero of decolonial thought possibly saw Jews as his co-persecuted compatriots, recall Levinas’ (1978/1999) famous French dedication to *Otherwise than Being*, which has been translated as “to the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.” The same hatred, the same antisemitism – unity in suffering, and hence, one might hope, in opposition to oppression. In some ways, this is accentuated by the book’s second dedication, which Annabel Herzog (2005) presents as untranslatable by those outside the comity of the Jewish people: a Hebrew language dedication that is specific and personal,

that names the “closest among the six million” as six individuals from Levinas’ family killed by the Nazis. Herzog explains:

The Hebrew sentences follow a traditional phraseology and dedicate [*Otherwise than Being*] to the memory of Levinas’s father, mother, brothers, and father and mother in-law, who are all recalled by their names in the following order: Yehiel, son of Avraham Halevi; Devorah, daughter of Moshe; Dov, son of Yehiel Halevi; Amminadav, son of Yehiel Halevi; Shemuel, son of Gershon Halevi; and Malka, daughter of Hayyim. The National-Socialists are not mentioned, as are neither the millions of victims of all nations, the hatred of the other man, or anti-Semitism. The second dedication expresses a particular and intimate remembrance of people and events that we, the readers, cannot share. (p. 342)

Herzog suggests that what is taken to be an “immemorial” memory of the general is more accessible than the personal memory that Levinas gives us – we cannot know exactly what these names mean, nor to whom they refer in the detail of their lives. Still, is it really the case that we cannot enter into the particularity of another’s experience in this way, whether or not we share their background or social identity? Knowing the Jewish liturgy, I recognize Levinas’ use of the traditional forms of memorializing to honour his family members. But, even if I did not know this, and even if I required a translation from the Hebrew to make the text accessible (just as I might require a translation of the first dedication from the French) – and granted that I can never fully know the lives of these people in the way that Levinas himself might have done – it is surely possible and ethically essential to respond to something here. These personal losses are neither unique nor unimaginable, and might have fuelled Levinas at moments when he moved away from the particularity into which he sometimes fell (the Jewish people as singularly chosen) and saw every one of the oppressed, of all faiths and all nations, as victims of “the same anti-semitism.”

And then there is the comment by Edward Said, scholar, polemicist, and author both of *Orientalism* and *Zionism From the Point of View of its Victims* (Said, 1978, 1979), to an Israeli journalist, Ari Shavit (2000), who had said to him that he sounded “very Jewish”: “Of course. I’m the last Jewish intellectual. You don’t know anyone else. All your other Jewish intellectuals are now suburban squires. From Amos Oz to all these people here in America. So I’m the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I’m a Jewish-Palestinian.” The context for this was a hard-hitting interview demanding Israelis face their responsibility for Palestinian suffering, so it should not be read as a generous offer of alliance, but rather as a criticism of all the other, failed “Jewish intellectuals.” Nevertheless, it rescues something from the debris: the idea of the Jewish intellectual, the “true follower of Adorno.” Despite the irony that Adorno was not “technically” Jewish, Said’s assertion makes an important gesture towards a Jewish offering, one which is universalized here in the person of the Palestinian-American intellectual.

That is where the discomfort at the embarrassment comes in: Why should I be embarrassed at trying to resurrect this history, and not now even as a “non-Jewish Jew” (Deutscher, 1968/2017) but as someone committed to my Jewishness and willing to use “classical” texts to assert it? After all, if both Fanon and Said have some time for Jewish identities, who am I to be apologetic – and at this time too, when so much seems to depend on asserting that antisemitism is a form of racism, and is not somehow exempt from the anti-racist activist critique? So, no embarrassment now, or at least I will try to offer something that makes these universalizing links, yet is also rooted in my particularism, and I will try not to be ashamed.

Mixed up in this is something else: the issue of psychoanalysis, its Jewishness, its colonialism, its universalist claims, its specificities, its blind spots and its potential. If I want to assert an alliance between Jewish and decolonizing theory, a rendering of critical theory that is both “Jewish” and decolonial, then psychoanalysis – after all, a profound influence on

Adorno and Butler, if not so much (but not negligibly) on Walter Benjamin – should offer something. I hope so; but let's see. The place to begin, in any case, is with barbarism.

