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Barbaric Jewishness: resistance to anti-semitism and Judeo-Christianity

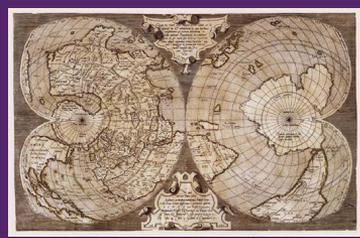
Listik, Y.

Citation

Listik, Y. (2023). Barbaric Jewishness: resistance to anti-semitism and Judeo-Christianity. *Horizontes Decoloniales / Decolonial Horizons*, 8(1), 7-52.
doi:10.13169/decohori.8.1.0007

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3636422>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Part I/Primera Parte

Interrogantes en la Intersección entre Religión y Poscolonialidad





Barbaric Jewishness

Resistance to anti-Semitism and Judeo-Christianity

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Submission date: 21 March 2022; Acceptance date: 27 February 2023;
Publication date: 11 August 2023

Resumen

Una parte central de lo que se considera políticamente hegemónico es el resultado de proyectos civilizatorios y coloniales fuera de Europa. En este contexto, la figura del judío tiene una posición ambivalente. Por un lado, es una figura central de la llamada civilización judeocristiana. Por otro lado, los judíos aparecen más a menudo como víctimas de este proyecto que como sus autores, por lo que la noción de judeocristianismo es fruto del antisemitismo. Este artículo argumentará que Boyarin y Slabodsky presentan un enfoque interesante a este dilema mientras que explorará la forma en que la identidad judía podría servir como una posición política contrahegemónica.

Palabras clave: Judaísmo, descolonialidad, antisemitismo, Marxismo, Teoría Crítica.

Resumo

Uma parte central do que é considerado politicamente hegemônico é o resultado de projetos civilizacionais e coloniais fora da Europa. Neste contexto, a figura do judeu tem uma posição ambivalente. Por um lado, ele é uma figura central da chamada civilização judaico-cristã. Por outro lado, os judeus aparecem mais frequentemente como vítimas deste projeto do que como seus autores, de modo que a noção de judaico-cristãos é uma consequência do anti-semitismo. Este artigo argumentará que Boyarin e Slabodsky apresentam uma abordagem interessante para este dilema enquanto exploram como a identidade judaica pode servir como uma posição política contra-hegemônica.

Palabras-chave: Judaísmo, decolonialismo, anti-semitismo, Marxismo, Teoria da Crítica



Abstract

A central part of what is considered as politically hegemonic results from civilizational and colonial projects outside Europe. In this context, the figure of the Jew has an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it is a central figure of the so-called Judeo-Christian civilization. On the other hand, Jews more often appear to be the victims of this project rather than its perpetrators, hence making the notion of Judeo-Christianity the fruit of antisemitism. This article will argue that Boyarin and Slabodsky present an interesting approach to this dilemma while exploring the way Jewish identity could serve as a counter hegemonic political position.

Keywords: Judaism, decoloniality, anti-Semitism, Marxism, Critical Theory.

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Introduction

This phenomenon inevitably recalls a Jewish joke: “What is a philo-Semite? An anti-Semite who loves Jews.”

Badiou et al (2013: 112)

[T]hought of the Other is sterile without the other of Thought.

Glissant (1997: 154)

Anti-Semitism has gained a prominent role in contemporary politics. As Amos Goldberg, a specialist on the topic at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and co-writer of the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (2022), which aims to respond to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition, stated in a lecture organized by the Israeli Academy for Equality dedicated to the topic, the issue of anti-Semitism strangely became a litmus test for progressive politics whereby people and institutions map themselves in relation to the question of anti-Semitism as understood in terms of their support for Israeli politics.

Strangely, because, according to him, there is no fundamental reason for anti-Semitism to be more, or less, repulsive than other types of discrimination, but it nevertheless seems to be treated as so. This reaction identified by Goldberg can be understood as a philo-Semitic reaction, following Segré’s (Badiou et al, 2013) conceptualization that will be developed later. In this context, in addition to the strange privileging of anti-Semitism over other modes of discrimination, it is often employed as a competing posture to other types of discrimination where anti-Semitism is associated with discriminated populations to justify or even legitimize the discrimination directed towards them.

Under this scenario, a series of bizarre metamorphoses take place: (1) anti-Semitism becomes distinguished from other types of discrimination; (2) the reason it is distinct is because it is perceived as no longer the discrimination of a non-hegemonic



posture but rather of a hegemonic narrative (Judeo-Christianity); and (3) hence the opposition to anti-Semitism is equivalent to the defence of hegemonic order. This is the way to make sense of the equivalence between the opposition to anti-Semitism and the defence of Israeli politics. Or, as the equivalence is often made, the statement that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism.

The argument here is that Marxism, as an umbrella concept for critical counter-hegemonic postures, represents a form of resisting this integrationist movement by presenting it as a construct of hegemonic mentality. In this manner, given that Marxism is counter-hegemonic, it must also be non-assimilationist. Marxism, constructed as the resistance of the barbarian, means fighting back against anti-Semitism rather than trusting that integration will eliminate it.

Scope of the thesis

Aims and limitations: the Jewish question

This article will not occupy itself with an assessment of Israeli politics or whether the equivalences highlighted are justified or not. The question here is merely whether they are justified in terms of anti-Semitism. In other words, whether the equivalence between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is effective in deterring “discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish)” to use the very broad and universally accepted definition of anti-Semitism found in the Jerusalem Declaration.

The motivation for this approach is not avoiding criticism of Israeli politics, but rather to demonstrate that the objectives it aims to achieve are not reached. To frame it in Slabodsky’s (2014) language, the question here is: how is it that after centuries of persecution, not only is the idea of joining that historically hostile environment accepted, but it is also portrayed as the way to deter hostility?



This is not aimed at recuperating Zionist ideology from its contemporary problematic developments in the realization of the state of Israel. Whether this is the case or not is of no interest here. The argument merely aims to demonstrate that even under a generous reading that a defence of Zionism could be equated to the opposition of anti-Semitism, it not only fails miserably to oppose anti-Semitism, but it also often finds itself being used to protect and advance anti-Semitic postures.

In other words, if for the philo-Semite a defence of Zionism is legitimized because Zionism is the only response to Arendt's (2011) call that "If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man" (p. 12),¹ then one is able to argue that Zionism is clearly failing even within its own criteria. This article abstains from the questions of whether or not there are other grounds to delegitimize Zionism (as there certainly are) or whether or not Zionism is legitimate in the first place (there are certainly arguments both ways); it aims exclusively to demonstrate the ways in which it fails even under the most generous reading of holding it exclusively to its aims. In other words, like Segré (Badiou et al, 2013: 616) the argument is not that the mainstream opposition to anti-Semitism is selfish and particularistic but that it fails to care for the interest of the endangered parts, often on behalf of a logic that endangers them in the first place.

Moreover, the text aims to employ the theories of Segré (2014), Boyarin (2018) and Slabodsky (2014) to explain the reasons behind this failure. The idea here is to challenge the basic presuppositions of the philo-Semitic account, more specifically, the idea that the opposition to anti-Semitism

¹ I would argue this seems consistent with Mignolo's (2008: 297) argument for the place of identity in politics against 'whiteness' as the universal transparent agent while being fully aware of the difference between the overarching theories both authors advance.



falls within the hegemonic account of politics rather than the opposing field. In other words, the central idea that will be challenged here is the idea that anti-Semitism is a counter-hegemonic posture rather than belonging to the hegemonic discourse along with other forms of discrimination.

It might seem evident upon historical inspection, but the idea of Judeo-Christian civilization is not an account of the harmonious relationship between its two elements. Instead, it is permeated by persecution and discrimination towards Jews as it is towards other non-hegemonic groups. In this manner, Jews belong to the category of “barbarians” much more than they belong to the category of civilized.² Even, as the philo-Semitic reaction evidences, Jews have significantly relocated and appear to belong to civilization, even if they are among its greatest defenders, the persistent existence of anti-Semitism demonstrates that the tension still exists.

