Decolonizing

Jewishness

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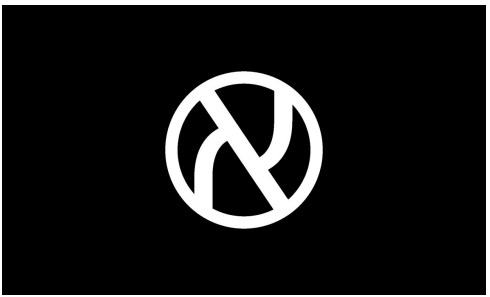
Decolonizing Jewishness

On Jewish Liberation in the 21st Century

Benjamin Steinhardt Case



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"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

–Aboriginal activist saying, attributed to Lilla Watson

Seven decades on, Israel is geopolitically embattled and the Jewish community is increasingly polarized around the issue of occupation. The occupation – Israeli military control over the Palestinian West Bank and the borders of Gaza Strip – is five decades old. Entire generations of people have grown up without political or civil rights, under the

military jurisdiction of a "democratic" state. Some trace the problem to the very existence of the State of Israel. How did the Jewish struggle to free ourselves from antisemitism lead to this point?

Following the trauma of centuries of persecution culminating in the Shoah (Holocaust), many Jews looked to the Political Zionist goal of founding a Jewish State of Israel, in what was then British Palestine, as a guiding star in a time of profound darkness. Defending their new state against Arab Palestinians and neighboring countries in the 1948 "War of

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Independence," what Palestinians refer to as the Nakba (Catastrophe), gave the new Israelis a powerful founding myth after millennia of diasporic marginalization. To many Zionists, the State of Israel represented a historic milestone in the effort to combat antisemitism, having carved out territory to defend the Jewish people from a world that had rejected and nearly annihilated them. For many Palestinians and others, Zionism itself represents a new front in the historic expansion of European colonialism, with the 1967 occupation, or the State of Israel itself, representing a crime against humanity. Israel, the Jewish Question, and the

occupation continue to play a central role in global political discussions to a degree that is vastly disproportionate to the amount of people directly affected by them, placing these issues, as Hannah Arendt once put it, at the "storm center" of national and geopolitical contention.

Meanwhile, amid the impending rise of fascism with the election of Donald Trump in the US and popular surges of far right parties in Europe and elsewhere, antisemitism has reemerged as a legitimate, if uncomfortable, issue for social movements. This subject has led to renewed

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discussions and arguments on the Left over the scope, nature, and reality of antisemitism, as well as the role Jews play in the dominant identity politics framework of movement communities.

According to anti-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon, there are two main characters in the process of global imperialism: colonizer and colonized. Many around the world have resonated with Fanon's analysis of colonial power dynamics and have drawn from his framework to pursue decolonization, or the process of destroying colonial power structures and remaking oneself in a

liberated image. Considering the occupation as it stands, it is not difficult to view the current state of the region through an anti-colonial lens with Israeli Jews playing the part of the (settler) colonizers and Palestinians playing the part of the colonized (e.g., Pappé 2015, Said 1979). In this framework, Jewish activists who oppose the Occupation play the part of "ally," or conscientiously subordinate supporter, to Palestinian activists (and others) who are fighting for their liberation.

However, the Zionist project itself can also be understood as an attempt at Jewish

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wrestle with and defeat our colonial selves to transcend. Like Jacob, we will be injured in the process, but the fight itself is required in order to open the door to a new covenant – one between Jews and our cousins.

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decolonization. Viewing Zionism and its subjects through this lens can potentially clarify a great deal about contemporary Jewish identities, and perhaps open a new path forward in one of the defining conflicts of our time. Ultimately, this approach helps us to understand, as I argue, that the Zionist project creates a social condition in which the liberation of the Jewish people has become fundamentally intertwined with the liberation of the Palestinian people.

The Complex Jewish Position

To Fanon, there is the colonizer and there is the colonized; there is white and Black. While he explores some complexity in the psychology and social positions of the two, to Fanon the colonizer (white) and the colonized (Black) remain the primary categories of analysis. The forms of racism that are attached to this colonialism place the target group at the bottom of a racial hierarchy for the purposes of the social, political, economic, and interpersonal power of those at the top. Considering the influence of Fanon on Black Liberation and other antiracist thinkers in the US, it is no coincidence that the contemporary

without, and seeking to take an active role in our ongoing history.

Emma Lazarus said: “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.” I am inclined to believe this is true, but it is unavoidably true that Jews today cannot be free anywhere until Palestinians are free in Palestine. In and of itself, this is not a political solution. But if we as Jews take the projects of Jewish liberation and human liberation seriously, it is a value, indeed an identity, upon which any political solution must be built. As Jacob had to wrestle with and defeat G-d for our Biblical people to transcend, so must we

must be against ourselves. This violence is both symbolic and internal, but is no less painful. We must rebel against the internalized colonizer in ourselves, embedded in our very subjectivities, and we must rebel against the part of our community that pursues literal colonization of others, trapping the Jewish people in the global middle position. This generation of Jews must discover if we will play the 21st century parvenu or find our place in the grand struggle for people's liberation by waking to the contradictions within, standing in solidarity with other oppressed peoples

framework for understanding race and privilege in this country follows the same logic. In the "identity politics" paradigm of today's social movements, the characters in the dichotomous picture are white people and "people of color" (POC). This picture can leave out a great deal of nuance, but nevertheless it captures a wide view of the politicized racial hierarchy. Importantly, it focuses on the foundational antagonisms of the racially constructed system by identifying whiteness as applying to the category of people who broadly benefit from the existence of the system itself.

