

EMMANUEL LEVINAS'S GEOPOLITICS: OVERLOOKED CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN RABBINICAL AND THIRD WORLD DECOLONIALISMS

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Abstract

In this article, I re-evaluate critiques of Levinas's Eurocentrism by exploring his openness to decolonial theory. First, I survey Levinas's conceptual confrontation with imperialism, showing that his early Eurocentric work (1930s–1960s) is revised in his later writing (1970s–1980s). Second, I explore the contextual reasons that led him to take that path, such as his previously overlooked conversations with the liberationist South American intellectual Enrique Dussel. Finally, I present the case for a revisitation of the current theoretical frameworks of Jewish thought. I explain how Levinas's encounter with Third World discourses helps to add a needed decolonial layer to contemporary Jewish intercultural conversations.

Keywords

Emmanuel Levinas; Enrique Dussel; postcolonialism; Eurocentrism; Judaism

Levinas's Geopolitics

Most interpreters of Emmanuel Levinas have not seen any need for further discussion of the interrelation between his political philosophy and his Jewish identity. He is generally accused of a Eurocentric attitude that overlooks the suffering of non-Jews.¹ Some even argue that his entire philosophical enterprise is reducible to a Western

The author is indebted to Robert Gibbs, Marc Ellis, Ivan Kalmar, Annette Aronowicz, Robert Bernasconi, Rachel Gostenhofer, and the anonymous *JJTP* reviewers for their invaluable critiques.

¹ See, for example, Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002); Robert Bernasconi, "Who is My Neighbor? Who is the Other?" in *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition: The Ninth Annual Symposium of the Simon Silverman Phenomenological Center* (Pittsburgh: Simon Silverman Center, Duquesne University, 1991), 1–31; and Sonia Sikka, "How Not to Read the Other: 'All the Rest Can be Translated,'" *Philosophy Today* 43 (1999): 195–206.

theological justification of the State of Israel.² Admittedly, this school of thought has plenty of evidence to justify the accusation of Eurocentric prejudice. During the interwar period, for instance, Levinas defended the integrity of the “Jewish-Christian civilization” against intra-European “barbarism.”³ In the early 1960s, he contended that one of the major problems for modern Jewish thought was the need to account for the “underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses” that threatened Western Judeo-Christian “Sacred History.”⁴ Later, in a prelude to his well-known rejection of the application of ethics to the Palestinian context, Levinas became even more vehement. He reduced philo-anthropological analysis to the encounter between Athens and Jerusalem: “Humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. . . . All the rest—all the exotic—is dance.”⁵

Before the 1970s, therefore, Levinas seemed to decisively locate Jewish thought within the West, and to defend Europe against the threats of the Third World. His pre-1970s writing does not appear to qualify Levinas as anything other than a partisan of Eurocentrism. Beginning in the mid-1970s, however, it is possible to uncover strong textual evidence of Levinas’s growing openness to decolonial thinking. This increase in receptivity seems to have occurred in two stages. In 1974, he began developing an epistemological openness toward Third World alternatives. This alternative crystallized in 1986, when this openness became geopolitical. Let me explore these two stages in more detail.

In 1974 Levinas published *Autrement qu’être, ou au-delà de l’essence*. According to most Anglophone scholarship on the topic, this book was primarily invested in addressing criticisms of his work by French intellectuals, especially Jacques Derrida.⁶ A closer look at the text itself, however, reveals a different constellation of concerns. Levinas contends that the only possibility of being “for-the-other” is “to introduce some barbarisms in the language of philosophy.” This openness to a multiplicity

² George Salemhamed, “Levinas: From Ethics to Political Theology,” *Economy and Society* 21 (1992): 93.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Actuality of Maimonides,” quoted in Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 45–46.

⁴ Levinas, “La pensée juive aujourd’hui,” in *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006), 210. Translated as “Jewish Thought Today” in *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 160.

⁵ Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 18.

⁶ On the predetermination of reading Levinas after the critique of Derrida, and on Levinas’ late answer, read the Editor’s Introduction to Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *Re-Reading Lévinas* (Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1991), xii–xv.

of voices that are not located in Athens is later further nuanced: what is “beyond essence” is not to be found in the West. “Otherwise than being” is “a *barbarous* expression” that emerges from “the margins” of European “triumphal history.”⁷

Levinas, therefore, distinguishes between Europe and its plural barbaric margins. On the one hand, “European history” is defined as the record of “conquest and jealous defense” of the center of power and thought. It is a testimony of the epistemological egotism and aggressiveness of a Self who is unable to acknowledge his responsibility for what is beyond himself. On the other hand, the barbaric terrain is where Levinas finds the space to think “beyond essence.” It is “in the margins” that “the trace of events” of Western history carries “another signification.” According to Levinas, that signification is created by the suffering of “the victims of the triumphs,” who are located (and can think) “beyond essence.”⁸ This valorization of the originality of alternative sources of thinking, especially in the context of suffering non-Western traditions, represents an epistemological openness to the multiplicity of Third World voices. But Levinas, as we shall see later, does not merely reduce this emergence of barbaric alternatives to epistemological re-evaluations.