It is fundamental here to make it explicit that in arguing that Jews remain non-hegemonic or barbarians, the argument does not intent to draw an equivalence between all forms of discrimination. As Slabodsky (2014) correctly points out, this philo-Semitic reaction is not a sheer illusion since both Israel (as representative, correctly or not, of Jews in the world picture) and local Jewish communities are integrated into the dominant logic. Still, even if one could make the most optimistic argument that this integration grants Jews with certain immunity from discrimination and anti-Semitism is today widely considered abhorrent to the point where it is practically innocuous. I would not argue that it is completely innocuous, but it is certainly comparatively less dangerous or violent than other forms of discrimination. The article will not engage in a comparative assessment even though it recognizes that a generalization and homogenization is problematic. It merely wishes to affirm the

² See also Dussel (1975: 8–9) for the connection between Jewish and barbarian identity.



existence of discrimination as a factor to be considered. The sheer existence of anti-Semitism is already a determining factor in the argument here since it evidences the tension the article is pointing at. Or as Deutscher (2017) puts it: “I fear that we may be living in a fools’ paradise in our Western welfare state. The trustful feeling of freedom from anti-Semitism may well be one more illusion, a particularly Jewish one, engendered by our ‘affluent society’” (p. 814). One could even argue that it strengthens the argument since despite the sociological evidence for integration and the acceptance of hegemonic discourse, the issue persists. It demonstrates that the “colonial wound” (Mignolo, 2009: 161; 2011a: 63) might “disinfect” but not close.

One needs no further proof than the comprehensibility of the white supremacist slogan “Jews will not replace us”. Even granting that those are not representative groups, and one should not grant them ownership of public discourse, the fact that the formula is even comprehensible is indicative. The fact that the formulation has a meaning, even if mainstream society denounces it, proves something. This is illustrated by the simple exercise of replacing Jews with several Xs. While if one replaces it with “blondes”, “trekkies”, “ecologists” or even “Irish/Italians”, the phrase is strange or comical, if one replaces it with “Blacks”, “Queers”, “Homosexuals”, “Arabs” or “Asians”, the phrase practically preserves its original meaning. In other words, while in the latter cases everyone knows what they are talking about even if one believes them to be wrong, in the former an initial surprise would be followed by an imaginative attempt to make sense of it.

In fact, one does not even need this thought experiment. Slabodsky (2014) provides historical evidence of this conflation beginning from the classification of American indigenous populations as sons of Shem within the Noachite proto anthropology of the discoveries (2014: 51), until the Nazi association of Jews to Blacks, both in terms of political conspiracies and genetics (2014: 62–63).



This conflation is coherent with a historical account of modernization as a colonial process marked by three main initial processes: the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula, the colonization of America and its indigenous population, and the exploitation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Slabodsky, 2016: 158–159). Traverso (2018) share this conclusion:

The birth of modern anti-Semitism was intimately linked to the development of racism as an imperialist ideology. In the anti-Semitic mentality, the Jew appeared as a dangerous being, a bearer of terrible diseases. As defended by social Darwinism, racial biology justified the pillage of Africa and Asia and the subjection of the non-European peoples by the great powers. (p. 55)

This is not merely a process of exploration but one that presents itself as liberating (Mignolo, 2008: 307). More precisely, an emancipation from a barbaric condition into a civilized inclusion, which often, unsurprisingly, faced resistance, was transformed into a violent attempt to eliminate barbarity (Dussel, 2020: 429, 468; Glissant, 1997: 133). In this manner, focusing on the Jewish element, Slabodsky demonstrates a continuous thread ranging from the blood purity laws imposed already in the Inquisition until the Holocaust.

Aims and limitations: Critical Theory

This article will not occupy itself with discussing Marx's text on the Jewish question but will limit itself exclusively to discussing the role of Marxism in the debate. Even though a debate over Marx's position is relevant and undoubtedly influences the Marxist ramifications in their engagement with the topic, the article will limit itself exclusively to the employment of that specific text rather than its actual content. In that manner, when exploring X's account of Marx's text,



the position will be associated exclusively to X rather than proposing to reflect or even offering it as the appropriate reading of Marx's text. Even if one disagrees with the specific reading of Marx's text, one is merely asked to consider whether the argument where it is employed is valid or not. The aim of this article is not to discuss whether Marx himself was an anti-Semite or not; the article will not take a position either for or against this argument but will engage only with whether some Marxist intuitions can be profitable in opposing anti-Semitism and hence tackling the so-called "Jewish question".

The preliminary answer offered at this point is "not necessarily": Marxism in and of itself does not necessarily respond to anti-Semitism and some of its intuitions when not properly contextualized can even aggravate the issue. The famous formulation that "anti-Semitism is the socialism of the fools" is already an admittance of that. In this formulation one finds that those who do not properly engage with socialism, i.e., those who do not intelligently absorb its theoretical and critical posture, are prone to mistakenly direct its conceptual framework against the wrong enemy and hence employ it against its own interest, reaching, at best, a socialism of the fools rather than real socialism. From this, one can also extrapolate that this socialism of the fools would not be emancipatory, in contrast to real socialism, since it tackles the wrong object rather than the actual adversary.

This does not mean that Marxism cannot "fail" at this account. Marxism can undoubtedly employ racism, chauvinism, or any other discriminatory stances, and, to return to my specific case of anti-Semitism, Traverso (2018) and Postone (2017) provide us with Marxist accounts of instances such as the show trials and the doctor's plot where anti-Semitic postures were taken by Marxist institutions. Even the fact that Deutscher was expelled from the Communist Party for exaggerating the dangers of Nazism is already problematic (Deutscher, 2017: 61). In those instances, the fact that one



finds Marxism reproducing anti-Semitic motives that resemble classic anti-Semitic motives is evidently taken to be surprising and even contradictory to Marxism itself. To summarize what is a complex issue, classic anti-Semitic tropes are ideas that Jews rule the world from the backstage by infiltrating loci of power. The degree and proximity of this resemblance will not be assessed here. Despite being an interesting topic, given its commonsensical negative attribution it serves little in the understanding of the contemporary entanglement between Marxism and anti-Semitism. In other words, those were clearly abhorrent postures that cannot be reproduced within Marxism and even demonstrate the challenge that Marxism has to oppose in order to reach its goal.

Classic anti-Semitism can be placed to the side since despite being empirically relevant (unfortunately), it is fortunately no longer theoretically fruitful since it is universally taken to be objectively wrong, even though one might still be surprised. Just to provide an anecdotal example, the term Jewish science remains very much alive as an “objective” scientific term. Consider Dutton’s (2019) article “Jewish Group Evolutionary Strategy Is the Most Plausible Hypothesis” defending the following position: “Kevin MacDonald (1998: 136) has argued that a series of twentieth century ideologies which have challenged European traditions *should be understood as part of a Jewish evolutionary strategy to promote Jewish interests in the West*, as evidenced by Jewish leadership of and disproportionate involvement in these movements” [my emphasis]. Moreover, the fact that Steven Pinker is on the editorial board of the journal where it was published is further evidence of the overarching argument of this article.

The more interesting issue raised by both Traverso and Postone is the question of the entanglement between Marxism and universalism in relation to anti-Semitism. As mentioned earlier, this issue is not reduced to the Jewish question but should be considered within the context of



non-hegemonic identities as a whole, as evidenced by Bernstein's assimilationist posture on colonialism: "We will condemn and struggle against certain methods of repression of the savage peoples, but not against the fact that they are subjected in order to impose on them the law of a superior civilization" (in Traverso, 2018: 67). As Traverso demonstrates, this position was widely accepted among Marxists and even consensual among several lines ranging from Lenin to Kautsky.