Fanon's work is foundational for anti-colonial thought, so it is a sensible place to begin an analysis of decolonization for any group. At the same time, Fanon's position on antisemitism is not without controversy. Notably, afro-pessimist theorist Frank Wilderson claims that Fanon characterizes the Holocaust as merely one of many "little family quarrels" between groups of white Europeans, using this phrase to explain the incomparability between white-white antisemitism and the white-Black legacy of slavery (2010:37–38). However, Wilderson mischaracterizes Fanon's view, possibly due to an early

and continue to oppress in the attempt to gain liberation in Israel. Our position imposes a Jewish version of what W.E.B. Du Bois called double consciousness (1903), where we are not forced to see through the eyes of the oppressor as well as the oppressed for survival, but we actually are simultaneously both as part of the same identity.

According to Fanon, an act of violence was required for the colonized to overcome their inferiority complex and decolonize. For Jews, who have become both colonizers and colonized, the first act of symbolic violence

particular the Palestinian struggle – for their liberation and autonomy.

Herzlian Zionism failed; it created a catastrophe for Palestinians while failing to liberate the Jewish people from antisemitism. There is every reason to believe we can yet create a truly decolonized Jewishness in the continuation of the liberatory movement against antisemitism, but this can only be done if it is melded with the struggle against the colonialism entrenched in our previous attempt at decolonization. Our struggle for our liberation is now inexorably bound up in the liberation of those we disenfranchised

English edition's translation. In fact, Fanon writes: "Bien entendu, les Juifs sont brimés, que dis-je, ils sont pourchassés, exterminés, enfournés, mais ce sont là petites histoires familiales" (1952b:93), which translates literally as: "Of course, Jews are bullied, nay, they are hunted, exterminated, put in the oven, but these are small family stories," or in another translation, "minor episodes in the family history" (1952a:95). This difference in wording is subtle but not at all trivial, and it gets at a crucial point for understanding Jewish subjectivity from the perspective of decolonization. The "family stories" Fanon refers to are the Jewish family's stories of

oppression, not intra-white family quarrels between white non-Jews and white Jews. In other words, Fanon is saying that the Jews have suffered greatly under the antisemitic system, but the violences done to them have been episodic and do not subsume their entire history. The Jewish family has stories of oppression, of death, but they also have stories of thriving, of living. Fanon is contrasting this with the African experience of European colonization and slavery, which he understood as subsuming the category of Black within a totalizing history of oppression.

organizations in allyship with Palestinians should not, as some suggest, be the sole purpose of Jewish voices in the struggle. The work of decolonizing Jewishness, which is a personally and culturally constructive as well as destructive process, is a prerequisite for any liberated future that involves us as a people, and is a vital element in the broader political struggle against the forces of the far right. Jewish liberation requires the Jewish fight against antisemitism for our liberation and autonomy, and also solidarity with the struggles of other oppressed groups – in

project they did not want the revered Talmudic rabbi's second question to be considered at all.

Unfortunately, many Jewish activists in Palestinian or other liberation work today metaphorically omit Hillel's first question instead; they focus on being for Palestinian liberation, or for the liberation of other oppressed groups without considering the implications of not also being for ourselves as Jews. While important, countering false claims of antisemitism against pro-Palestinian organizing levied by the Jewish right and protesting Zionist

For Fanon, Jews are undoubtedly among the ranks of the oppressed, and in his 1952 work Black Skin, White Masks, he makes great use of the Jewish experience to develop his understanding of the colonized Black condition. Black people and Jews pose different existential threats to whiteness, but their connection is that both are perceived as having the potential to overwhelm and appropriate white society. At the same time, the two are not equivalent. Fanon also describes Jews as white, or at least as white-passing in today's terms, and articulates important differences between anti-Jewish and anti-Black racisms.

Crucially, to Fanon, the Black experience of oppression is overdetermined by corporeality, by skin color. Jews, on the other hand, become oppressed when they are discovered to be Jews, and since there is no definite way of identifying Jews in the racial sense, their oppression is contingent on their detection as Jews.

Prodigious attempts have been made on the part of antisemites to develop a system for physically identifying Jews at first sight, but apart from "some debatable features," Fanon is correct that Jews often pass as not-Jews. It was this physical ambiguity that led to the

questions – "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" – continues to stand as a beautiful summation of what is required of the Jewish people. All three questions can be understood in this context as rhetorical; the first implies the need to fight for ourselves as Jews, the second implies the need to fight for others in solidarity, and the third implies a sense of urgency. Pinsker began his seminal 1882 pamphlet on Zionism with this quote but, incredibly, he left out the second question! For the thinkers of Political Zionism, being "for others" was so antithetical to their

2015 essay advocating for Jews to renounce whiteness. He was heavily criticized, often fairly, for glossing over what it would actually mean to "renounce privilege," for ignoring Jews of color, and of course, for not mentioning the Occupation. All of these problems have a simple and powerful, though admittedly painful, solution: the decisive step out of the colonial mindset is removing the white mask in all of its forms and confronting the colonizer within.