This openness to barbaric epistemologies crystallizes in Levinas’s geopolitical Talmudic lectures, ten years later. In “Les Nations et la présence d’Israël,” he takes the new epistemological barbarism to the level of decolonial geopolitics. The lecture, an interpretation of *Pesahim* 118b written in 1986, distinguishes between two communities struggling for geopolitical survival. Those formerly referred to as barbaric, or as the margins of the West, are now called the community of “the brave ones.”⁹ This new alliance is integrated by Jews (Israel), Arabs (Egypt), and Africans (Ethiopia)—Levinas takes the latter to symbolize the whole Third World.¹⁰ The ethical community of those displaced by history confronts a common enemy: an empire

⁷ Levinas, *Autrement qu’être, ou au-delà de l’essence* (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1974), 273. Translated as *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Levinas, “Les Nations et la présence d’Israël,” in *À l’heure des nations* (Paris: Minit, 1988), 120. Translated as “The Nations and the Presence of Israel” in *In the Time of the Nations* (London: Athlone, 1994), 104.

¹⁰ Levinas writes that Ethiopia stands for a loose conception of the Third World. In his own words, it represents all the “countries doubtless similar to it” that make up “between a third and a fourth of mankind.” “Les Nations et la présence d’Israël”/ “The Nations and the Presence of Israel,” 114/99.

that accumulates wealth merely for the sake of accumulation while it condemns the other peoples to starvation. Levinas quotes the Talmudic text directly: “There are three hundred and sixty-five streets in the great city of Rome; in each one there are three hundred and sixty-five towers; in each tower, there are three hundred sixty-five storeys; and in each storey there is enough to feed the whole world.”¹¹ This is, in Levinas’s words, an “economy of the wealth of pure accumulation.”¹²

However, Levinas does not restrict the criminal ethos of egotistic empires to the ancient world. According to him, the empires of Greco-Roman antiquity have become “modern humanity.”¹³ In the modern world he identifies this community as the European “fraternal West,” and finally as “America.” In other words, he sees a continuous stream of economic accumulation from ancient Rome to the current “twentieth-century American realization”—which he identifies as nothing short of the “rabbinic doctor’s futuristic nightmare.”¹⁴ He sees no reason to accept the existence of this egotistic community, and follows the rabbis in praying for an end to “a collectivity destined to violence by the kind of society it is and fond of war.”¹⁵ He is less interested in reform than the defeat, destruction, and dispersion of this violent egotistic community—whether it be Rome, the European West, or the U.S.

Levinas goes further and asserts that it is impossible for “the empire” to reorient its ethos, even when it desires to become part of the new barbaric community. He rejects any kind of assimilation of the powerful to the new front. As he wrote earlier in the same collection, “this pure assimilation” is no more than “a facile virtue of the West, [a] hypocritical pretext of the colonizers.”¹⁶ In such statements, Levinas—who has always been viewed as a Eurocentric philosopher—seems to place Judaism within a radical geopolitical

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108/93.

¹² *Ibid.*, 122–123/107.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 122/107.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 112/96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 115/102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74/106. It is important to notice that two authors who explore “Levinas and the political” focus on the early political critique calling this a “community of masters,” based on the “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism.” See Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 40; and Nelson Maldonado Torres, *Against War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 20–23. I believe that my reading of barbaric civilization goes beyond this community, as it presents an alternative to the barbaric community of the brave ones.

decolonial front. I contend that this is the result of a hidden historical and conceptual encounter with the underside of history: with Third World philosophers.

Levinas's Geopolitical Encounter

As mentioned above, Levinas's simultaneous engagement with Jewish identity and political philosophy has been read as Eurocentric. But I contend that this view overlooks the decolonial openness that Levinas began to show in the 1970s and 1980s. I pose the following question: What made Levinas change the geopolitical space of Jewish thought during the last twenty years of his life? Why should a Eurocentric partisan of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition re-evaluate Jewish thought, placing it with the peoples of the underside of history? I contend that this openness cannot be explained without an exploration of Levinas's overlooked historical encounters with Third World intellectuals. These meetings took place in the 1970s, during simultaneous reflection on the Holocaust and the end of political colonialism.

Let me develop this often neglected historical-conceptual encounter. Levinas encountered a young and "sympathetic" group of Southern intellectuals, among them Argentine philosopher Enrique Dussel, in Paris and Louvain in 1971 and 1972.¹⁷ Both sides remember the conversation with great interest. Levinas describes Dussel as "doing geopolitics," and states that "there is a very interesting attempt in South America to return to the spirit of the people." He declares how "happy or even proud" he feels when he "hears the echoes of my work in this group." Levinas describes this "as a fundamental approval" for his project. This approval is understood in terms of the historical-conceptual relationship between Jews and Southerners: "It means that other people have also seen the 'same thing.'"¹⁸ Enrique Dussel also remembers the meetings. He describes how he was in charge of gathering together "a group of Latin American

¹⁷ Levinas, "Philosophie, justice et amour," in *Entre Nous* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991), 138. Translated as "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 179. Curiously, Levinas explicitly prefers other scholars to Dussel. But I will show that this particular conversation was carried on between the two of them.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

students to talk to Levinas in 1971 in Paris and in 1972 in Louvain.”¹⁹ Subsequently, Dussel writes that his reading and encounter with Levinas “produced in my spirit a subversive overthrowing of all that I had learned until then.”²⁰ A few years later, he would title his new book *Liberación latinoamericana* and Emmanuel Levinas.²¹