Barbaric Jews

One way of reading some of Freud's more compellingly unfortunate remarks, couched in the language of colonialism, is as part of an effort to place black Africans and indigenous Australians in the place of the "other" to white Europeans, previously largely occupied by Jews. There is little need to reproduce these remarks here (see Frosh, 2013, 2017), other than to remind ourselves of the division proposed by Freud, especially in *Totem and Taboo*, between the world of the "savage" and that of the "civilized" – meaning, generally speaking, European men (Freud, 1913/1955). That Freud should write in this way is not surprising, given the European colonial present of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Said (2003) notes, the strangeness of the "non-European" other was in some ways simply the converse of Freud's immersion in the received history of European civilization, deriving from the Greeks and Romans as well as from the Bible (p. 16). Yet, as Said also points out, Freud had an intriguing understanding of the "semitic," with whom he identified at least part of the time, as the opponent of the European – or at least of the Christian. The famous place where this occurs is in the passage in *The Interpretation of Dreams* where Freud (1900/1953) is recollecting his father's "unheroic conduct" in the face of a Christian antisemite who knocks his expensive (Jewish) fur hat into the gutter (p. 197). Freud links this event with his identification with the "Carthaginian general" Hannibal, who had been made by his father to swear revenge on the Romans; and then traces further back into childhood his liking for Napoleon's "Jewish" marshals. Said (2003) comments, "Reading *Moses and Monotheism*, one is struck by Freud's almost casual assumption (which also applies to Hannibal) that Semites were most certainly not European [...] and, at the same time, were somehow

assimilable to its culture as former outsiders” (pp. 15–16). This last point is an important marker of a kind of wished-for shift in Jewish identity *towards* Europeanism, but Freud’s association of semites with non-Europeans is a significant one not only for Said, but for Freud himself. Sander Gilman (1993) has perhaps made most of this, arguing that Freud was largely responding to the widespread antisemitic tropes of his time that feminized Jews as “castrated” as a consequence of circumcision and associated them with blackness and primitivity. It should be recalled here that many of these tropes linked Jews and “savages,” perhaps most especially – *pace* Fanon – cannibals. Marita Vyrigioti (2018), studying the place of cannibalism in psychoanalysis, comments on the currency of this at that time, and its very material effects on the lives of European Jews in the form of public “ritual murder” trials. She concludes that “the cannibal fantasies projected on Jewish communities exposed financial, cultural, social, and religious anxieties and informed the anti-Semitic imagery of a people which *live among us, eat our flesh, and suck our (Christian) blood*” (p. 45, emphasis in original). Responding insouciantly to this, in *Moses and Monotheism* Freud (1939/1964) explains how the invention of the monotheistic God by the Jews is a step forward for civilization, because it requires an act of intellect and an escape from sensuality. Christianity is then a regression to the more material, even “feminine” practices that require visible icons, whilst Christians are at times barely disguised barbarians. “We must not forget,” Freud wrote, “that all those peoples who excel to-day in their hatred of Jews became Christians only in late historic times, often driven to it by bloody coercion. It might be said that they are all ‘mis-baptized’. They have been left, under a thin veneer of Christianity, what their ancestors were, who worshipped a barbarous polytheism” (p. 91).

The work that is done in this material is certainly a kind of “colonizing,” as Brickman (2003) amongst others points out, in which the Jewish other is made European and civilized at the expense of the “primitive” other of colonialism. Yet there is also something else at stake here,

which takes off from the reference to the “barbarous” in the previous quotation. The work that Freud does to reposition Jewishness as civilized and European is necessary precisely because of the haunting of the European vision of Jewish identity by its opposite, indeed by the fantasy of “barbarism” that is core to antisemitic discourse – as opposed to the real barbarism demonstrated by antisemites in Freud’s day and especially just after his death in 1939. Freud objected to the association of Jewishness with barbarism, despite his liking for Hannibal: for him, Jewish identity offered a high ethical ideal, a point he made several times, for example in his famous letter to the Vienna Bnai Brith (Freud, 1926/1961). But not only is this objection coincident with a view of non-Jewish (“Christian”) civilization as itself largely “barbarous”; one might also argue that Freud’s central perception, the existence of an unconscious life in each human subject, however civilized they might claim to be, is testimony to the presence of barbarism everywhere – and not just as something to be overcome. To put this more delicately: Freud’s rhetoric has some significant “political” effects. First, it shifts the location of barbarism away from the Jew and into the colonized black, thus buying into the colonial mindset; but contrastingly, it places barbarism in non-Jewish (specifically Christian) Europe itself. However, it also offers scope for a revaluing of barbarism as resistive of conventional order and hence potentially liberating. This relies on the idea that the universal presence of a “primitive” unconscious amongst humans makes the barbaric mobile and formative. What is taken to be the civilized norm – that of colonial rationality – is underpinned by the hugely potent, repressed yet disruptive forces that lie at its heart. If the Jews are linked to these forces, being supposedly barbaric, then Jewishness and “savagery” are to be taken seriously as positions for conjoined opposition to the dominant colonial order.