Confronting the colonizer within is an integral part of confronting the colonizer without. Rabbi Hillel's famous set of

infamous yellow patches the Nazi government mandated for Jews' clothing. This element of Jewish racial covertness, which is the case for Jews of all colors, is critical to understanding antisemitism and how it has shaped Jewish identity. We might say that Jews are underdetermined by corporeality; from the perspective of the antisemite, in a sense Jews only become Jews when they are discovered to be so. That which makes us objectionable resides within and is not always immediately visible from without. In other words, if the essence of Black oppression is embedded in visibility,

the essence of Jewish oppression revolves around invisibility.

Finally, while Fanon explores the real historical and experiential differences between constructed social categories of Jew and Black (and Arab), he also notes that the separation and hierarchicalization of these categories is itself a tool of the oppressor (1952a:83). If each group of people views the others as the primary or most immediate threat, then the oppressor class, being insulated from attack and scrutiny, is able to

identity was not based on decolonizing, but on recolonizing. The route Zionism took re-enacted rather than healed Jewish cultural trauma, and projected it onto another people.

The struggle for Jewish recognition cannot be won from within a parvenu mentality. So long as Jews as a people consent to the middle role in the service of the oppressor, we will be perpetual strangers, whether or not we have a temple, or capital, or a state. The belonging we truly seek cannot emanate from the castle, but can only come from the village. Rabbi Steinlauf was therefore on the right track when he wrote his controversial

To Arendt, the emancipation of the Jews ought to have been an "admission of Jews as Jews into the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play the parvenu" (1978:68). As the Israeli State, marketed as a liberator, actively oppresses an entire population under its control, Arendt's critique stands today. Perhaps not ironically, the tzabar cactus for which the Sabra Jew was named is not native to Palestine, but was imported as a desert-friendly crop in the early 19th century (Griffith 2004). From the beginning, the new

maintain not only material but also hegemonic power.

To sum up, from Fanon we learn that: (1) Jews are an oppressed people; (2) they are oppressed by the same colonial forces that dominate other oppressed peoples; (3) Jews as a group are in many ways closer to the colonizer than other oppressed peoples are; (4) that proximity is itself used by the oppressor to maintain the colonial situation. Fanon gives us a great deal to work with, but despite his extensive discussion of Jews as a comparison group, his final analysis leaves us out. Ultimately, Fanon constructs a

dichotomous world – colonizer and colonized – in which it is unclear where the complexities he discusses around the Jewish position fit in. If Jews are sometimes in one category and sometimes in the other, or if Jews simultaneously experience elements of both, then how can Jews pursue decolonization?

Systemic Antisemitism

Like anti-Black racism, antisemitism can be treated as a systemic racism. According to race theorist Joe Feagin, systemic racism can be understood as: “an organized societal

prime agents of imperialism – and not necessarily in that order.

With the State of Israel claiming to be the true home of all Jews, Jewish communities worldwide have foundered in the effort to think and act outside the parvenu paradigm. Until today we have been unable to build a movement for Jewish liberation in solidarity with the liberation of all oppressed peoples, and all humanity. With the formal end of the exile in 1948, this is now the Jewish Question.

Jews of color (Domínguez 1989, Motzafi-Haller 2008). But neither a state, nor cooperation with European powers, nor the adoption of oppressive systems in the European image were able to liberate the Jewish people from the antisemitic system. As Arendt anticipated: "The antisemitism of tomorrow will assert that Jews not only profited from the presence of the foreign big powers in that region but actually plotted it and hence are guilty of the consequences" (1978:133). We can see this phenomenon playing out in the discourse on the left today, where the US and Israel are held up as the

whole with many interconnected elements" involving "long term relationships of racialized groups with substantially different material and political-economic interests," based in "the material reality and social history" of colonial societies (2006: 6–9). To say that antisemitism is a systemic racism is not to discount the ethnic and racial differences between Jews, nor is it to ignore the system's religious origins. It allows us to analyze anti-Jewish oppression beyond individual prejudice and understand it in terms of historical legacies of differential

treatment that are imbedded in institutions and in our experiences of the world.