The echoes of Levinas’s and Dussel’s mutual influence can be traced back to 1973, only a year after they met. Dussel writes: “The real overcoming of the [ontological and dialectical] tradition... is found in the philosophy of Levinas. Our overcoming will consist in re-thinking the discourse from Latin America.”²² His project sprang from “a personal dialogue I maintained with the philosopher [Levinas] in Paris and Louvain... What I expressed in a European university at the beginning of 1972 is precisely a ‘barbaric philosophy.’”²³ A year later, Levinas himself published *Autrement qu’être*. In its last pages, perhaps to emphasize the late incorporation of the term, Levinas writes the words quoted above: that the only way to have openness for the other is to “introduce some barbarisms in the language

¹⁹ The original text was published in Enrique Dussel, “El método analéctico y la filosofía latinoamericana,” in *América latina: Dependencia y liberación* (Buenos Aires: García Cambeiro, 1973), 111–113; and later expanded into an article published years later: Enrique Dussel, “Sensibility and Otherness in Emmanuel Lévinas,” *Philosophy Today* 37 (1999): 123–127.

²⁰ Enrique Dussel, “Para una fundamentación filosófica de la liberación latinoamericana,” in *Liberación latinoamericana y Emmanuel Levinas* (Buenos Aires: Bonum, 1975), 8. I am indebted to Walter Mignolo for his suggestion of translating “desquiciada repulsión” as “subversive overthrowing.”

²¹ This work, *Liberación latinoamericana* y Emmanuel Levinas, has not been translated into English. Enrique Dussel and Daniel Gillot, *Liberación latinoamericana y Emmanuel Levinas* (Buenos Aires: Bonum, 1975). This encounter has not been studied outside Latino/a philosophy. See some of the critical appraisals in Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, *Thinking from the Underside of History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000). Of particular importance are the introduction, written by the editors (18–21); Mignolo’s “Dussel’s Philosophy of Liberation: Ethics and Geopolitics of Knowledge” (28–30); and Michael Barber’s “Dussel’s Marx and Marion on Idolatry” (204–210). The only reference to this encounter I could find within Jewish thought is Robert Gibbs’s acknowledgment of the existence of this influence. See Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 229. Nelson Maldonado Torres recently presented a superb re-evaluation of the encounter in philosophical terms in, “Thinking from the Limits of Being: Levinas, Fanon, Dussel and the Cry of Ethical Revolt” (PhD diss., Brown University, 2002). This dissertation was revised and published as *Against War* (2008), which appeared shortly before I finished my own dissertation.

²² Dussel, “El método analéctico y la filosofía latinoamericana,” 112.

²³ This is the major description of what cannot be sublated within the system in Levinas’s major first work (*Totalité et infini*).

of philosophy.”²⁴ He also encourages revising the meaning of history through the vision of the barbaric margins of the West.²⁵

Levinas's epistemological openness to decolonialism arises from his encounter with Third World scholars. Why does that encounter find its epicentre in the term *barbarism*? This term stands out as one of the most provocative rhetorical resources of imperial epistemological designs. From early antiquity it emerged as a tool for creating both self-consciousness and the idea of the fixed nature of “the other”—a natural slave.²⁶ In the early Middle Ages, barbarians became a real threat to the empire, since they could actually make history regress: a barbarian was not, after all, merely a naive *bon sauvage* passively waiting for the illumination of civilization, but a fierce and self-actualized creature who challenged Christendom.²⁷ From the late Middle Ages to the modern era, a wide range of “others” continued to be identified as barbarians, in order to justify various systems of racialization. Some examples are Latin American Natives (identified by Gines de Sepulveda), Arabs (by Thomas Aquinas), Jews (by Voltaire), and Africans (by Hegel). In other words, barbarism was a catchall term for those who resisted imperial designs.²⁸

Eventually, those stigmatized confronted the term. Among the colonized resisters were a good number of Jews—especially Jews predisposed to oppose imperialism (though not yet colonialism) because of their Marxist persuasion. They left the negativity of the term intact but reversed the accusation, deeming the imperial capitalism of Christian Europe to be the barbaric system.²⁹ In time,

²⁴ Levinas, *Autrement qu'être/ Otherwise than Being*, 273/178.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). See esp. pp. 101–200.

²⁷ W. R. Jones, “The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (1971): 376–407.

²⁸ The original sources are as follows: Gines de Sepulveda, *Tratado de las guerras justas contra los indios* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1941), 37–39; I am unaware of any English translation of the text. Voltaire, “Juifs,” in *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Naintré: Voltaire Intégral, 2006), 1–36. Translation in *A Philosophical Dictionary* (Coventry House: New York, 1932), 99–116. G. W. Hegel, “Der Naturzusammenhang, oder die geographische Grundlage der Weltgeschichte,” in *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1955), 218. Translated as “The Natural Context of the Geographical Basis of World History,” in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 177.