In his exuberant study of “decolonial Judaism,” Santiago Slabodsky (2014) discusses various ways in which it might make sense to read Jewishness as “barbaric.” His first move is to

establish the historical association between Jewish barbarism and other “barbarians” within the discourse of European identity and of whiteness in general.

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. The specific narrative of Jewish barbarism proved particularly persistent across time, space, and ideological persuasion. Even champions of liberal values [...] 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.

(p. 4)

Slabodsky notes how much this perception has shifted since the end of the Second World War (although the antisemitic claim that Jews sponsor the Muslim “invasion” of the West is still current), in light of both the Shoah and the foundation and increasing normalization of the State of Israel. Nowadays, it is much harder to think of Jews as aligned with the subordinated other, yet this history is a profound one. It is even true in Europe *after* Emancipation, which we should recall came late and only tentatively. For instance, in Austria, access to citizenship for Jews was only made official during Freud’s childhood in 1867, beginning a process of dissolution of Jewish community life that nevertheless refused Jews full entry to the society into which they were supposedly assimilating. Enzo Traverso (2016) comments that “[t]his is the source of the mixture of particularism and cosmopolitanism that characterizes Jewish modernity,” (p. 9) – a creatively fertile mix, it is true, but always an uncomfortable one verging on the edge of exclusion. It did not in any case take long for their rights to be rescinded in the most dramatic and thoroughgoing way, in the

treatment of Jews not just as barbarians, but beasts and vermin. But amongst the important issues here is that with the rise in “racial” antisemitism, Jewish barbarism became incorrigible: that is, conversion to Christianity would no longer solve the Jewish problem, as Jews remained Jews whatever their formal religious status. This shift was not unheralded: after all, one point of the Inquisition was to chase after “New Christians” who remained Jewish in their beliefs and secret practices even after supposed conversion. Nevertheless, it was radically different in scale and severity – there was now nothing that a Jew could do to become civilized. The more that Jews might try to do so, the more pernicious they appeared: a secret conspiracy to undermine European civilization on behalf of the barbarian hordes lurking at the gate.

The idea of barbarism as developed by Slabodsky is binary and in some ways categorical, opposing the barbaric to the civilized rather than, for instance, working with the notions of hybridity that have been more characteristic of postcolonial and diasporic studies. This binarism has its difficulties, not least that Jewish “cosmopolitanism” has always been linked with absorption of the influences of surrounding cultures and has often included incorporation of Western classicism as well as Jewish texts and traditions. Nevertheless, Slabodsky presses for barbarism as an *oppositional* response to the coercive power of Western colonialism, incorporating Jews along with other colonized subjects. Distinguishing “border thinking,” a notion developed by Walter D. Mignolo (2000), from hybridity and playing on the image of the *marrano* – originally a term of abuse for “New Christians” or *conversos* deliberately mobilized here as antagonistic to the colonial (and Christian) norm – Slabodsky (2014) asserts the resistive power of the colonized other as something to be sought out and catalyzed: “The *marrano* does not prevail over the dualism like a hybrid but reacts creatively to this imperially-imposed identity,” he writes (p. 34). Whereas the hybrid “attempts to undermine colonial dualism by dissolving identities,” the border thinker “creatively develops

identities, even if these identities turn upside down the reified imperial constructions” (p. 35). In practice, this means taking the elements written off by the colonial “empire” as barbaric and empowering them, disrupting the colonial project. Jews are potentially as much part of this as any other colonized group, because colonialism has made them the same. The European Enlightenment did this by presenting Jews as the outmoded barbarians of reason – a direct inheritance of the supersessionism of the Church, in which Christianity is taken to have displaced Judaism, leaving the unconverted Jews as primitive relics. There is also another historical link, arising as much from the colonized South as from Europe itself, but feeding the colonial imagination in a way that is not much attended to. Slabodsky notes how from the sixteenth century Amerindians were identified as Jews, with the emergence of writings “detailing the commonalities between Natives and Jews. In particular, the accusations focus on cannibalism, sexual perversion, lust, and, most importantly, anarchical and seditious political behaviour” (p. 60). More generally, “[f]rom the dawn of modernity in the seventeenth century until the Holocaust in the twentieth century, the narrative of barbarism made Jews and Blacks political co-conspirators using political and sexual perversion to subvert coloniality’s structures of domination” (p. 62).