As a system, antisemitism has developed differently from other racisms. It should not be surprising therefore that attempts to equate antisemitism to anti-Black racism feel uncomfortable and forced. The efforts of liberal Jewish pluralists at analogizing the Black experience in the US with the Jewish experience in Europe are at best misguided and ahistorical (Greenberg 1998). Discussing antisemitism in the terms of other racisms is awkward precisely because it does not fit

Herzl prided himself on his deep understanding of the antisemite. To Arendt, Herzl's understanding of antisemites ran so deep that he not only trusted them in allyship with the Zionist mission, but maybe began to think like them too. From this perspective it should not be surprising that the entire Zionist project has transformed in the image of the oppressor, not only externally but internally too. Envisioned as a place of safety for all Jews worldwide, Israel has in fact codified, racialized, and hierarchicalized previously fluid categories of Jew and Arab as well as "white" Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardi, Mizrahi, Beta Israel, and other

it. The Sabra Jews in their most iconic form, the soldiers of the palmach (Jewish militias in the War of Independence), epitomize the tragic embodiment of this failure, bitterly fighting their "cousins" for the sake of a system that ultimately exploits them. Today, agents of a state that claims to exist for the representation and protection of a historically oppressed people inflict traumatic violence upon their Palestinian neighbors, and, ironically, deny them access to a state with which to represent and protect themselves.

well within the dichotomous construction those forms of racism are based upon.

The roots of antisemitism date to antiquity, but its contemporary terms first emerged with the racialization of Jews in 15th century Spain and were popularized in reference to the 19th century European "Aryan myth," a form of racism in which humans are divided into a biologically and culturally determined racial hierarchy. Antisemitism, or anti-Jewish oppression, existed in other regions as well, and although there were at times similarities to European antisemitism, the Jewish experiences in these regions

cannot be rolled into a single, universal account. However, the racialization of Jews and the creation of the modern discourse of antisemitism occurred in the context of the production of whiteness in Europe. Without ignoring the historical and contemporary experiences of Jews of varying identities (see Ben Daniel 2016 and Shohat 2006), the European system of racialized antisemitism is the dominant model, having been exported to the world via European colonialism. Though it might seem paradoxical from the perspective of decolonization, it is therefore necessary to begin by unpacking European

antisemite went beyond image – it actually required marginalizing and silencing the voices and identities of Holocaust survivors, upon whose experience their movement was being justified, in favor of an invented narrative of purity and strength (Almog 2000:82–84).

To Fanon, decolonization involved violence against the colonizer as a mode of production of the new man, as it helped the colonized to defeat and transcend their inferiority complex, specifically as opposed to violence against themselves and their oppressed neighbor, which would perpetuate

"Man" Jewish people would become in a country of their own.

In seeking to overcome European antisemitic stereotypes, the new Israelis in fact adopted many of the standards of their (former) oppressors, including Orientalist views of Arabs (Sela 2005). The Sabra Jews walked an awkward line, attempting to become natives who, as Ella Shohat puts it, "live in the 'East' without being of it" (2006:331). Though they struggled against the colonizers in one way, they embodied them in another. This unintentional but nevertheless close association between the New Jew and the old

antisemitism and its impact on Jewish identities.

In order to understand the points inherited from Fanon, there are two significant particularities to antisemitism as a system that we must confront. First, the target group is not placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy but in the middle. Second, outbreaks of widespread violent oppression are episodic and cyclical as opposed to constant.

The first particularity of antisemitism has to do with social position. Antisemitic

depictions of Jews have often projected their image in the vilest forms, but systemically it has also afforded many Jews considerable social and economic privilege. While most forms of racism place the target group at the bottom of the hierarchy, antisemitism locates its target in the middle. Jews have often played the social role of merchants, traders, and moneylenders, and at times (such as today's US) Jews have been admitted into the higher ranks of professional classes and social milieus. Interpreted through the lens of other forms of racism, this privilege appears to be connected to a linear reduction of anti-Jewish oppression and integration of

Sabra, after the Hebrew name of the prickly pear cactus that grew in Palestine: hard and thorny on the outside but soft and sweet on the inside. The Sabra Jew was born in Palestine, spoke Hebrew as a first language, and fiercely defended the "homeland." The Sabra was the photo negative of the shtetl Jew; whereas antisemitic propaganda had made the diaspora Jew out to be weak, sickly, pale, ugly, cowardly, and greedy, the Sabra was strong, healthy, handsome, hardworking, daring, brave, and self-sacrificing (Zerubavel 2002). This was the idealized anti-diaspora Jew; the sort of

limbo, keeping it at odds with its neighbors and reliant upon ultimate salvation by neo-imperial powers.

Re-Colonizing Jewishness

Decolonization "sets out to change the order of the world" (Fanon 1961:2). This process involves momentous historical events, but the project begins and ends with human subjects. In the attempt to liberate Jews via state power in Israel, Zionist philosophy created an image of a "decolonized subject," a Jewish New Man. This Zionist version of the Haskalachic "New Jew" was dubbed the

Jews into whiteness. Put simply, the popular notion is that Jews were once oppressed, but now they are not. In the common identity politics of the left today, this privilege is evidence of Jews' complicity with whiteness and with systemic racism, prompting the role of white allyship with other oppressed racial and ethnic groups. However, historically this privilege is been a double-edged sword, and in fact has been a fundamental aspect of the antisemitic system. As Fanon reminds us, the Jewish threat is a stealthy, intellectual one, so the presence of Jews in prestigious fields, while economically and socially advantageous for a time, also plays directly

into the narrative that Jews are covertly dangerous.