Still, if one returns to the original question concerning the relation between Marxism and the opposition to anti-Semitism, one finds that, even though Marxist intuitions might serve as an aggravating element of anti-Semitism, the question of emancipation seems inherently tied to the objective of avoiding anti-Semitism. Put simply, if one adopts anti-Semitic postures, one has fallen for the socialism of the fools rather than embracing proper socialism. The Marxist concern with anti-Semitism seems to be a fundamental element of its emancipatory theory. Obviously not the exclusive concern, as it will be demonstrated later, but nevertheless one that is revealing of the Marxist engagement with what will be denoted as "barbarian" in reference to non-hegemonic subjectivity in a general manner (Traverso, 2018: 219–220). Despite its peculiarities, the case of anti-Semitism does not, or should not, hold any extraordinary place in Marxist theory. As any other case of the relation between modernity and non-hegemonic subjectivity, it presents a challenge to Marxism inasmuch as it, too, is the outcome of modernity and enlightenment.

Marxism, however, presents a tense relation to modernity and its capitalist ramifications. Even if it is the outcome of a specific context and mentality, Marxism cannot automatically be associated with that mentality and its implication since its emancipatory projects are aimed at overcoming the present conditions. It is not a mere coincidence that Walter Benjamin is portrayed by Traverso (2018: 168–169) as the central figure of this tension. A proper engagement with Benjamin's philosophy



and its specific model of counter-hegemonic Jewish Marxism is beyond the scope of this text, but Traverso demonstrate that Benjamin's Marxism was certainly not a triumphal march of history towards progress. This counter-hegemonic posture makes its quest for emancipation inherently connected to the question of non-hegemonic subjectivities, turning the question of its engagement with them into a fundamental measure for Marxism. As Slabodsky (2014) argues:

For Marx barbarism is a characteristic of the West and not of the victims it exploits both inside and outside of Europe. The only way to escape this barbarism is revolution on a global scale from the metropolis to the colonies. He argues that "the profound hypocrisy and barbarism of bourgeois civilization is unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked." For Marx the "bourgeois period of history" was not in vain. Still trapped by Eurocentrism, Marx points out that capitalism created a "material basis for a new world." (p. 79)

In other words, the question about the relationship between Marxism and anti-Semitism is pertinent to all forms of non-hegemonic subjectivities because it concerns the question whether Marxism reproduces the "[T]riumphalist philosophy of history that would eventually be described as a rhetoric of permanent progress. According to normative Western accounts, history is a teleological march toward the final liberation of humanity" (Slabodsky, 2014: 26). Dussel (in Dussel and Guillot, 1975: 21) goes as far as to affirm that without such a distinction Marxism and liberal capitalism reproduce the same modern homogenizing force. This is also Glissant's (1997: 222–223n.2) assessment in reference to Stalinism and Trotskyism as well as Mignolo's (2008: 300) conditioning, or possibly dismissal, of Marxism by employing a similar logic.



Marxism and the Jewish question

The symbiosis I refer to is mostly a story of crossing *heresies*: Marxists were heretics within the Jewish world and, symmetrically, the Jews mostly belonged to the heretic currents of Marxism.

Traverso (2018: xi)

Judaism is not a religion

In his essay on Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, Monod (2016) argues that Marx's central target is not Jews but rather their social role. Marx's criticism of Judaism is not a criticism of Jewishness but rather a criticism of its construction under capitalist society (2016: 271). In that manner, one can develop from Monod's (2016: 278) assessment that, even if empirically the criticism has Jews as its reference, it does so only inasmuch as a certain social role, which is denoted by the term "Judaism", is imposed on them by the entanglement between capitalism and Christianity. A similar assessment appears in Postone's (1986: 310–311) account of the capitalist roots of Nazi anti-Semitism that will be discussed later. In other words, Marx is criticizing the hegemonization of Jews via the construction of Judaism as a capitalist concept. One can extrapolate that Judaism, the capitalist features, in this context would be distinct from Jewishness itself.

Judaism comes about only as a private identity; as a personal or religious element that is distinct from political life. This separation between public and private is, for Marx, characteristic of the Christian capitalist state. I do not know if Daniel Boyarin is a Marxist. Perhaps he does not consider himself a Marxist and has good reasons to reject it. But, if he were a Marxist, his arguments would go in this same exact direction in confirming not only that the separation is characteristic of Christianity, but also adding that the separation is historically alien to Jewishness



until modernity, and, even then, it remains problematic, since the category “religion” itself only emerges in a Jewish context within modernity (Boyarin, 2018: 329, 2129).

This Marxist tendency is further evidenced in his brief assessment of Marx, which corroborates, from a Jewish perspective, Traverso’s (2018) Marxist insight:

In *The Jewish Question*, as in *Über das Geldwesen* [a text by Moses Hess], the Jew is a symbolic figure of alienated humanity in the bourgeois world, the incarnation of a man who, according to Elisabeth de Fontenay, has become a stranger to himself. (p. 20)

And similarly in Gil Anidjar’s (2014) deconstruction of Christianity:

All significant concepts of the history of the modern world are liquidated theological concepts. This is so not only because of their historical development—in which they circulated between theology and the operations of the modern world, whereby, for example, the blood of Christ became the flow of capital—but also because of their systematic fluidity, the recognition of which is necessary for a political consideration of these concepts. (p. 79; emphasis in the original)

This assessment further elaborates that is only within the Christian universal equivalence that inequality emerges:

Blood counts—and then there are bloods that count less. Within the expansive logic of circulation and flow, there occurs, or recurs, *a difference between bloods.* (2014: 712)

Boyarin (2018) argues that for Marx:

“Judaism” is *always* a product of Christian guts. Just as “the Jew”—as opposed to the Jewish individual—is always/everywhere necessarily a product of non-Jewish



discourse, and given the absence of any Jewish talk of “Judaism” until very recently, there is no “really real,” no “religion” from within, no Judaism, at all, but only a construction from the outside. “Judaism” following Marx is a projection of non-Jewish discourse, projectile vomiting from their entrail. (pp. 2362–2370)³

And hence Judaism is also employed as a form of accusation even against clearly non-Jewish figures such as the Pope (Boyarin, 2018: 2699).⁴

Boyarin makes his case using several strong examples and textual references, but perhaps the strongest comes precisely from the importance associated to a trivial phenomenon. He mentions a notable interpretation about the importance of tying one’s shoelaces in a specific manner that is distinct from common practice. This does not emerge from any commandment that could be religious, but it is still taken to be a fundamental part of *yahadut*—the word usually translated into Judaism (Boyarin 2018: 1899). In this manner, the idea of Judaism as constituting a religion appears to miss the point. Boyarin is not arguing that Jewishness does not have religious elements to it but only that it cannot be properly described as a religion.

Nancy and Cohen-Levinas’s (2016: 675) intuition that converts do more than embrace a religion is relevant here. Boyarin in his assessment of the meaning of conversion to Judaism demonstrates that it focuses exclusively on ethnic and performative elements, what he refers to as “doings” (2018: 1761). This is further exemplified in a negative manner via an interpretation of Ruth’s conversion that comments on conversion as something connected to “faith” or as matter of “personal inclination/heart”. Given its singularity and

³ This is also Slabodsky’s (2016: 161–162) conclusion while not via the same argumentation.

⁴ See also Traverso (2018: 138, 140).



extraordinary character, Boyarin (2018: 2212) employs it to reinforce his argument.