²⁹ See, for example, the following: Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1961), 1:791. Translated as *Capital* (Penguin Books: London, 1976), 1:916. Rosa

however, post-Marxist Third World decolonialists not only appropriated the term but inverted its connotation and began to create a community of barbarians to resist the (French) empire. After leaving behind communist or socialist militancy, decolonialists such as Aimé Césaire would go further and invert the concept, giving it a positive valence.³⁰ Césaire was deeply influential in the tricontinental meetings of intellectuals that Dussel attended during the 1970s. As far back as the 1950s, not only Afro-Caribbeans, but also Latin Americans and North Africans (the latter including Jews such as Albert Memmi), have followed Césaire's lead.³¹

Following the lead of his new interlocutors, this explicit resistance to empire would be the next step for Levinas: a switch from epistemological to geopolitical barbarism. In their encounters, the Third World decolonialist Dussel—aware of the previous limitations of Levinas's Jewish-centrism—asks the Jewish interpreter of the Talmud what the limits of his conception of otherness had been. Years before, for example, Levinas had observed that “among the millions of human beings who encountered misery and death, the Jews alone experienced a total dereliction.”³² Dussel challenged this claim: “What

Luxemburg, “Leitsätze über die Aufgaben der Internationalen Sozialdemokratie” in *Politische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1966), 29–30. Translated as “The Crisis of the German Social Democracy” in *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dick Howard (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 334–335. Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1977), 254. Translated as “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 256. Horkheimer and Adorno, “Begriff der Aufklärung” (The Concept of Enlightenment), in *Dialektik/Dialectic*, 13/1. Critical appraisals can be found in Michael Lowy, “Modern Barbarism: Notes on the Fiftieth Anniversaries of Auschwitz and Hiroshima,” *Monthly Review* 47 (1995): 4–26; and in John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “Empire of Barbarism,” *Monthly Review* 56 (2004): 1–15.

³⁰ See Aimé Césaire, “Babare,” in *Cadastre* (bilingual edition) (New York: The Third Press, 1973), 81/80.

³¹ Curiously, Levinas was not the first one to be influenced by African thinking in the inversion of barbarism. For an earlier example, see Albert Memmi, *La statue de sel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 145. Translated as *The Pillar of Salt* (New York: Beacon Press, 1992), 165. Further connections between Memmi and Levinas should be explored. One of the first North American scholars to point out the existence of this dialogue is Annette Aronowicz, in her “Translator's Introduction” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, xxiv.

³² Levinas, “Une religion d'adultes,” in *Difficile liberté*, 26. Translated as “A Religion for Adults,” in *Difficult Freedom*, 11–12. In my private conversations with Enrique Dussel (Berkeley 2004 and San Antonio and Amherst 2005), he repeated that he was unaware of the Jewish writings of Levinas at the time he asked him the question. He said it was a mere *palpito*, a hunch, that he was later able to overcome in one of his most celebrated works: *Filosofía de liberación* (Mexico City: Edicol, 1977),

about the fifteen million Indians slaughtered during the conquest of America, and the thirteen million Africans who were made slaves? ... Aren't they the 'other' you are speaking about? What about all of us who are not Semitic?"³³ Levinas, as was his custom, took his time answering (just as he did with Derrida).³⁴ But this time the question was not posed in theoretical terms but in the practical responsibilities of the Europe that Levinas defended for the suffering of non-Jews.

His eventual response would be couched in geopolitical terms, which he had described as Dussel's field.³⁵ Levinas references the barbaric community of "the brave ones," from *Pesahim* 118b. In his interpretations of this text, as we have already seen, Levinas understands the community of Israel and other barbaric peoples as constituting a common front. He outlines his hope that the suffering and starved should become a "regenerated humanity." This is only possible through an alliance of Third World people that is able to condemn, confront, and defeat the egotistic "wild beast of Rome"—also known as "the fraternal West" or "America."³⁶

Levinas's response to Dussel is that there is room for all the "others"—that is, the new barbaric community of the brave ones, both Semitic and non-Semitic—within a Third World anti-imperial front. This front includes (and sometimes, problematically, even seems to be headed by) the Jewish people. As Dussel requested, Levinas expresses his solidarity with both the Semitic—the Arab and the Jew—and the non-Semitic: the Black. However, by reducing the non-Semitic to the latter, represented by Ethiopia (and also by "countries doubtless similar to it," as Levinas writes, problematically using the East African nation as a metonym for the entire Third World), he fails to recognize the case of the "Indians" of the Americas, one of Dussel's own most important concerns.³⁷ Nevertheless,

translated as *Philosophy of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985). I am indebted to Prof. Dussel for his encouragement throughout this research.

³³ Dussel, "Sensibility and Otherness in Emmanuel Lévinas," 126.

³⁴ See n. 4 above.

³⁵ See n. 18 above.

³⁶ Levinas, "Les Nations et la présence d'Israel," 112–113/"The Nations and the Presence of Israel," 96–97.