There are various ways in which this narrative of barbarism might be utilized for oppositional practice. Slabodsky’s main structural division is between those Jewish writers and thinkers who regard barbarism as a “negative” but displace it from Jews and the colonized “barbarians” to European civilization; and those who take ownership of barbarianism as a positive alternative to the so-called civilization of the West. The former tendency is the stronger one amongst European Jewish intellectuals and has an unexpected association with Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism. Jacqueline Rose (2011) notes his reference in “A Solution of the Jewish Question,” published in *The Jewish Chronicle* in 1896, to “the profound barbarism of our day,” by which, he explains, “I mean anti-Semitism.” Rose

comments, “[l]ong before the horrors of the Second World War will offer its deadly confirmation to his insight, Herzl has more or less stated that barbarism – like partition, we can say – originates in the West” (p. 73). Herzl’s solution was Zionism; in other cases, Jewish texts are drawn on and presented as the genuinely civilized alternative to European barbarism. In this, we might see a move away from a view of Jewish critical fervour as arising mainly as a response to antisemitism. Instead, Jewishness is seen to have its own dynamic of critical engagement with the social order, with its social practices, traditions, and texts being mined for insights into how to build a good society. Arguably, this is precisely the task that the rabbis of the Talmudic period set themselves as they discussed the meaning of Biblical texts and developed commentaries that offered spiritual, legal, and practical guidance for Jewish communities. It might also be seen as part of the “Jewish” project of some more contemporary writers, for example Judith Butler – though this is also made more complex by Butler’s astute awareness of how making universalizing claims for a Jewish ethics can itself reproduce the colonial impulse. Presenting Jewish thought as linked with “alterity,” Butler (2012) begins her book on Jewish ethics discussing the move away from “ontology” and towards “relationality” that posits the other as central to formations of the human subject, and asking “Is this Jewish?” “It establishes the relation to alterity as constitutive of identity, which is to say that the relation to alterity *interrupts* identity, and this interruption is the condition of ethical relationality. Is this a Jewish notion? Yes and no” (p. 5, emphasis in original).

“Yes and no” is already a Jewish answer to a question like this! Butler’s claim here is not put in terms of barbarism, yet it has some echoes of it: the closed mind of (the) European (ontology) is displaced by the more transgressive and open possibilities of the “Jewish” emphasis on the interruptive presence of the other. Butler begins this passage with an exclamatory moral statement: “Relationality displaces ontology, and it is a good thing too”

(p. 5). In this tradition, then, the supposedly barbaric Jew draws on Jewish philosophy to offer a critique of the supposedly civilized West, turning the tables just as other barbarisms do – the famous but unfortunately probably apocryphal Gandhi quip (Journalist: “What do you think of Western civilization?” Gandhi: ‘I think it would be a good idea’) standing in for more developed postcolonial argumentation.

The second strand of barbaric thinking that Slabodsky (2014) outlines is one that retains the name-tag of barbarism for the colonized and for the Jew, but reads it positively. Here he draws on postcolonial thinkers such as Albert Memmi, a quote from whom begins Slabodsky’s book: “I am an incurable barbarian” (p. 1). I am no expert on Memmi and will leave the discussion of how best to represent his thinking to others (e.g. Cheyette, 2013), save to note that it is clear that he held to a position that rejected assimilation and emphasized the contribution of Jews to the broader decolonial movement in the name of his own Jewish specificity, however hybrid this might be; and that he argued an important step along the way would be to reframe Jewish self-understanding outside antisemitism and instead in conjunction with the emerging Africanist movement of the time. Dislocation nevertheless remains an important element in this self-understanding; that is, Jews have something to offer specifically because of their deracinated position, a position usually seen as antagonistic to the rootedness of the civilized subject. Cheyette quotes Memmi as follows: “I was a sort of half-breed of colonization, understanding everyone because I belonged completely to no one” (p. 51). For Slabodsky (2014), what matters is the triple alienation of Memmi: “a native in a colonial country, a Jew in an anti-Semitic universe [and] an African in a world dominated by Europe” (p. 128). Note here the resonance with the famous complaint attributed by Alma Mahler (1946/1968) to her husband Gustav, half a century earlier: “I am thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed” (p. 109). The nomadic and othered Jew