Boyarin (2018: 2484–2506) states that the transformation of Judaism into a religion is accompanied by its toleration as a “wrong” posture that is accepted. Boyarin argues that this is a form of “conversion” that conditions Jewishness. This procedure serves as a form of Christianity to secure its borders. In other words, the idea of “religion” and its placement within an overarching structure secures against barbarism. Boyarin’s argument can again receive a Marxist tone if one considers Deutscher’s (2017: 1208–1226) assessment that Jewish emancipation was conditioned on a strong bourgeois class that did not see the emergence of the Jewish bourgeois as a threat. Where this condition was absent, emancipation did not occur. This Christian attitude aims to provide clarity and purity against possible hybridity, never forgetting that hybridity is only so from the perspective of purity. He goes as far as directly implying that this logic grounds the notion of *Mischling*—a Nazi reference to mixed ancestry (Boyarin, 2018: 2795). Or, as Anidjar (2014) states about Christianity:

It extends its universal reach by spreading its peculiar benevolence far and wide (“Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges,” as Anatole France had it), by building walls and establishing frontiers, at once internal and external, which is to say that “when frontiers are decided, the adversary is not simply annihilated; indeed, he is accorded rights, even when the victor’s superiority is complete. (p. 543)⁵

⁵ See Dussel (1975: 36) for a similar argument.



Or, in Mignolo's (2011) more abstract description of the formation of otherness:

Suppose that you belong to the category of the *anthropos*. The *anthropos* is the "other" in current terminology. But the "other" doesn't exist ontologically. It is a discursive invention. Who invented the other if not the same in the process of constructing the *same*? [...] The enunciation needs an enunciator (agent), an institution, for not everyone can invent the *anthropos* but to impose the *anthropos* as the other in the collective imaginary it is necessary to be in a position to manage the discourse (verbal, visual, sound) by which you name and describe an entity (the *anthropos* or "the other") and succeed in making believe that it exists. (p. 275)

Slabodsky's assessment of the concept of "Judaeo-Christian" and all its possible employments (civilization, values, moral, and so on), popular among conservatives, but not exclusively conservatives as left movements have fallen for this narrative as well, goes in the same direction. As easily demonstrated by history, this is not a long-standing alliance but rather one that has sedimented (one could even say "sedimenting" still) in recent years. As Glissant (1997) states: "When one says civilization, the immediate implication is a will to civilize" (p. 13), so hopefully one can see that despite all the possible difference, Jews share the one common feature employed by Mignolo (2008: 316) in his cases: being exposed to colonial violence.

Counter-hegemonic Jewishness

Considering the previous assessment of Marxist interpretations, it becomes clear that Marxism aims to resist the hegemonic imposition of social roles, or in better words, any civilizatory mission. Under this interpretative scheme, a Marxist conception of emancipation can be constructed as opposing



the universalizing spread of civilization or the continuous flow of history that inevitably leads to communism.⁶ Instead, social emancipation is the disruption of this model by non-hegemonic narratives. To reappropriate Luxemburg's formula, the choice facing us is "Barbarism/Socialism or Civilization". Marxism is the possibility of recuperating barbarianism or returning to the topic at hand, of Jewishness emancipated from "Judaism".

As Nancy and Cohen-Levinas (2016: 684) argue, the issue of anti-Semitism is not a religious concern, it is a civilizatory concern. It concerns the fact that Jews represent the cursed face of the humanist and capitalist blessing. Or in the terms proposed here, it concerns the fact that the barbarian refuses the benefits of universalistic hegemony in an act of epistemic disobedience. Slabodsky (2014: 29, 34–35, 71), on his part, mentions that natives and Africans were accused of being Jewish and often accepted the accusation since the term gained an iconoclastic sense (perhaps as a pejorative term on its own). A similar account is provided by Segré's (2014: 3713n.15) reference to Meillassoux's understanding of the slogan "we are all German Jews". Also, Boyarin (2018: 1376) compares Jewish unsuitability to the categories of "Judaism" as a religion with the Chaco Canyon culture's unsuitability and the imposition of "Judaism" as a category under colonial conditions to the South African case (p. 2815). Finally, Memmi (1966) famously provides a similar argument in terms of coloniality in general.

This epistemic disobedience is best illustrated by Dussel and Guillot's (1975: 23) reproduction of the classic Argentinian folklore character Martín Fierro's formula that "in my

⁶ This conclusion is not shared by all the authors mentioned here. For an alternative conclusion that focuses on an emancipatory scenario that is "indifferent" to non-hegemonic subjectivities see Monod (2016) and Badiou et al (2013). An engagement with this posture is beyond the scope of this article but as hinted earlier, we find this "indifference" remains overly universalistic and hence problematic. Nevertheless, it is only as problematic as all the other assimilationist or integrationist postures. For an assessment of this position see Segré (2014).



ignorance, I know that I am worth nothing”. This nullification is the product of the violence imposed on him, but from this ignorance (lack of *logos*/reason) emerges the counter-hegemonic posture of refusing the homogenization. As Dussel and Guillot (1975: 25–26) go on to conclude: Otherness is not a form of comprehension but of incomprehension (i.e., ignorance/barbarity)⁷ and the new can only emerge from this nothing.

Rancière (1999: 44–46) argues that political domination is naturalized via the rhetorical “do you understand?” interpellation. This subjugates those inferior to the role of obeying without questioning: understanding what they must do while also understanding their social role as those who do you fully understand—i.e., lack reason as in Dussel and Guillot’s (1975: 19) reconstruction of Aristotle account of the barbarians as those who are strong but lack ability/intelligence. Then one can find in Dussel and Guillot the response to such subjugation: not understanding, being *de facto* unable to comprehend in an adoption of the barbarian posture.

This method of epistemic disobedience can be illustrated in Jewishness by Segré’s (2014) comparison between Plato and Rabbi Shimon: “While Plato invites us to come out of the cavern, Rabbi Shimon invites us to enter it” (p. 293 [my translation]).⁸ The idea here is that while Plato represents enlightenment and its triumphalist imposition of emancipation, Rabbi Shimon, a central Talmudic figure and alleged creator of the Kabbalah, calls on us to refuse it. In the cavern, where Rabbi Shimon was hiding from imperial persecution, he studied and gained the power to smite with his sight alone.⁹

In this context, one can again employ Boyarin for a Marxist purpose. He comments on an interpretation of the book

⁷ I find Dussel’s formulation stronger than Mignolo (2008: 290) “learning to unlearn” but they are undoubtedly more connected than opposing.

⁸ A similar parallel can be found in Levinas’s comparison between Abraham and Odysseus.

⁹ See Fonrobert (2007) for a more details assessment of this dynamics.



of Esther that assesses the fact that Mordechai did not bow before Haman, the vizir, because he identified as a *Yehudi* (belonging to *yahadut* or Judaism). This interpretation states that this would be correct when the vizir was far away and one could not see him, since it would constitute a deification which is prohibited by Jewish religion. Still, Mordechai refused to bow even when the vizir was near, which would not constitute a deification and would only mean that he was paying respect to the vizir's power, which would be allowed in Judaism. Hence the conclusion the interpretation reaches was that Mordechai's posture emerged exclusively from him being politically rebellious.

Boyarin (2018: 2251–2267) used this example to demonstrate a case where the modern conception of the separation between politics and religion is emerging within Judaism. Still, Boyarin reminds us that this distinction between far and near is not present in the original text, which leads us to believe that the identification of *Yehudi* requires not bowing down to power regardless of the situation. This is precisely the interpretation Segré (2014: 232–234) makes employing a Talmudic reading. In other words, if one decolonizes Jewishness of its modern categorization, the outcome is that Jewishness demands that one does not recognize the vizir's power. In fact, those who recognize it are committing a double crime, first by bowing when they should not, and, moreover, by justifying it via categories that do not belong to Jewishness they are naturalizing the submission to an alien order which is an even deeper form of bowing. This is further reinforced by Boyarin's (2018: 4060n.15) reconstruction of *Ioudaismos* (a possible Greek source for the term Judaism) as not as referencing a noun, and hence not being parallel to Judaism, but as describing a mode of action. That is, more specifically, acting in a manner antagonist to *Hellenismos* (a term that refers to acting as a Greek and used in a pejorative way by Jews against other Jews).