³⁷ Dussel wrote his first dissertation on the topic of natives, the church, and colonial Latin America at the Complutense University of Madrid in 1959. His work was particularly important in commemorating the discovery of the Americas in 1492. See Dussel, *El encubrimiento del otro: Hacia el origen del mito de la modernidad* (La

despite this generalization, more than thirty years later Levinas still remains an important voice among Latino/a scholars in the U.S. One of his heirs is Walter Dignolo, a leading scholar in the field of postcolonial theory and Latin American and Latino/a studies. He supports the “self-restitution of barbarism as a theoretical locus,” learning from “the exteriority (in Levinas’s sense).”³⁸ Levinas’s own conversations with Third World philosophers led to the Jewish discourse being incorporated into leading Southern decolonial discourses.

What remains uncertain is whether Levinas also incorporated any decolonial objectives into his discourse. Critics may argue that the influence at this level was not reciprocal. This is especially true when we analyze Levinas’s reaffirmation of the role of “Israel” within a Third World community. This incorporation has been read by contemporary English-speaking critics as an attempt to gain support for the State of Israel and the Zionist project.³⁹ These readings understand that there is a natural contradiction between decolonialism and Zionism. In this article I argue that their position cannot be contested if they follow the homogenization of postcolonial studies by the “messianic” Saidian discourse after the 1980s.⁴⁰ In this context, most decolonial works in the U.S. and the U.K. included a critique of the State of Israel.⁴¹ In other words, from our contextual perspective, the reinsertion of “Israel” in a Third World community seems to contradict a truth commonly taught as a linchpin of decolonial discourse. In English-speaking academia a pro-Zionist decolonialism is out of the question.

The encounter between Levinas and Dussel, however, did not take place in North America (or the U.K.). In France, since the late 1940s, the hegemonic public decolonial intellectual was not Edward Said but Jean-Paul Sartre. While Sartre’s decolonial credentials seem

Paz: Plural Editores, 1994). Translated as *Eclipse of “The Other” and the Myth of Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

³⁸ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 29, 309–310.

³⁹ Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 166–172.

⁴⁰ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 65.

⁴¹ An excellent critical appraisal of the role of Said’s anti-Zionist identity in the formulation of postcolonial studies can be found in Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar, “Introduction,” in *Orientalism and the Jews* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2005), xviii–xv.

unimpeachable, he was hardly a critic of the State of Israel.⁴² There are innumerable writings in which Sartre demonstrates his energetic approval of the Jewish state. He supported the existence of Israel before the declaration of independence, admired the dubious early political steps, remained silent when Israel engaged in alliances with Western colonial powers, denounced French foreign policy when it opposed Israeli actions, and rejected any comparison between Israeli actions and Western imperialism. In his later years he accepted an honorary degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Remembering his rejection of the Nobel Prize more than ten years before, he described his acceptance of this honor as a “political choice.” Even though he demonstrated his concern for the plight of non-Jewish minorities in Israel and supported peace conversations, these actions did not undermine his idealization of the Jewish State. In the French context, therefore, the relation between decolonialism and Zionism was not a natural contradiction.⁴³

Even though Levinas and Sartre are usually presented as antinomies, they both agree that there is no natural contradiction between decolonialism and Zionism. Several Marxist and anarchist decolonial groups did confront the Jewish state over its actions, but a significant group of decolonialists such as Sartre did not.⁴⁴ In his talmudic interpretation Levinas may well have been trying to express support for the State of Israel. But this does not seem to create a contradiction within the French scene. Levinas’s incorporation of Third World theory marks the point where he departs from his early Eurocentrism. That position does not necessarily translate into anti-Zionism, however: for contextual reasons, his unwillingness to criticize the State of Israel (or to express solidarity with Palestinians) does not prevent him from showing a clear openness to Third World alternatives.

⁴² For an explanation in English of the relevance of Jean-Paul Sartre for decolonial thinking, see Robert Young, “Sartre: The ‘African Philosopher’”; and Azzedine Haddour, “Remembering Sartre,” in Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams (London: Routledge, 2006), ix–xxviii and 1–21.

⁴³ An erudite critical account of Sartre’s position regarding the State of Israel can be found in Jonathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 184–207.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the pro/anti-Israel divide in the French left, see Dominique Schnapper, *Jewish Identities in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For a post-1968 reading, see Yair Auron, *Les Juifs d’extrême-gauche en mai 68. Une génération révolutionnaire marquée par la Shoah* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996).

Levinas and Dussel (who received a second doctorate from the University of Paris IV—Sorbonne in 1967) were firmly entrenched in this context. Both followed the same trend and treated “Israel” as an integral part of a Third World community.⁴⁵ They idealized “Israel” well beyond the current nation-state. Dussel, who had lived in a kibbutz for two years before meeting Levinas, had not written a single piece critical of Israel before Levinas’s publication of his talmudic lecture in the late 1980s. Shortly after Levinas’s talmudic reading, Dussel described his relation to Judaism and an idealized Israel in an interview. He acknowledged that it was through his life experience and readings that he “rediscovered the millenary Semitic suffering.”⁴⁶ For him, “the Greek” represented “the impossibility of slave emancipation.” In contrast, he contended that “to reconstruct Latin-American philosophy, it would be necessary to destroy the Greek myth.” To fully comprehend the culture of Latin America—“a poor people, humiliated, colonized, and dependent”—it was necessary, he claimed, “to depart from Jerusalem and not from Athens.” Jerusalem, in Dussel’s eyes, represented “the possibility of the revolution of the poor.”⁴⁷