appears here as an affiliate of all homeless or oppressed people, having to find their way without ever gaining acceptance. Freud, too, speaking in 1926, had a similar tripartite framing of the impact of the excluded Jew, though couched characteristically in a combative way: “My language is German. My culture, my attainments are German. I considered myself German intellectually, until I noticed the growth of antisemitic prejudice in Germany and German Austria. Since that time, I prefer to call myself a Jew” (Gay, 1988, p. 448). Mahler, of course, converted to Christianity – a move that Freud always refused to countenance – in order to take up the position of Director of the Vienna Opera; but one might argue that the recurrence of Jewish themes in Mahler’s music (an example being the appearance of a chaotic Klezmer band in the funeral march in the First Symphony) is not only nostalgic, but also a way of reminding his cultivated audiences that the barbaric Jewish disruption was still around.

Otherwise to Colonization

We should recall the way Hannah Arendt (1944/2007), prefiguring the “barbarism” argument, valorizes the status of the Jew as “pariah.” She distinguishes this from Jewish “parvenus,” who identify themselves with their oppressors through assimilation and self-enrichment (a characterization that laid Arendt open to charges of antisemitism) and in this way betray the historical consciousness of the Jews as outsiders. The claim is that their pariah status may not be loved by Jews, but it gives them critical leverage that should not be discarded; moreover, it requires their willingness to self-address as Jews if it is to be materialized in this progressive form. Being on the outside as a pariah gives some kind of authority to the Jew and makes it possible to contribute to the wider struggles in the world even though, she cannot resist adding, the status of these radical Jews “among their own brethren” – the parvenus – is low (p. 276). There is a lot one could say about this (see

Stonebridge, 2019), but the issue I want to hold onto here is how pariahs, whatever their exclusion from the Jewish “mainstream,” nevertheless register as Jewish in the struggle against oppression. In one of her most powerful pieces of writing, the visceral *We Refugees*, Arendt (1943/2007) lambasts the way in which “we” do not want to be Jews. Assimilation does not work, as the fate of non-Jewish Jews shows, pushed from one country to the next, each time trying to be perfectly German or French, “willing to become loyal Hottentots, only to hide the fact that we are Jews” (pp. 271–72). It has never worked, even for the *conversos*, unless they take up cudgels as *marranos* and barbarians. Arendt’s version of this, articulated through a number of exemplary figures, is to emphasize the radical situation of the Jewish pariah, indeed to claim everything ethical in Jewish culture and behaviour as being due to that state, a claim that might resonate with Said’s assertion of himself, quoted earlier, as “the last Jewish intellectual.” Concluding *We Refugees*, just before her famous statement that at last it had become clear that the fate of the nations is tied up with the fate of the Jews (this is 1943), Arendt makes this bid for the soul of Jewishness:

It is the tradition of a minority of Jews who have not wanted to become upstarts, who preferred the status of ‘conscious pariah’. All vaunted Jewish qualities – the ‘Jewish heart’, humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence – are pariah qualities. All Jewish shortcomings – tactlessness, political stupidity, inferiority complexes, and money-grubbing – are characteristics of upstarts. There have always been Jews who did not think it worthwhile to change their humane attitude and their natural insight into reality for the narrowness of caste spirit or the essential unreality of financial transactions. (p. 274)

The disconcerting reproduction of classical antisemitic tropes in this passage is close to the surface, but so is an assertion of Jewish radicalness as a kind of universalist message of alliance with others. Arendt’s bitterness is understandable: the “we” in *We Refugees* was

central to her situation. The question is, to quote Butler (2012) again: “Is this a Jewish notion? Yes and no” (p. 5).