In this context, Deutscher's concept of non-Jewish Jew to refer to several iconoclastic Jewish figures becomes relevant. Deutscher illustrates his case by referring to a Talmudic story of the Akher (the stranger) who masters one of the most important Talmudic sages. According to the tale, the Akher at one point breaks with Judaism by literally transgressing the line that one is allowed to travel on Shabbat, hence parting ways with his pupil who remains within the boundaries permitted (Deutscher, 2017: 419).

What Deutscher does not mention, and must have known considering his upbringing in Hassidism, is that the Akher is not just some iconoclast sage. He is one of the four who have entered the *Pardes*, the realm of truth and knowledge. In fact, he is one of the two to have "survived" the experience, since one died, one lost his mind, one survived unharmed, and he became heretic. His heresy emerges from the core of Jewishness, so, considering the previous account of Judaism, perhaps a better term would be "non-Judaic Jew", which I would argue also makes for a better understanding of Anidjar's (2009) statement that "we have never been Jewish" (pp. 45, 49) given that blood relations are a Christian notion and hence Jews have never been part of that structure (pp. 42, 45).

This is a position that does not constrain itself with doing the Shabbat within the specific boundaries of the permitted social sphere. Instead, it wants to take the Shabbat everywhere, that is, its claim against working regulations emerges from a Jewish perspective. Moreover, the semantic proximity between Akher, as the stranger, and the concept of barbarian reinforces the overarching argument here.¹⁰

The idea here is not returning to an original position or a form of pure barbarism. As Glissant (2020: 356–357) states, the colonized does not exist prior to colonization and its disorder is the lack/absence of something but the very

¹⁰ Slabodsky (2016: 155) interprets this case differently.



structure of colonization. Instead, the best way to make sense of Boyarin's and Slabodsky's proposal of decolonizing Judaism is understanding that one operates without a proper ground, and is always invited to one's own table since one does not even have a name to claim or a language to shout.¹¹ As Anidjar (2009) concludes: "We live in Christian blood. And we have never been Jewish" (p. 49). Unless one understands Anidjar to be reclaiming a "pure" conceptualization of Jewishness cleansed of Christian blood, one must understand that the name Judaism is a barbaric name; it results, as do all other barbaric names, from the violence inflicted on it— it is immersed in the bloody politics of Christianity. In this manner, the opposition to anti-Semitism can only be formulated as a counter-hegemonic resistance, as already hinted in Césaire's understanding that Nazism is not extraordinary to civilization but rather the crowning of its logic (Mignolo 2011a: 60; Slabodsky, 2016: 162; Slabodsky, 2014: 35–36).

Boyarin grounds Slabodsky's reconstruction of Mignolo's idea of "border thinking". According to Slabodsky, this amounts to understanding the asymmetry of power and the violence of coloniality and denying it completely. It is not the impurity of a mixed middle ground that appeals to some engendered structure of communality, instead, it is the impurity of degeneration and disruption. Glissant (1997: 111) mentions the ideas of silt and alluvium to talk about the opacity in the mirror of modernity. An assessment of this connection will remain beyond the scope of this text but, nevertheless, I would highlight an initial connection: "Opacities must be preserved; an appetite for opportune obscurity in translation must be created; and falsely convenient vehicular sabirs must be relentlessly refuted" (Glissant, 1997: 120). This barbaric

¹¹ As in Slabodsky's (2014: 21) recounting of the question posed to him by Mignolo "What language does the *barbaric* Jew speak?" [emphasis in the original].



position constitutes neither a safe space nor the creation of a hybrid third, hence avoiding the binarism, but the possibility of advocating a barbarian epistemology in detriment of the colonial one (Slabodsky, 2016: 166–167; Slabodsky, 2014: 21). This is further supported in his reproduction of Dussel’s explanation for his interest in biblical Hebrew, which could as easily have come out of the “Marxist Boyarin” constructed here:

For while these Greek imperial categories, developed and elaborated by conquistadors, preempted the possibility of “slave emancipation,” Biblical Hebrew, a vocabulary developed by the vanquished, enabled “the possibility of the revolution of the poor.” To philosophize from Latin America, a continent of “colonized, humiliated, and dependent” peoples, it was necessary to begin with the categories developed by the historically defeated who were symbolically represented by Jerusalem. (Dussel in Slabodsky, 2014: 22)

As Dussel (2020: 587, 631n.16), states in a consistent line with the argument being constructed here, the question is not creating a space of conditioned tolerance and co-existence, i.e., a form of “valid” identity (p. 706n.36), but of constructing an identity that disrupts and reassembles political totality (1975: 13).

In a concluding movement of solidifying this position, Levinas’s theory proves to be relevant. For example, Slabodsky (2014: 106–107) explored the case against wealth accumulation that Levinas makes in one of his Talmudic readings. In his Talmudic interpretation “Judaism and Revolution”, Levinas defines revolution as the emancipation from economic determinism but does not give a definite answer regarding its relation to Judaism. Segré (2014) finds a possibility of combining the two: “the subjective rupture with the State is the core of Judaism” (p. 23; emphasis in the text [my translation]). In his understanding of the relevant Talmudic passage, Segré (2014: 46, 150) argues that “removing the thorns from the vineyard”, i.e., fighting evilness, is diametrically opposed to



acting according to the king's orders. A similar reading of Levinas's politics is found in Abensour (2002), but the latter does not employ Levinas's Jewish philosophy in his argument. Still, there is room to argue that it is not completely absent, given the two figures involved and the brief reference to "Jewish folly" in Hegel (Abensour, 2002: 17).

Segré's answer to Levinas's question about whether Judaism is compatible with a revolutionary politics as thought of in the modes of the Greco-Roman state is perhaps negative, but, understood within the overarching argument here, this negative answer does not cancel the possibility of a revolutionary politics, it enhances it. More specifically in the context of Mignolo's (2011b) definition of border thinking as:

Border thinking is, in other words, the thinking of us the *anthropos* who do not aspire to become *humanitas* because it is the enunciation of the *humanitas* that made us *anthropos*. We delink from the *humanitas*, we become epistemically disobedient, and think and do decolonially, dwelling and thinking in the borders of local histories confronting global designs. (p. 277)

The philo-Semite problem

Almost across the board, Jewish politics, to the extent that it exists at all, is run by people who have likewise grown up—without ever growing powerful!—worshipping power and opportunistic success. Their abhorrence for principles, their fear of betting on the wrong horse, their admiration of those who hold power on this earth, and their reluctance to mobilize the energies of their own people have cost us the deployment of a Jewish army. In the midst of the monstrous turmoil the world now finds itself in, those who are unwilling to take any risks are certain to lose everything. The time for compromises is past. Those who think they can live on their knees will



learn that it is better to live and die standing up. We do not need any opportunistic practitioners of realpolitik, but we certainly do not need any “Führers” either. The trouble is, first, that a great many organizations and bureaucracies are working to prevent radical democrats from speaking to our people; and, second, that our people – those who are not yet behind barbed wire – are so demoralized by having been ruled by philanthropists for 150 years that they find it very difficult to begin to relearn the language of freedom and justice.

Arendt (2009: 243) in a text entitled “Jewish Politics”
written in 1942

The case of Jeremy Corbyn’s anti-Semitism is an interesting phenomenon to open this debate. His leadership of the UK Labour Party was considered by the Wiesenthal Centre to be the anti-Semitic event of 2019 (*Annual Top Ten Worst Anti-Semitic Incidents: SWC Releases 2019 List*, n.d.). This year the list was officially called “Global Anti-Semitic and Anti-Israel incidents”, which already points to the problematic conflation raised earlier. This conflation was not present in the previous year when the list was called only “Global Anti-Semitic Incidents”.