The middle position alienates Jews as a group from other groups above and below them in the social hierarchy. From above, they are viewed with suspicion, while from below they often appear as the most visible oppressor – for example as landlords, store owners, and bosses in low-income communities. Georg Simmel famously described the status of Jews as that of the perpetual Stranger (1950). Kafka articulated the condition as being told: "You are not from the castle, you are not from the village,

rulers has survived the founding of the State of Israel unchecked. Worse still, the material advantages of colonial exploitation (Shafir 1989) combined with the parvenu impulse to "ape the gentiles" (Arendt 1978:68) resulted in the Israeli government molding itself in the image of the Western imperial power, including all of the barbarity that comes with it, and pitching Jews to the world as racially white. The founding of the State of Israel in this way – that is, in lock step with systemic antisemitism – perpetuated a paradox from which Jews as a people have yet been unable to escape. The State of Israel as it currently exists traps the Jewish people in liberation

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that early Hebrew tribes were often used by pharaohs as mercenary forces, positioned on borderlands to buffer the Egyptian Empire with the Assyrians and the Nubians, where they took both casualties and national blame during warfare (Hull 2009). In a sense, Herzl's movement led Jews out of their modern middle position as stranger-merchants back to their ancient middle position as stranger-mercenaries.

Though the Zionist movement's goal was liberation from antisemitism, the identity of the Jewish people as scapegoats in service of

you are nothing." (1926:46). The presence of this neither-nor population helped to build and maintain modern state structures, and in Europe, white supremacy, essentially by acting as a cushion in between elites and the most acutely oppressed.. As Aurora Levins-Morales puts it:

The whole point of anti-Semitism has been to create a vulnerable buffer group that can be bribed with some privileges into managing the exploitation of others, and then, when social pressure builds, be blamed and scapegoated, distracting those at the bottom from the crimes of those at the top.

Peasants who go on pogrom against their Jewish neighbors won't make it to the nobleman's palace to burn him out and seize the fields. (2002, np)

As an identifiable group, Jews accrue limited but real privileges from above, resentment from below, and mistrust from both, until a moment of crisis in which an outburst of violence opens a pressure relief valve for popular discontent over economic or political conditions, directed at the stranger.

The second particularity of antisemitism has to do with its cyclical, episodic nature. In

under which people live with different sets of rights and laws depending on geography, ethnicity, and religion should be viscerally repugnant to any sense of justice, and is a status quo that is patently unacceptable in the norms of the 21st century world.

The Zionist project as Herzl articulated it set the Jewish State on this trajectory. Before, during, and following its founding, Zionist and Israeli leaders allied with colonial forces, playing the middle position in between the imperial "center" of the US and British Empires and the "periphery" of the Arab and Persian Middle East and North Africa.

examples demonstrating just how ineffective statehood has been in alleviating Jewish insecurity on any level.

This pathological insecurity (which Fanon notes in all colonized peoples) combined with the material benefits of being a colonizer, has led Israelis to perpetually alienate themselves from and abuse their neighbors, as Israel maintains a military occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza, neither granting Palestinians citizenship nor allowing them to secede. To say nothing of the abhorrent violence of the occupation, a militarily controlled territory

between moments of acute violence, such as pogroms, or most iconically, the Holocaust, there are lengthy periods of calm. The late 1800s were a time of integratedness and relative prosperity for Jews in Western and Central Europe, with many feeling as though antisemitism was a thing of the past. Nineteenth century anarchist Bernard Lazare's personal transformation on the matter of antisemitism is instructive. Lazare was the first Jew to pen a comprehensive sociological volume on antisemitism, published in 1894. He had been convinced that the persistence of antisemitism was at least in part the fault of Jews themselves, and

that it would inevitably disappear as both Jews and non-Jews moved away from the prejudices of the past into a revolutionary future – a position that is startlingly similar to that of many Jewish activists on the left today. The Dreyfus Affair of 1894 – the scandal in France surrounding the arrest and (false) conviction of a Jewish military officer who had been accused of collaborating with the Germans – drastically changed Lazare's mind. After witnessing the widespread surge of public and state-sanctioned mistrust and hatred of Jews that followed Dreyfus' arrest, Lazare committed himself to the fight against antisemitism. Lazare's earlier

short, Herzl's Zionism led the Jewish people through a backdoor into the very same position they sought deliverance from, only on a global scale.

Since the Political Zionists' success, statehood has provided a measure of protection for individual Jews who live in Israel, but it has also created a lightning rod for material attacks by neighbors and political attacks by anti-imperialist forces. The Israeli government's preoccupation with validation of its right to exist and the panic surrounding the recent "nuclear deal" between the US and Iran are but two

anti-Semites… wanted to preserve the availability of the Jews as a scapegoat in case of domestic difficulties" (Arendt 1978:172) and the creation of an Israeli state did just that on an international scale. Arendt was part of a dissenting wing of the Zionist movement that sought a "national homeland without a national state," and following their political defeat, she presciently articulated the implications of allying with European powers, saying that the autoemancipation project was ending not only in national but in "chauvinist claims – not against the foes of the Jewish people, but against its possible friends and present neighbors" (ibid:140). In

position was partially attributable to the era in which he wrote. Jews in Western Europe appeared to be assimilating into white Christian and even bourgeois society. Anti-Jewish prejudices persisted, but the violence that had been attached to it in previous eras had all but disappeared, making these sentiments appear as a vestige of a bygone age that would surely fade into nonexistence. In Arendt's words:

After thirty years of a mild, purely social form of anti-Jewish discrimination, it had become a little difficult to remember that the cry, 'Death to the Jews' had echoed through

the length and breadth of a modern state once before when its domestic policy was crystalized in the issue of antisemitism. (1951:94)

The crystallization of domestic policy around antisemitism that Arendt refers to is not random; it has been central to the development and enactment of systems of oppression by diverting the anger of a portion of the aggrieved population away from the power source of their economic and political grievances. Though we have been in a lull of pogromic antisemitic violence since the Holocaust, this cycle may be becoming

Despite internal debates (for example, some argued for an Arab-majority state with minority ethnic rights for Jews and some pushed for alliance with the Soviet sphere of influence), this avenue ultimately brought Zionist leaders to the negotiating table of global imperial powers that were able to produce the results they sought – a sovereign state carved from the waning British Empire. The British in particular were adept at defining the terms of their colonies' identities and territories, imposing both borders and colonial subjectivities that would survive local national liberation movements (Mamdani 2012). "The real

realpolitik obsessed with achieving statehood above all else. Herzl correctly identified the antisemitic trap Jews had been caught in, where all Jews were conflated with upper class Jews, who were pushed into professional and financial roles then blamed for systemic failures. However, the assumption that all non-Jewish nations were inherently antisemitic foreclosed the possibility of solidarity with other oppressed groups, namely Arab Palestinians, who also sought liberation from foreign rule, only leaving space for cynical bargaining over self-interest.

ominously visible again with the prospect of rising fascism, first in Europe and now in the US. Karen Brodkin's reversal on Jews having become "white folks" following Donald Trump's election is a poignant contemporary demonstration of what Lazare may have gone through. Brodkin's influential work How Jews Became White Folks (1998) articulated the now popular position that Jews had moved from an oppressed people to a white people, albeit with some differences, through a process of assimilation in the US. But the evident widespread resonance of violent antisemitic tropes in the Trump campaign along with

attacks on Jewish sites and persons prompted the question: can Jews become nonwhite again? According to Brodkin (2016), this question itself was the answer – whiteness is by definition non-revocable. Part of its constructed social power is protection from such insecurity. In other words, if Jews' whiteness can be abruptly revoked, then they were never really white in the first place. Of course, even when speaking of Ashkenazi Jews, the question should never have been "are Jews actually white?" because whiteness is an invented and socially constructed category. The question should have been: in what ways do some Jews

crossroads: How would their communities relate to non-Jewish Palestinians?

While their desire and initiative to liberate their people from oppression is admirable, the Zionist movement emerged from a European nationalist zeitgeist in which few were considering the rights of non-European peoples, and the leaders of the dominant model of Zionism did not break from that mindset. Beyond this context, Herzl and other Political Zionists misjudged several crucial elements. Herzl's nationalism, combined with his belief that all Gentile nations were inherently antisemitic, led to a

diaspora, Zionists, who emerged from the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), now encouraged Jews to look to the State.

Among many dilemmas for this agenda, one stands out. The Jews were a diasporic community; many felt native to nowhere but Palestine, but relatively few of them actually lived there. In the 19th century, Zionists (mainly from Europe) began urging Jews to move to Ottoman Palestine and establish land rights. Whether or not its adherents knew it, the Zionist project was at a

experience and enact whiteness in a context where these Jews have racial privilege and also where the Jewish appearance as white appears to be part of the antisemitic system?

In times of relative peace, the community feels the ever-increasing need to recover from the previous violent episode and protect itself. During periods of calm, many educated and upwardly mobile Jews have doubled down on their relative privilege and engaged in a form of "respectability politics." Of course, most Jews did not have the ability to pursue elite social status, but those who did often felt as though doing so

protected the community at large (or at least they could justify their pursuit of wealth and prestige through that logic). But the anti-Jewish sentiment never entirely dissipated and Jews as a group have become distinctively sensitive to society's antisemitic murmurs, consciously or subconsciously gauging the political climate for signs of the next pogrom.

Meanwhile, for generations raised in the times between periods of open anti-Jewish violence, such as today's US, the absence of the more visible type of brutality that is constantly visited upon other groups sows

people but from land. According to Pinsker, Jews could not even dignify themselves to ask for hospitality as foreigners because they had no place from which to collectively offer to repay it. A state would provide physical security, but more importantly it would provide the existential foundation for recognition of the Jewish people. For Herzl too, recognition in the modern world was bound to statehood and sovereignty – Jews would only be able to achieve the recognition required for liberation from antisemitism if they controlled a state. Whereas Judaism had required Jews to look to G-d for protection and guidance in the

For the Political Zionist movement, Jews were perpetual strangers precisely because they possessed no sovereign homeland. Pinsker's reference to his era, when other groups were fighting for national sovereignty, cannot be ignored. This Zionist vision emerged in the context of 19th century European nationalism, which, like socialism, provided a cognitive framework with which to interpret the problems of the world.