Both Dussel and Levinas describe Jerusalem/Israel/Zion in ideal terms, as the iconic center of “the revolution of the poor” (the barbarians, the colonized, or the community of the brave ones). Levinas himself, as already mentioned, considers Israel a participant in and possible head of this new barbaric front.⁴⁸ This does not mean that the reasons behind this understanding of “Israel” are the same in the two authors. While Levinas might justify support for the State of Israel, Dussel might merely be idealizing a very paternalistic Christian understanding of the mythical marginal Hebrews.⁴⁹ However, both scholars support a decolonial conversation that does

⁴⁵ Dussel was immersed in the French-speaking context. In 1965–1966 he studied at the Institut Catholique of Paris and in 1967 he received his doctorate. Full biographical information can be found at http://www.enriquedussel.org/cv_en.html (accessed July 17, 2010).

⁴⁶ Dussel, “Autopercepción intelectual de un procesor histórico,” *Anthropos* 180 (1998): 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ See n. 35 above.

⁴⁹ This critique was made in a (still unpublished) thesis written by a sharp yet sympathetic critic of Dussel. See Mariano Moreno Villa, “Filosofía de liberación y personalismo: Meta-física desde el reverso del ser. A propósito de la *Filosofía ética de la liberación* de Enrique Dussel” (PhD diss., Universidad de Murcia, 1993), 67–93. See also Dussel’s original untranslated text, *El humanismo semita* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1969).

not revise modern Zionism. This is of course inconceivable for our post-Saidian North American understanding of decolonialism. But it does appear as a possibility in the French decolonial scene, dominated by the ubiquity of Sartrean thought. Levinas's openness to and incorporation of decolonialism is not necessarily anti-Zionist because, simply, the contextual situation did not require him to take this step. His pro-Zionism may be politically naïve and probably blind to some post-1940s world problems. Still, his unwillingness to adopt a critical stance does not seem to disturb his Third Worldist conversation.⁵⁰

Besides raising the possibility of incorporating Israel within a Third World project, I contend that this overlooked historical-conceptual encounter between Levinas and Dussel has ramifications well beyond the case itself.⁵¹ This provocative dialogue can be employed to re-evaluate current theoretical frameworks for intercultural conversations within Jewish philosophy. To fully engage with the latter, however, what is needed is the addition of a decolonial overlay to those frameworks. In the next section, I will show how current models require such a dimension if we are to fully understand the experience of Jewish intellectuals in an intercultural context.

Levinas's Geopolitical Encounter: Theoretical Contributions

The intercultural character of Levinas's conversations is not a priori surprising: in all orthodox centers of Jewish knowledge (in North America, Europe, and Israel), scholars have explored Jewish thought in relation to other experiences.⁵² However, I argue here that Levinas's

⁵⁰ Whether a pro-Zionist decolonialism is possible is a topic that requires further discussion. I presented the ambiguities of the Jewish discourse as a partner of decolonial thinking in Santiago Slabodsky, "But There Are No Longer Any Anti-Semites: Vicious Circles, Jewish Destinies, & an Alternative Framework to Understand Decolonial Discourses," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 7 (2009): 35–52. Here I limit myself to exploring the historical-conceptual agreement between Dussel and Levinas and its consequences for Jewish thought.

⁵¹ For the impossibility of combining this messianic project with a straightforward Zionism, see Jason Caro, "Levinas and the Palestinians," *Journal of Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35 (2009): 671–684.

⁵² I will explain Israeli and French models in the following paragraphs. In North America, Ella Shohat has become one of the most provocative proponents of the need to study Judaism (along with feminism and colonialism) "relationally" along with the experience of other peoples. I take the term from her work. See, for example, Ella Shohat, "Gendered Cartographies of Knowledge," in *Taboo, Memories, Diasporic Voice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

encounter adds a decolonial element that has not yet been explored in current frameworks.

As mentioned above, the study of Jewish thought in relation to the experience of other peoples is not novel. Shalom Rosenberg, long-time chair of the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, points out that the diasporic history of Judaism has made its thinking “a philosophy of the encounter.”⁵³ In Rosenberg’s view, the classic situation is one where Jewish borders encounter or overlap with others. These encounters may not always be pleasant, and may in fact result in violent clashes. Rosenberg points out that Jews seem historically predisposed to develop a creative culture in conversation—or in conflict—with their surroundings.⁵⁴

The encounter of Levinas with Dussel, a philosopher of the Third World, does not seem to be exceptional; however, Rosenberg’s framework does not always account for the full complexity of the Jewish intercultural experience. There are at least three sides to Levinas’s encounter with Dussel: the empire (imperial epistemology), Israel (Jewish thought), and the Third World (represented by the decolonial thinking of many parties). The latter two find commonality as they are both persecuted by the empire. Still, this kinship does not resolve itself into a single unity—whatever Levinas himself may wish. In his own philosophical lexicon, only because of the omnipresence of the Empire (Ego) can the Jew (other) and the Third World (third party) communicate.⁵⁵