For the sake of the argument, one could grant that Corbyn is, in fact, anti-Semitic. The argument here aims less at problematizing the instances of positive employment of the term, even though it indirectly does so as well, and is more interested in questioning the problematic failures to do so. With this in mind, it still seems suspicious that several violent events where Jewish lives were directly targeted are all compressed into the second position. Events such as attacks on a synagogue in Halle (Germany) on Yom Kippur, a shooting at a synagogue in San Diego and the attempt at bombing and poisoning the water of a synagogue in Colorado all received much less attention than Corbyn’s leadership of a party that



was not even the governing party. Moreover, one cannot avoid the fact that the event that topped the list in the previous year, the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, and in 2017 the “Unite the Right” march, are not disconnected to the shootings events, which indicates an intensifying continuity to those events. But one can still grant a generous reading that their focus was exclusive to the scope of the year 2019 disconnected from its historical context.

Still, this suspicion is further aggravated when considering that two of those events happened right at the centre’s backyard, located in California. As will be further developed below, the alliance between the US and the opposition to anti-Semitism carries a symbolic weight that should make any event in its context more problematic. In other words, considering the weight the US has as the major and unshakable ally in the fight against anti-Semitism, any incident within its context should require special consideration since it possibly shakes that which is unshakable.

Now, one might argue that despite the considerations presented, the centre’s decision remains within a reasonable scope since I grant that Corbyn is in fact anti-Semitic. Again, just for the sake of the argument. I am not arguing that he is or is not. I am grating it for the sake of the argument because by avoiding this discussion I believe one might reach a more complex and interesting conclusion. One might debate the final decision, but one cannot argue that the centre is ultimately wrong. In this manner, unless one wants to delve into the question of whether he is anti-Semitic or not, which the article does not, the Corbyn case can be put to the side for now.

The interest here lies in the centre’s posture. When considered among other cases, the logic of the centre becomes interesting. More specifically, when one considers the decision within Segré’s (Badiou et al, 2013) account of the French context that preceded it and recent anti-Semitic incidents in Bolsonaro’s Brazilian government, one is able to identify a



logic that presents itself as opposing anti-Semitism but that, in fact, not only fails to identify it and hold it accountable, but, in some cases, operates as an intensifying element. In that manner, what was previously just suspicious can now be constructed as a concrete problematic scenario.

Anti-Semitism as deflection

Segré (Badiou et al, 2013) assesses the so-called philo-Semitic reactions to explore the construction of the narrative described previously where Israel (as representative of the Jewish question) is associated with the West and civilization. According to him, what is initially described as merely a strategic alignment pragmatically motivated, hence the outcome of specific motivations on both sides, is turned into a principled grouping, hence turning the alignment into a normative condition.

The initial step of the transformation is best exemplified by his assessment of Trigano's claim that in the same manner that morality was measured by the way one positioned oneself in terms of the Dreyfus affair, today one can divide the world according to positioning in relation to Israel (Badiou et al, 2013: 821). In that manner, France's strategic diplomacy is immoral while the American unconditional support for Israel is testimony to their role as the beacon of freedom. Slabodsky (2014: 181–183) provides a similar account via the figure of Robert Kaplan, an important "strategist" showing the mirroring "positive" side of this dichotomy.

With that in mind, one establishes that any attack on Israel's "rock", any form of anti-Americanism, is a form of anti-Semitism. One already notices a shift in the idea of Jewish autonomy that engendered the claim that Zionism served as the only form of opposition to anti-Semitism (Badiou et al, 2013: 980–998) but, more interestedly, with this association one is obliged to revise American history and cleanse it of its



anti-Semitic events. Facts such as the American proximity to Nazi officials, Ford's distribution of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and his portrait in the Nazi headquarters, and later support for Latin American dictatorships who had an anti-Semitic tone, are all dismissed on grounds of the principle of total alliance. A similar logic is present in the Argentinian case as constructed by Slabodsky (2014: 2) as well as in certain documents uncovered from the Brazilian dictatorship, specifically concerning the execution of Jewish journalist Wladimir Herzog.

This logic is extended even further by Finkielkraut in his argument that America is the inverted image of Auschwitz. Segré (Badiou et al, 2013: 1197) remarks that this position is an open denial of Israel as the inverted image of Auschwitz, which is usually taken to be a principle of Zionist narrative. Still, this only amount to the weaker case here, that Zionists themselves do not see in Zionism the solution to anti-Semitism; the stronger case is constructed in demonstrating that this inversion turns on itself and reinforces anti-Semitism in some cases.

Segré (Badiou et al, 2013: 3684n.14) points to the interpretation of the May '68 revolts as anti-Semitic as an initial demonstration of this dynamic. Under this hermeneutical frame, students shouting "we are all German Jews" are being anti-Semitic while the conservative response of sending the Jewish leader of the revolt to Dachau is not worth mentioning.¹² The lack of concern in this case is suspicious, but one can give the generous reading that, given the obvious anti-Semitism of the reaction, it was more profitable to direct the hermeneutical efforts to exposing the hidden anti-Semitism.

This avoidance turns openly problematic when it is used in contemporary times to ground the opposition to progressive politics and its "alliance" with Islamic anti-Semitism. Segré's reconstruction here is rich and highly recommended for anyone

¹² See also Slabodsky (2014: 98)



interested in the current articulation between secularism and Islamism in general. Unfortunately, this article cannot do justice to his argument and must focus on specific instances.

One of the main cases assessed by Segré (Badiou et al, 2013: 1743) is an account where a female teacher noticed the words “dirty Jew [in the French masculine]” written in one of her Maghrebian student’s classroom exercise book. Segré analyses the account and reaches the conclusion that it is unlikely that this was intended: the teacher admittedly describes herself as not visibly Jewish, the wrong gender, and a series of other factors point in that direction, which is further confirmed in the teacher’s account of the reaction of the student and his family: “In the presence of his mother (deeply affected by her son’s action), the pupil offered me his apologies and begged me to explain to him what a Jew was, so that he would understand better and not say stupid things like this in the future” (in Badiou et al, 2013: 1781).

As Boyarin demonstrated, the employment of Judaism as a pejorative term disconnected from actual Jews is common. This is also found in Deutscher’s (2017: 580) comments on the issue. In fact, Boyarin (2018: 2957) argues that all its usages are rooted in anti-Semitic articulations and hence problematic, since his argument is that the category “Judaism” is merely an invention to dominate Jews. But, as Segré is attempting to demonstrate, rather than the concern being just the specific agent’s employment and their intentional or unintentional offense, anti-Semitism is symptomatic of a larger issue. In this way, Segré’s argument is that in focusing on the specific agents, one not only exculpates the larger hegemonic structure engendering anti-Semitism but one also employs anti-Semitism as a tool for targeting non-hegemonic subjects, hence reinforcing the dominant structures.

The implication in Segré is not that anti-Semitism is excusable, given the social circumstances of those marginalized populations, but rather that the fight against anti-Semitism



requires a different approach. It requires the understanding that anti-Semitism is never an attack on the hegemonic even if it is being employed by the marginalized and even if Jews believe themselves to be fully integrated into the hegemonic discourse. In a sense, Segré (Badiou et al, 2013: 2152) is giving a double warning against what was previously described as the socialism of the fools and the fool's paradise by demonstrating that they both emerge from the preservation of hegemony.

This is proven by his counter-analysis of the data collected and used to demonstrate the presence of anti-Semitism in the marginalized population (with a focus on the Islamic community). By repurposing the statistics used to demonstrate the presence of anti-Semitic opinions among that population, Segré demonstrates a more significant result when the identification as "right-wing" is employed as a factor rather than ethno-cultural identification. People who identified as right-wing demonstrated a higher percentage of anti-Semitism for questions about Jewish influence on the media, economics, and politics. He also mentions that this result is reproduced in another research where the presence of anti-Semitism under right-wing regimes is undeniable (Badiou et al, 2013: 3926n.11).