As a social group in this nationalist framework, the Jews' problems were seen to arise not from their alienation from other

resentment between Jews and other oppressed peoples. In these eras, many Jews are clearly more privileged than members of other marginalized populations. The visibility of Jews' privilege and the invisibility of oppression lead to increasing doubt about the persistence or even the reality of antisemitism, and correspondingly, increased antipathy toward Jews by other groups that are collectively worse off in the socio-economic system. The combination of conservative Jews' claims of whiteness (and even superiority) and liberal Jews' insistence on analogizing their historical position to other groups' histories of oppression only

serves to exacerbate this bitterness, summed up powerfully in James Baldwin's 1967 essay, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White." The resentment builds until the next moment of crisis in which a version of the dynamic described by Levins-Morales repeats itself. The social-political middle position and the cyclical, episodic nature of antisemitism are what give this racial system its specific, time-tested character.

In order to talk about decolonization for Jews, therefore, we cannot directly import the categories of colonizer and colonized

Jewish State. Seminal Zionist thinker Leon Pinsker explained:

Today, when our kinsmen in a small part of the earth are allowed to breathe freely and can feel more deeply for the sufferings of their brothers; today, when a number of other subject and oppressed nationalities have been allowed to regain their independence, we, too, must not sit a moment longer with folded hands; we must not consent to play forever the hopeless role of the "Wandering Jew." It is a truly hopeless one, leading to despair. (1882 np)

international criminal charges. What went wrong?

The simple answer from the Jewish left has been: colonialism. The simple answer from the Jewish right has been: antisemitism. While neither answer might be quite as wrong as the other side would like to believe, the story is much more complex than both.

In line with Fanon's call for "bread and land," to many Zionists the answer to the Jewish Question was autoemancipation, or the Jewish political movement to create a

from an analysis that focuses on a different type of racism. If we are to understand Jewish decolonization we must do so in the context of the particular historical development of the Jewish subject in relationship to the antisemitic system.

The Colonized Jewish Subject

The long history of antisemitism has had a significant impact on Jewish subjectivity. In Fanon's psychological analysis, being colonized is not simply a matter of material relationship to power, it is also a personality. The experience of life under a colonial

system generates specific inferiority complexes among subjects, which, when these become internalized, in a sense create colonized people. It has been well argued that Jews have inherited a culture characterized by precarity and trauma associated with the extreme violence experienced by previous generations, with Jewish psychological and cultural responses to this violence dating back well before the Holocaust. Here Fanon's observation of "minor episodes in the family history" is both accurate and insufficient. It is not only the moments of violence but the constant threat of them, the precarity, the perpetual

out for bread and land, and ultimately smashed all obstacles in their path to win and defend it. Nevertheless, while the legitimacy of other national liberation movements of the 20th century is not questioned today (at least by the Left) Israel is not considered among them; in fact, it is considered an archetypal colonizer. In addition to Palestinian uprisings, Israel now faces a growing boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaign, a fracturing diaspora community, internal dissent, and if it were not for the US veto in the United Nations Security Council,

Zionism as (Failed) National Liberation

To Fanon, an oppressed people start with those demands that are most basic and most promising: “Bread and land: how do we go about getting bread and land?” (1961:14). In achieving this, the colonized are forced but also naturally prepared to exact violence upon their oppressors, and indeed must be “determined from the start to smash every obstacle encountered” (ibid:3). That the Jews were an oppressed people leading up to the 20thcentury just about wherever they lived is clear. In the Zionist story, the Jews did cry

lack of belonging laced with fears of betrayal, that have impacted Jewish identity at the deepest level. That Jews were neither of the castle nor of the village had the material effect of making them a vulnerable population, acutely aware that they are exposed to exploitation as scapegoats in moments of crisis. In short, the culture of antisemitism has created barriers to the establishing of solidaristic networks between Jews and non-Jews. Deeper than the objective condition of the stranger is the subjectivity of the stranger, which develops

in the absence of trusted community bonds with other groups.

Despite their most ardent attempts, and despite the accumulation of vast wealth by some individuals, upper class Jews were never able to truly break through the "glass ceiling" of whiteness in the fullest sense, with whiteness being understood in the dominant European context as the enduringly superior social-economic caste. Many Jews have sought such inclusion, and arguably some have achieved it, but only to the extent that they as individuals function as white. Individual Jews achieving whiteness

The reality of antisemitism and its centrality in the ideology of historical and contemporary fascist movements necessitates a Jewish liberation movement. But anti-Jewish oppression and Jewish positionality are unlike that of many other oppressive systems and oppressed ethnicities and nationalities. It should be no surprise then that any Jewish national liberation project that fails to account for the particular dynamics of this positionality will be doomed to failure.

colonization, understanding everyone because I belonged to no one" (1957: xvi). Memmi is able to see through the eyes of the colonizer and the colonized, he says, because his experience and identity simultaneously contain aspects of, and alienate him from, both. From this standpoint Memmi effectively describes both the colonizer and the colonized in ways that align closely with the descriptions in Fanon's clinical work. Importantly, Memmi's perspective was colored not only by his social-ethnic positionality, but also by his anticolonial ideology.

in a time and place has not meant that Jews as a group became fully white, even in that same time and place. The unavoidable fact that some achieved elite status – most stereotypically the "House of Rothschild," for example – has not only not shielded Jews from antisemitic violence, but the existence of such elite Jews is integral to the propagation of antisemitism. It was this dynamic that allowed "white" Jews in Western Europe to seemingly overcome antisemitism in the 19th century only to see it come roaring back as the ideological and

material foundation of one of the more acutely violent episodes in human history.