Emmanuel Levinas, who appears nowadays in most accounts of “Jewish” philosophy, definitely thinks it is. In terms of Butler’s (2012) ontology-relationality division, Levinas (1991/1998) is on the side of relationality; indeed, the West’s obsession with ontology is what rules it out of an engagement with a truly human ethics – one which acknowledges the place of the other and thus moves away from narcissistic self-promotion. The profundity of the claim that Levinas makes lies in the way it undermines assumptions of autonomous subjecthood and instead makes otherness foundational to the subject, an otherness that is both abstract and universal and immediate and personal. Levinasian ethics means we have to respond to what he calls “the Face of the Other” (Levinas, 1991/1998, p.104) as the primary demand upon us; and this Face is both the immediate other person and the principle that we are not the origin of ourselves and therefore are subject to the requirement that we respect the differences produced by the heterogeneity of human subjects. So far so good, then, but the difficulty is that in some of Levinas’ writing it is not clear that the philosophical requirement that the other comes first is followed through politically, particularly when it comes to the other who stands outside the Eurocentric norm. Here is a famous problematic formulation, linked with Levinas’ resolute support for the State of Israel as both an ethical and a political entity, from his paper “Jewish Thought Today,” first published in 1961 (Levinas, 1963/1990, p. 164). He has just remarked that “Jewish universalism has always revealed itself in particularism. But for the first time in its history, Israeli Judaism gauges its task only by its own teachings.” Immediately, however, comes the sting.

Surely the rise of the countless masses of Asiatic and under-developed peoples threatens this new-found authenticity? On to the world stage come peoples and civilizations who no longer refer to our Sacred History, for whom Abraham, Isaac and Jacob no longer

mean anything. As at the beginning of Exodus, a new king arises who does not know Joseph. (p.165)

It is hard to find excuses for this, or indeed for other places where the Palestinians are positioned as Israel's other, yet excluded from the kind of other that makes demands on the subject – that is, refused any Face. The reference to the new king (pharaoh) just makes things worse: the Egyptians should have been grateful to the descendants of Joseph, who had saved them from famine, but instead turned on them, with disastrous results for themselves. Howard Caygill (2002) quotes Levinas in an interview just after the Sabra and Shatila atrocities of 1982:

[I]f you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, then what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong. (p. 192)

For Caygill, this opens up a “wound” in Levinas' whole system of thought; for Butler (2012), it produces a “quandary”: “The fact that the Palestinians remain faceless for him (or that they are the paradigm for the faceless) produces a rather stark quandary, since Levinas gives us so many reasons to extrapolate politically on the prohibition against killing” (p. 39).

It is worth noting one complexity in Levinas' (1963/1990) “countless masses of Asiatic and under-developed peoples” passage. This is not to reduce its poison: the phraseology itself, plus the subsequent reference to “the greedy eyes of these countless hordes who wish to hope and live” (p.165) and the danger that “Jews and Christians are pushed to the margins of history” (p.165) is evidence of Levinas' unwillingness to extend his system of ethics to everyone. Yet there is also an acknowledgement that the demands of these “masses” are

fuelled by something *necessary*. “We hear in it,” he writes (p. 165), “the cry of frustrated humanity, and while one certainly has the right to denounce one’s own hunger as materialist, one never has the right to denounce the hunger of others”. This seems to restore the other, the one in need (“frustrated humanity”) as an agency with which the subject (“one”) might identify. Slabodsky (2014) makes an additional claim, which is that Levinas’ views changed between the earlier work in which the barbarism of the West would be opposed only by Judaism, with the “Asiatic and under-developed peoples” dropping off the map of ethical responsibility, and his writings from the 1970s onwards which were influenced by his engagement with Southern cone thinkers, some but not all of them Jewish.

Following encounters in the early 1970s, Levinas was challenged by a group of South American intellectuals. He then expanded his critique of the West, mobilized the positive conception of barbarism from his new conversation partners, and recognized that the future of humanity resided in the barbaric margins of the West. He rubricated his turn by employing Talmudic texts to explain the need to form a large community of barbarians. This new community would be instrumental in challenging criminal imperial formations represented symbolically by Rome and contextualized in Europe and the United States.

(p. 94)

This supposed shift away from seeing non-European others as a threat and towards locating them in the context of an alliance against the West is not without its problems, of course: the continuing exceptionalist support for Israel makes the decolonial link unstable, though it is worth noting that there are moments in Levinas’ work where the ethical critique of Israel is at least strongly implied (Frosh, 2009). Levinas is perhaps trying to balance the argument for the special position of the Jew as repository of ethics, along with a political and personal commitment to the preservation of the State of Israel, against a universalist philosophy in which one has the most responsibility for the other with whom one has no particular

connection, or even to whom one is opposed. This is a hard act, complicating any clear evaluation. Levinas struggled with recognizing the “countless masses,” but if Slabodsky is correct, he also indicated how this struggle could be resolved in a relational rendering of otherness that allies all those who are oppressed along with the Jews, in opposition to that “same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism” (Levinas, 1978/1999). Jewish barbarism is the ethically superior position not only because it is relational rather than narcissistic; but because it affiliates itself with all the other barbarisms that seek expression, recompense, and justice.