However, Segré brilliantly twists the knife on the accusation when he tests people's opinions about the Shoah. First, he points to the alarmist account that 11 per cent of students of Maghrebian origin believe there is an exaggerated concern with the Shoah, against only 4 per cent of students of French origin. Even within the accusatory interpretation, 89 per cent remains an impressive majority and a similar figure to right-wing identification. Segré then flips the question to "do you think there is too little concern with the Shoah" and shows that 54 per cent of Maghrebian students agree, against 49 per cent of French origin. The final blow comes when he uses the ideological frame and shows that only 42 per cent of right-wing students find that there is not enough talk about the Shoah.



One already notices a clear escalation from an initial blindness to the employment of anti-Semitism for problematic causes. The final movement we can extract from Segré's account takes us one step further by exploring the way this logic is turned against Jews—becomes itself anti-Semitic under the guise of opposing it. According to Segré (Badiou et al, 2013: 2850) this logic is found in Taguieff's revisionism (there are no other words for that) of exculpating the Vatican of the Shoah. Against the Vatican and an almost unanimous historiography, he references a sermon to a small group of Belgian pilgrims claiming that anti-Semitism is inadmissible. Besides the irony that a similar statement is used by the same Taguieff to chastise an Islamic adversary for not positioning himself against anti-Semitism, the important element here is that a historically anti-Semitic institution is being cleansed on behalf of the civilizatory narrative of placing Christianity and Judaism against Islam (Badiou et al, 2013: 2869–2879).

In a similar vein, Finkielkraut attacked those students who refuse Western civilization and the Christian view of the world by referring to the Crusades as a fundamental episode that is being challenged (Badiou et al, 2013: 4053n.22). This defender of the enlightenment then argues, against an archbishop nonetheless, for a return to the Augustinian conception of evil in detriment of what he calls whitewashed Rousseauism, leaving no suspicion as to his intentions and worldview.

Considering this background, the response of the philo-Semites to fellow defender of civilization Oriana Fallaci's overarching employment of anti-Semitism (not to speak of her overarching discriminatory posture) is not surprising (Badiou et al, 2013: 3034). As it is also not extraordinary when we consider their support for francophone Renaud Camus when he claimed Jews are overly present in the media (Badiou et al, 2013: 2956).¹³ In this context, it is fundamental to remind the

¹³ For a reproduction of Camus' statement see Segré (2013: 4121n.1).



reader that Camus is the proponent of the notion of the “Great Replacement”, which cannot be untangled from the white supremacist slogan mentioned earlier. Fallaci attacks the Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l’antisém itisme (LICRA; a “leftist” Jewish association) which, together with a Muslim NGO, sued her in France for her discriminatory statements by claiming:

Yes, now I do understand those ungrateful Jews of “LICRA”. Now I do. Collaborationism is always born of fear. Yet their case reminds me of the German Jewish bankers who, hoping to save themselves, in the Thirties lent money to Hitler. And who, despite this, ended up in the ovens. (in Segré, 2014: 3109)

The latent and open anti-Semitism here does not require any further interpretation.

This is not an isolated case since in her comments on her process in the Swiss court she lists a series of other “victims” such as Holocaust revisionist and animal rights activists who opposed Halal slaughtering by claiming it is a “barbaric” ritual (Badiou et al, 2013: 3129). She is fully aware of the ramifications of her statements: “[Halal butchery is barbaric] to the same extent as *schechitah* or kosher butchery” (in Badiou et al, 2013: 3138; see also 4155n.5).

Segré calls our attention to the fact that Fallaci never mentions Auschwitz and only once the notion of “extermination camps”. Moreover, in that singular instance, she names concentration camps rather than extermination camps. The mystery is solved by her open opposition to the Jewish-centred account of Nazism, which also accounts for her self-proclaimed sympathy for the revisionists (Segré, 2014: 3286). Had she taken part in the questionnaire, one is able to safely assume what her vote would have been. One cannot but be reminded of Arendt’s (2009) formulation in “We Refugees”: “Apparently nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new



kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends” (p. 265).

*Brazil as a laboratory of contemporary fascism*¹⁴

The Bolsonaro case is an excellent concluding case for the assessment of those dynamics,, both because it is recent and because it perhaps represents the strongest instance of those processes. One can point to situations such as a functionary of the Brazilian foreign ministry gesticulating the “OK” sign that has been appropriated by white supremacist in the US or Bolsonaro drinking a full glass of milk on one of his public videos as a sign of his flirtation with anti-Semitic ideologies. Still, there remains room for interpretation and dog whistling is not concrete evidence, so one is left with the suspicion.

A more interesting instance is perhaps the previous culture minister’s video where he reproduces both the language and the visuality of Goebbels in an almost undeniable manner. This resulted in his “amicable” replacement (both Bolsonaro and the minister exchanged pleasantries and vows of loyalty), and the whole polemic was dismissed as a misunderstanding without proper explanation. The minister claimed to be unaware of the references and, more interestedly, a conspiracy emerged arguing that he was framed by infiltrated opposition agents, which further aggravates the anti-Semitic tone rather than dismisses it.

I find it important to mention that the left responded very poorly to this incident by claiming that the only reason he was replaced was because he offended the Jewish community, hence insinuating that Bolsonaro was under their absolute

¹⁴ Paraphrasing of a left-wing slogan that talks about Latin America as the laboratory for neoliberal policies, more specifically in reference to the dictatorships of the previous century.



control. I will repeat my previous claim that I find the Brazilian case in its articulation between left, right, and anti-Semitism extremely rich and revealing.

Still, in all those cases, as strong as the suspicion might be, there is still some level of ambiguity, but there are four cases where no alternative reading is possible in my view. The first one is the governor of Santa Catarina, a Bolsonaro ally, who failed, when questioned, to disallow her prominent father's openly Nazi and revisionist postures. The second case is a politician allied to Bolsonaro, who a couple of weeks before Pessach published an accusation, citing the Bible, that Jews sacrifice children, a clear reference to the blood libel anti-Semitic trope that Jews use Christian blood to make Matza (the "bread" eaten in Pessach).

Both these instances reproduce the logic outlined by Segré (Badiou et al, 2013), more specifically the Fallaci response. In both cases we find the local Jewish community almost unanimously rising in opposition. To contextualize, the Brazilian Jewish community is fairly well structured, being composed of national and local associations, having Holocaust and several other museums, and also think tanks of different natures.

In the first case, the Israeli ambassador came out in support of the governor's stance as a satisfying response and defended her posture against the attacks of the Jewish community. In very clear terms, the Israeli posture was to side with its political ally, Bolsonaro, in detriment of the local Jewish community's (in this case unambiguous) accusation of anti-Semitism. In the second instance, the ambassador was no longer working in Brazil and the Israeli government did not take any significant stand, but the response by the politician himself and others within Bolsonaro's support base of Christian evangelists reproduced the same tone. As in the Fallaci case, they accused the Jewish leadership of selling their own people and presented themselves as defenders of the Jews since they were the "true"



defenders of Israel. Without the slightest sense of irony, the community was accused of betrayal and secret alliances with the left because it presented a resistance, even if only minimal, to the hegemonic narrative.

The third and possibly more frustrating case happened recently when two representatives of the German ultra-right-wing (aka Fascist) party AfD met with prominent figures of the Bolsonaro government and his political base, including members of his family. One of the AfD members, Beatrix von Storch, is even a direct descendant of a high-ranking Nazi official. As expected, the immediate reaction of the Jewish community was critical around the spectrum to which the response once again activated the philo-Semitic Judaeo-Christian logic. One finds that this case deserves special attention because it not only confirms but also demonstrates an additional step to the previous logic. Unlike the previous instances where the tension was put to the side and life continued, this time on top of the national confederation's (CONIB) weak and minimal critical posture, it also published on its official website the text by one of Bolsonaro's allies responding to the confederation, hence providing that posture with its official stamp. Glissant (2020: 360–362) is helpful in understanding this logic of the colonized “elites”. Briefly, it refers to a posture that is comfortable operating within their colonized subjectivity while aware of the oppression of colonization or, specifically in the case here, a posture that fulfils the role implied in Judaism as constructed previously, while presenting itself as the bastion protecting against anti-Semitism.