This tripartite figure makes Rosenberg’s two-sided model seem too simplistic. When he posits a mere dialogue between two sides, rather than a conversation between multiple partners, Rosenberg almost seems to be reproducing Levinas’s own pre-1970s model of Eurocentrism. While Levinas reduced anthropology to the encounter between Athens and Jerusalem, Rosenberg is now reducing philosophy to a similar binary.⁵⁶ Rosenberg’s model, therefore, is unable to account for the colonial dimension: he cannot include the

⁵³ For the development of this trend and an interpretation of Rosenberg’s structure, see Raphael Jospe, *What Is Jewish Philosophy?* (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Jerusalem, 1988), 67. For the role of this structure in Rosenberg’s own work, see the description in *Tov va-ra’ ba-hagut ha-Yehudit* (Tel Aviv: Matkal/Ketsin, hinukh rashi/Gale-Tsahal, Misrad ha-bitahon, 1985), 7–18. Translated as *Good and Evil in Jewish Thought* (Tel Aviv: MOD, 1989), 9–17. Particularly interesting is the emphasis on the diasporic encounter in the Jerusalem school of MACHSHEVET YISRAEL.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Levinas, *Autrement qu’être/Otherwise than Being*, 248–249/159–160.

⁵⁶ See n. 5 above.

conversations of multiple others under the hegemony of an imperial discourse.

Still, while Levinas's encounter does account for such conversations, his incorporation of the colonial variable is not unique. Another thinker on the same track is H el ene Cixous. As an Algerian Jewess writing from Paris, Cixous also takes up the task of showing that Jewish intercultural encounters in colonial contexts are more complex than a simple conversation between two sides. In her article "Ce corps  tranger juif," she adds a new dimension to the framework of Jewish thought, incorporating Levinas's colonial variable. Cixous, a pioneer in the field, takes a step forward in the analysis of complex Jewish frameworks. Her model, however, does not fully account for the reality represented by Levinas's encounter with Dussel.

One penetrating point made by Cixous is that the Jew is not only one side of a two-party encounter between cultures, as Rosenberg posited; the Jew can also be a third party trapped by asymmetrical relations between two other parties. Her term for a Jew in this situation, poised between other cultures yet defined by enforced solitude, is "Stranjew." At first glance, this may seem to be simply a description of the typical Jew. According to Cixous, Stranjews are individuals who live (and write) amid the anxiety of cultural intersections. In other words, she means Jews who can acknowledge their contradictory ethnic belongings and live in-between identities—as a "debt contracted by the predecessors," as she puts it.⁵⁷ However, the context of their lives is an existential struggle between colonial and decolonial discourses and practices. This places them both within and apart from the surrounding culture, with their identity contested by their complex backgrounds. "According to my father, we were more Arabic than French, but that's a legend," Cixous acknowledges.⁵⁸ In her account, any description of the nature of the Stranjewish affiliation escapes conclusive answers. In the Derridian voice of Cixous, "We will never know" what we were, or have been.⁵⁹

Cixous does not describe the intercultural encounter as two sides meeting, as per Rosenberg. On the contrary, Jewish discourse seems

⁵⁷ Helen Cixous, "Ce corps  tranger juif," in *Judeit es: Questions pour Jacques Derrida*, ed. Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly (Paris: Galil ee, 2003), 63. Translated as "The Stranjew Body," in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 56.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 60/53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

to emerge from being trapped in colonial situations—hemmed in by cultures to which the Jew partly belongs, and to which she is partially foreign. Cases such as colonialism in North Africa testify to the complexity of the Jewish experience. In contexts where borders are strictly politically defined (i.e., Christian French vs. Muslim Algerian), the Jew lives and thinks in between the violent, struggling reduction of identities. These borders could be asymmetrical between the colonizer and the colonized. But Cixous argues that the Jewish position in between (sometimes closer to one, and sometimes to the other) results in a state of permanent anxiety. She asks, “On what side [do] we find ourselves, always half-lost, faltering, we who were crisscrossed by adversary borders?”⁶⁰

But this situation is exactly the crucible from which the creativity of the Stranjew seems to emerge. According to Cixous, “the invention,” the phenomenon of Jewish creativity, emerges from just that intense anxiety of the intercultural trap—of those forced to live in between such violent encounters of two (or more) other identities. In Cixous’s words, the creative Stranjews are “hostages of a blood-soaked history that surpassed us on all sides.”⁶¹ And this concept of cultural anxiety as a source of creativity seems to parallel her experience of many other colonized peoples. In North America, for example, we do not need to venture beyond the Southern border to read Gloria Anzaldúa’s intricate celebration of “the frontier,” or Walter D. Mignolo’s elaboration of the wealth of “border gnosis.”⁶² The character of modern colonized people living in between borders may be global, and Jews only one of many groups in the same situation. This commonality, created by European and American expansions, invites us to explore Jewish thought “relationally”: that is, in terms of other historical encounters, overlapping with the experience of other colonized peoples.

Levinas’s encounter, therefore, could be read as crystallizing the phenomenon of colonized peoples forced to live in between borders.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid., 60/53.

⁶¹ Ibid., 70–71/64–65.

⁶² Latino/Latina thinkers have been exploring this problem in the U.S. for a long time. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). A more sophisticated account in Mignolo’s self-restitution of barbarism is not coincidentally elaborated “from exteriority (in Levinas’s sense).” See Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 98.