Back to Psychoanalysis

This piece started with Fanon and then Freud and was meant to add psychoanalysis to the mix in constructing a Jewish barbarism that is decolonizing in its impulse and effects. Without going over this ground in detail again – the Freudian assumption of a bifurcation between “primitive” and “civilized” that is subverted by the presence of “primitivity” in the unconscious of all “civilized” people, and by a barbarism that hides behind the supposed advanced culture of Europe and is easily roused – let us think through the possibility that the “Jewishness” of psychoanalysis might have something important to contribute to this resistive movement. For one thing, what is this “Jewishness”? Clearly, it is in part a historical and sociological statement about psychoanalysis – almost all the originators of psychoanalysis were Jewish and for a large part of its history it was dominated by Jews, and this had substantial effects both in contributing a critical vision and in generating antisemitic attacks on psychoanalysis (Frosh, 2005). The historical record is strong on this, but is that enough to claim a psychoanalytic link with the Jewish “barbarism” argued for in this paper? Psychoanalysis has had an uncertain history in relation to politics, as in many other things, with a strong institutional tendency towards conservatism (e.g. Damousi and Plotkin, 2012)

as well as a tradition of radical thought and uses of psychoanalytic theory to fill out understandings of resistance and ideology and in some cases to offer models of critical mental health practice (Frosh, 2018). Obviously, this paper sides with the radical element in psychoanalysis, its capacity to remain at odds with the normatively oppressive values of colonialism. Here, the leverage that psychoanalysis has given on analyses of racism is relevant, visible in Fanon's (1952/1967) use of Lacan and Freud, but also in a wide range of more contemporary commentaries drawing especially on Kleinian, relational, and Lacanian traditions (Frosh, 2013). In addition, the recent applications of psychoanalysis in postcolonial theory have been highly creative, albeit at times fraught with contradictions (Greedharry, 2008). Does this represent the wresting away of psychoanalysis from the limitations of its Jewishness to find a more decolonizing setting, or is it a culmination of its Jewish elements that makes it a promising ground for decolonial practice? As Jews become more normalized, at least for the time being, should psychoanalysis become *less* "Jewish" in order to maintain its radical political edge?

This seems to me an irresolvable and uncomfortable dilemma, another "yes and no." Nevertheless, I am advocating a reappropriation of the Jewishness of psychoanalysis in the context of a "barbaric" response to the living legacy of colonialism and the broader effects of social oppression on human lives. For example, Arendt's (1943/2007) "Jewish pariah" qualities of "humanity, humor, [and] disinterested intelligence" are very close to psychoanalysis' "Jewish" ideals – at least of the Freudian kind (p. 274). Diller (1991) quotes Ludwig Braun in his speech to the Vienna Bnai Brith honouring Freud's seventieth birthday as portraying psychoanalysis as "genuinely Jewish" and going on "to define the meaning of Jewishness as being comprised of an independence of spirit, the willingness to do battle with an unjust society, and a vision of the whole of nature and humanity" (p.170). This is a universalizing Jewishness with which Freud (1926/1961) felt at home – his return letter

quotes his “respect for the so-called ‘ethical’ demands of human civilization” (p. 367) – but it also links with the disruptive elements of the revalued barbaric in comparison with the “unjustness” of the surrounding society. The deracinated element in this is also important, not just for Freud himself, but for later psychoanalysts who – largely because of their Jewishness, but also at times in opposition to authoritarian regimes – have found themselves highly mobile and unsettled, traversing boundaries and working across re-forged and reimagined identities. Whilst the impact of this on psychoanalytic theory has been mixed, it is arguable that the general stance has been one that is open to relationality and otherness in a way that echoes (albeit at a critical distance) Levinasian concerns (e.g. Benjamin, 2018). Something comes at us from the other and demands not just recognition, but an openness to being psychically challenged and changed. This is precisely the “yes and no” of “interruption” as “the condition of ethical relationality” to which Butler (2012, p. 5) refers in her comments on Jewish thought.