The fourth case refers to journalist José Carlos Bernardi, a self-entitled conservative Christian entrepreneur from the recently created Bolsonaroian news outlet *Jovem Pan TV*, who while discussing the topic of former president Lula's visit to Germany with his fellow journalist, Amanda Klein, responded to her claim that Brazil should envision Germany's development with the claim that it is easy, one just needs to kill all the Jews



and rob their wealth as Germany did in the post-war. One could give a generous reading that he was not actually suggesting this posture but was hyperbolically challenging Klein's perspective and using this posture precisely given the obvious immorality of upholding such views. One could also point to the obvious historical inaccuracies since the end of the war marks precisely the end of this posture as the official state policy and it is debatable whether killing Jews was economically efficient for Nazi Germany. Those issues are of no interest here.

Still, there are two fundamental points worth highlighting in this situation and they are inherently interconnected. Firstly, even if the journalist presents the idea of ethnic cleansing as immoral, the implication is that it is effective. In this sense he is implicitly legitimating the posture as a reasonable economic posture. And secondly, the implied conflation that any challenge to neoliberal hegemony is equivalent to Nazism creates the narrative that any challenge to hegemonic logic is anti-Semitic. In this scenario, the begging question to Bernardi's posture seems to be "why is it obvious that such posture is immoral?", if it works then maybe the Jews are doing something to rig the economy as it seems they have some power over it. Hence, why would it be immoral to solve it? The ironic twist is that for a proper liberal who thinks of the economy as following science-like economic determinism, for instance a conservative entrepreneur, there is nothing stopping them from supporting such a posture.

This final message is made urgent by a historical parallel. Benjamin's 1921 *Critique of Violence* references the biblical figure of Korach, a "rebellious" figure who became rich under suspicious means in Egypt and claimed reservations about the exodus. Benjamin was perhaps unfamiliar with the figure of Hans-Joachim Schoeps at the time, but there is an interesting analogy to be made here. Schoeps was the leader of the Jewish support organization for Hitler. He was able to flee in 1938 but his family perished. Upon his return to Germany, he resumed



his conservative activities even among “former” Nazis. His relevancy emerges from the fact that, without the slightest irony, he serves, along with Finkelkraut, as a reference for the Jewish section of the AfD. As Benjamin hints, opposing Korach is a Marxist mission.

Conclusion

It is imperative to eliminate the concept of the “pre-modern” [Barbarian under the colonial gaze] that serves imperial modernity so well and to speak instead with pride of the “non modern” [decolonial barbarian], which implies delinking and border thinking, for the non-modern shall be argued in its legitimacy to think and build a just and equitable future beyond the logic of coloniality that is constitutive of the rhetoric of modernity.

Mignolo (2011b: 279)

As Traverso (2018) states, “the history of the Marxist debate on the Jewish question is the history of a misunderstanding”» (p. 216). Marxist theory is not immune to making the universalizing or assimilationist mistake which leads it into several problematic ramifications. For instance, in assuming the full integration, the left treats anti-Semitism as a non-issue or, even worse, as a hysterical outcry by the hegemonic parallel to “reverse racism”. It dismisses the historical oppression of Jews in similar ways to right-wing perspectives and becomes vulnerable to similar conclusions.

I would argue that this is ultimately a conservative logic as demonstrated, for example, in a recent opinion column in one of Brazil’s most famous newspapers, *Folha de São Paulo*, arguing for the dangers of “reverse racism” and the oppressive posture of those “seemly” marginalized communities by mentioning that black communities in Brazil hold anti-Semitic



beliefs and hence discriminate against white people (Risério, 2022). The implication of the argument was that the so-called marginalized hold the power to discriminate and, moreover, are now even more powerful than the normative order since their power to discriminate is largely taken as acceptable or a mode of self-defence whereas “traditional” forms of racism/sexism/homophobia are no longer tolerated by the hegemonic order. The underlying thesis is that the hegemonic order is in danger and should defend itself against its supposed victims, who are in fact the real aggressors. Connecting it to the overarching argument here, what we see is anti-Semitism being weaponized to defend hegemonic order and legitimize further discrimination.

On the other hand, the left often only refers to Jewish oppression in a nostalgic and romanticized manner, as something of the far past when Jews were allies rather than enemies, creating a dichotomy of the good persecuted Jews of the past in opposition to the bad hegemonic Jews of the present. A complete assessment of this dynamic is beyond the scope of the text here, but authors such as Traverso, Postone and Deutscher clearly illustrate that this was never the case, and the left has often turned its back on Jews using precisely the same logic, even in times when persecution was undeniable. For instance, Traverso’s (2018: 145, 148–150, 158) account of the Weimar period or his reconstruction of cases of left-wing Holocaust denial based on economic determinism (pp. 60–64, 213n.59).

Still, Marxism also represents a form of resisting the universalistic argument by presenting it as a construct of hegemonic mentality. In this manner, given that Marxism is counter-hegemonic, it must also be non-universalistic. Marxism would then not represent an advancement of civilization but, instead, the advancement of barbarism. Marxism would then be the resistance of the barbarian, more specifically to the case here, fighting back against anti-Semitism rather



than the trust that integration would eliminate it. Perhaps, something emblematic of this turn in Marxism proposed here is Traverso's (2018) reproduction of Trotsky's late move from an assimilationist stance in a letter: "In his opinion, the only hope of salvation for the Jews lay in socialist revolution and, from this point of view, he praised the potentiality for revolt against the capitalist order residing in 'the messianic spirit' of the Jewish proletariat" (p. 157n.55)

This article explored the topics of Jewishness and anti-Semitism exclusively, but hopefully the points it raised regarding progressive attitudes and its possible limitations can be extended, taking full awareness of the particularities of each case, to other forms of discrimination towards non-hegemonic subjectivities (namely, as Slabodsky puts it, other barbarians), hence making a tangential contribution to the question via its engagement with Jewishness. In other words, Marxism too should be constructed as a form of being an "incurable barbarian" to use Memmi's category articulated by Slabodsky (2014: 23).

As Postone (1986) argues, liberals and conservatives treat anti-Semitism as a scapegoat ideology—a deviance from proper enlighten modernity. Based on this assessment, one must also question from what one is scapegoating. In this case the answer is clear: the crisis of capitalism. Postone demonstrates this to be the case for Nazism,¹⁵ but one could also extend it to contemporary iterations of this logic. We find this when we see that liberals and conservatives treat anti-Semitism, or any form of discrimination, as scapegoating: either in dismissing it as a superficial phenomenon of the unmodern/uncivilized easily fixed by education or warning against the dangers of allowing its barbarity to grow unrestrained. This is exactly the dynamic present in Traverso's (2018: 145, 148–150, 158) account of the Weimar period, hence the alert that this article aims to raise.

¹⁵ Traverso (2018: 191–193) associates a similar claim to Abram Leon.



More importantly, within this context one finds that liberal and conservative postures, in their attempts to confront “deviant” political postures and reaffirm hegemonic discourses by re-establishing “normality”, are indirectly confirming the nature of the problem as a form of social issue (i.e., a crisis of capitalism) and hence confirming the need for a Marxist response:

Fundamentally, these young people are pressing to its ultimate conclusion the impatience of the democratic individual with any forms, mediations and institutions. They are pressing to its ultimate consequences the devouring passion for wellbeing. Their vocabulary is sometimes that of radical Islamism, but their world is one of absolute individualism, of “everything right now”, video games and pornography ... Their ideal is one of availability: “what I want, where I want, when I want”. (Finkielkraut, cited in Badiou et al, 2013: 4093)

Even though Finkielkraut does not mention it by its name, he is aware he is describing capitalism and not Islam.

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