⁶³ It is not a coincidence that two women seen as “Eastern Jewesses” agree on this point. While Cixous implicitly talks about this rationality in France, Ella Shohat

Still, Cixous's model cannot explain the experience of the Lithuanian exegete of the Talmud. Cixous's Derridian engagement with colonialism does not leave any room for a positive construction of conversations with other oppressed peoples. In her view, Jewish creativity is only an individual attempt to escape what another Maghrebi Jew, Albert Memmi, calls the "impossible condition" or "dead end" of the existential Jewish situation.⁶⁴ In Sartrean terms, we could argue that creativity is no more than an "allergy" to this complex social structure. In Cixous's account, Jews develop their creativity as a result of trying to escape their elusive selves. Recalling Derrida, she says that these Jews "do not want to espouse the guilt of their ancestors."⁶⁵ Cixous is a great resource for an account of Jewish experiences within colonialism. Her provocative model revises the two-sided Eurocentric model of Rosenberg and denounces its simplicity. But her deconstructive postmodernism does not allow her to account for positive decolonial possibilities. In other words, there is no possibility of an alliance with other sufferers to create an antihegemonic project.

In conclusion, I contend that Levinas's encounters with Third World thinkers cannot be completely described by either Rosenberg's Eurocentric framework, the overlapping border, or Cixous's colonial concept of a postmodern, anxiety-ridden interstitial existence. Levinas's new model is more provocative, describing a conversation between two subaltern cultures under the power of a dominant colonial enterprise. The Jew is not a side that shares his/her knowledge in the encounter. But neither is she so anxious or oppressed that she is paralyzed by the impossibility of self-discovery. Levinas's model presents Jewish thought as an active counter-hegemonic project that attempts to create as a bridge a common resistance to the egotism of the more powerful entity. True, this is not the first attempt to build this bridge in the French-speaking context. For example, Memmi attempted the same enterprise in the 1950s—but quickly

in the U.S. has become one of the most provocative proponents of the need to study Judaism (along with feminism and colonialism) "relationally." See n. 52 above.

⁶⁴ See Memmi, *La Libération du Juif* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 241–281. Translated as *The Liberation of the Jew* (New York: Orion Press, 1973), 280–303.

⁶⁵ Cixous, 63/56.

discovered the difficulties of a Jewish-Muslim alliance in the context of the decolonial process.⁶⁶

The encounter between Third World and Jewish intellectuals, however, was both historically and conceptually possible. This requires a new level of complexity for Jewish thought and intercultural conversations, since it involves factors that neither Rosenberg nor Cixous contemplated. Rosenberg was able to formulate a provocative model of the philosophy of the encounter, and Cixous added the colonial reflection of Jews in between cultures. Levinas goes a step further and helps us to formulate a decolonial layer. This last dimension includes both Rosenberg's active agency of the Jew, and Cixous's exploration of multi-sided engagements. And it concludes by bringing Jewish thought to a different level. The Jew can have an active role within a decolonial project, without the need of merging or divesting her particularities.

Thinking Beyond

Reading Levinas in conjunction with Dussel reveals alternative conversations in Jewish thought that had been previously overlooked. This demands a reformulation of current models to fully account for the experience of Jewish philosophers within a decolonial framework. It is not very common, however, to see accounts of Jewish philosophy that include decolonialism as a relevant variable or context;⁶⁷ and it is even less common to see explorations of the historical-conceptual alliance between Jews and intellectuals of the Third World. The reason for the lack is a problem that goes beyond the scope of this article.⁶⁸ Suffice it to say that colonialism has been a reality throughout the world for the last five hundred years, and resistance to it, decolonialism, constitutes a real discourse—particularly in Levinas's context of postwar France.

⁶⁶ See the interesting interchange (indicating the limitations of this possible alliance) described in n. 31 above.

⁶⁷ One of the few exceptions is the superb work of Gil Anidjar. Problematically, his analysis always leaves the Jewish philosopher (Franz Rosenzweig in this case) on the side of the West. See *The Arab, The Jew: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 87–98.

⁶⁸ I tried to establish a few basic points for this discussion in a previous article. See Santiago Slabodsky, "Relocalizando Sinaí en los Andes: Especificidad latinoamericana de un duelo judío post-holocaustista," *Majshavot* 40 (2003): 72–94.

Consequently, one has to wonder whether Levinas is the exception or the rule among contemporary Jewish thinkers. Is he exceptional in his active conversations with other colonized peoples, or are there more conceptual and historical conversations waiting to be explored? If Levinas is *not* an exception, we should endeavor to take a global perspective on Jewish intercultural conversations, rather than reducing them to over-studied contexts (such as Euro-America and, in the most generous scenario, the Maghreb). I contend that there is a need to analyze the experience of modern Jewish intercultural thought in general, and postwar Jewish philosophy in particular, from a decolonial viewpoint. This relational field will help in the study of the conversations of Jews with other subaltern histories. It may also explain why other French-speaking icons of the Third World decolonial struggle, such as Frantz Fanon, often reference Jews in relational terms: “It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who one day reminded me of the fact that whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), 167–168. Translated as *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 182–183.