Jewish agency has been an integral factor in this process. Arendt follows Lazare in calling the Jew who is ever striving at all cost to succeed in the dominant Gentile world, the parvenu. She contrasts the parvenu with the conscious pariah, the Jew who understands their positionality and seeks to think outside the bounds of the antisemitic system. The parvenu is essentially a phony, attempting to assimilate by "aping" dominant, elite, white behavior and culture. This imitation is an awkward

critical preliminary step to pursuing liberation and decolonization. This is in part because it exposes a particular vantage point that the Jewish position creates. Albert Memmi prefaces his 1957 work The Colonizer and the Colonized with an acknowledgment of his social position as a Tunisian Jew. The middle social position of Jews, being among the colonized but with unique proximity to the colonizer (a Jewish status Memmi identifies in both North Africa and in Europe) is, according to Memmi, what allows him to write a book analyzing the personalities of both sides of the colonial relationship: "I was a sort of half-breed of

but nevertheless it has grave consequences. Antisemitism has been and continues to be a linchpin of far right ideology (Arendt 1951, Ward 2017), a political force that is a grave resurgent threat to society. By shirking the responsibility to pursue Jewish liberation alongside and in solidarity with other groups' liberation struggles, this parvenu, like the other, not only facilitates the perpetuation of antisemitism, but hinders the prospects for collective human liberation as well.

Acknowledging the antisemitic system in which Jewish identities have evolved is a

and exaggerated version of the original, distorted by distance from the source and the desire to fit in. The parvenu is contemptible to Arendt not simply because of their spinelessness, but because their agency is a factor in the continuation of the antisemitic system. Elite treatment of Jews from "the castle" involves negating collective Jewish claims to self-determination in favor of dealing with individual Jews. As French aristocrat Clermont-Tonnerre articulated it, arguing in favor of civil rights for Jews during the French Revolution: "The Jews should be denied everything as a nation but granted everything as individuals" (Judaken

2006:9). Historically, the parvenu accepts and in fact embraces this dynamic, either discarding connections to their Jewish community or tailoring them so as to make them least obnoxious to elite society. Jews' material proximity to whiteness and upward mobility in the West, most notably in the US, has enabled the parvenu to reinforce liberal capitalism and white supremacy by positioning Jews as success stories of pluralism, with the "right to embrace difference and yet enjoy access to power" (Greenberg 1998).

Jews, in terms of the oppressed as well as in terms of the oppressor.

The role of allyship, especially when oriented around criticizing the State of Israel, fits snugly into internalized discomfort and self-loathing that comes with Jewishness in an era when antisemitism is at its least overtly violent (see Lerner 1992). The pursuit of liberation for others alone is a perfect example of this alternative version of Arendt's parvenu, essentially aping white guilt. Like the elite version, this might appear to be the only path for participation in social-political life alongside other groups,

the racial spectrum. Jews as a group are not exactly white, but Jews as a group are also not acknowledged as POC. Individual Jews can be viewed as white or as POC on other bases (e.g., skin color, national background), but they are not recognized in the white-POC framework as a group. Jewish participants in Left-wing movements are assumed to identify as white unless they have another legitimate claim to POC status (i.e., Jews of color), and there is little room for affiliation in the struggle for liberation outside of POC status or allyship. Jews are thus disaffirmed as a legitimate people, which is to say as

The parvenu Arendt wrote of is the Jew imitating and striving for whiteness, yet unwittingly playing into the antisemitic system, but in fact there are two parvenu versions. Today, the other version is that of the left Jewish activist who denies the reality of antisemitism either striving to be the "good ally" to the oppressed, a group to which this parvenu denies membership (as a Jew, though not necessarily on other bases) in a bid to gain acceptance.

Marx (1844) famously contributed to debates over the "Jewish Question," in which Jews struggle between their identity as a distinct

people and the identities of the nation-states in which they live as others. In the 19th century, alongside nationalism (from which Zionism grew), and liberalism (from which assimilationism in the US grew), socialism offered an alternative solution to the Jewish question: for the working class of one nation to ally with the working class of other nations on the basis of their shared economic class. To many Jews, the workaround required a prerequisite – to negate the legitimacy of membership in one's own oppressed community. Indeed, many Jews were active in building 19th century communist and anarchist movements in part

as a solution to the Jewish Question, where Jews might gain acceptance not through legitimizing their group but by delegitimizing all national groups. Accordingly, Jews have often sought validation in their participation in social movements of the oppressed as individuals or on the basis of membership in some other legitimized group of claimants (e.g., workers, women, etc.).

This Left-wing Jewish self-denial has survived the transition from class-based to identity-based politics. In the identity politics framework, Jews are nowhere to be found on