I have emphasized reasonably contemporary Jewish writings in this article, but before closing it is worth noting that there is a huge “classical” back catalogue of Jewish thought that is relevant to the question of how to maintain a critical stance towards the social order whilst also holding onto what might be termed a psychoanalytic ethic. In some ways, these writings can be seen as more “Jewishly traditional” in that the practice of Jewish scholarship is to take Biblical texts and their commentaries, usually centuries or even millennia old, and rethink them for contemporary concerns. Examples here include Avivah Zornberg’s incisive re-readings of Biblical texts through psychoanalytic lenses, producing new versions of moral engagement (Zornberg, 2009), as well as Levinas’ (1990) brilliantly yet subtly subversive Talmudic readings from the 1960s. There is also *psychotherapeutic* relevance for some of this work. For instance, Philip Cushman (2007) claims that the Jewish midrashic tradition (the aspect of Jewish thought focusing on interpretation through questions and narratives) might

inform contemporary relational psychoanalytic practice – indeed, that it often does so unawares, as “[i]n ways that we may not realize, Jewish therapists might be moved by deeply felt, embodied ways of being and thus moral commitments that have their origins in ideas and social practices hundreds or even thousands of years old and socially transmitted to us in ways implicit and constitutive” (p. 82). The substance of this influence is to promote certain values (“engagement, historicity, interpersonal interaction, the dialectic of absence and presence, the prohibition against idolatry”) and develop “a process of study and authorial creation that seems structured to encourage learners to engage with and enact those values, which are among the most important concepts in Jewish thought” (p. 53). Cushman’s focus is on how these values are congruent to relational psychotherapy, and indeed this may be one way in which some of the issues raised here have psychotherapeutic relevance. The Butlerian claim that Jewish ethics promotes relationality and openness to alterity is in some respects well aligned with relational and intersubjectivist psychoanalysis, as Jessica Benjamin’s (2018) work also suggests. Psychotherapy does not necessarily need to be overtly “barbaric” to reflect these influences, though it is fair to say that the perspective I have adopted here suggests it should resist tendencies to be socially conformist and also be actively engaged in anti-racist and decolonial practices.

Perhaps, however, there is an even more basic association. The most distinctive characteristic of the psychoanalytic formulation of the unconscious, whatever variations there are between schools, is its *negativity*, its opposition, that is, to the structures of rationality that characterize conscious mental life. Whatever we think we are doing to create order in the world – to colonize the barbarism of nature, both human and physical – is disrupted precisely by that barbarism; and this is not an accident or merely a problem to be solved. It is rather a recognition of *reality*; that is, the “reality principle,” which defers gratification and diverts pleasure in the name of what is possible, is ironically only part of the true reality of the

human subject, in which identities are never fully formed or completely stable (Said's (2003) point) and in which something always works against the grain of settledness and control (this being a version of the death drive, but also a simple comment on the subversive nature of unconscious life). Politically, psychoanalysis, perhaps like barbarism, insists on the "cruelty" of confrontation with reality as it is, however difficult that might be emotionally and also philosophically; that is to say, the "barbaric" elements in psychoanalysis and in politics have to do with resistance to those reconciliatory comforts that deny the actual suffering and oppression surrounding us – the barbarism of "civilized" society itself. In this specific and quite precise sense, the unconscious of psychoanalysis is "barbaric" and its Jewishness is part of that. Add sexuality and cannibalism, both concerns of psychoanalysis and fantasized attributes of the Jewish as well as the racialized "other," and what is created is the possibility of the "community of barbarians" to which Slabodsky (2014, p. 94) claims Levinas eventually aspired. Is this over-optimistic? No doubt, again, yes and no.

There is a tussle going on in Jewish communities worldwide, impacted upon equally by Israel's position as "civilized" in the negative sense that the new barbarianism frames, and by antisemitism as it (re-)emerges in Europe and elsewhere. Recovering the Southern tradition, as Slabodsky (2014) advocates, is a difficult task in this context; alliance-building between Jews and others is sought as an alternative to the assimilatory fantasy of recognition from the colonizing authorities, yet is also precarious. Still, here is a wager: the Jewish component of psychoanalysis has been central to its development and has fuelled its radical elements much more than its conservative ones, notwithstanding various setbacks and complications. This is because of the insistent and it seems never to be entirely overcome marginality of the Jews, their permanent immersion in "fort-da," through which they are at times absorbed into the body of the social, and at times expelled from it. It is also because there is a long history of Jewish barbarism that infiltrates Jewish commitments to disciplines that subvert rather than

confirm normalizing practices, as the case of the critical theorists attests, and hence that are set up to embrace other “barbaric” practices, such as those of decolonialism. In this sense, psychoanalysis needs and can never escape its Jewish provocations; and in these can be found some of the energy with which it is possible for psychoanalysis to contribute to the ongoing struggle for a decolonized world.

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