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Theorizing “new ethnicities” in diasporic Europe: Jews, Muslims and Stuart Hall

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ABSTRACT

Stuart Hall’s concept of “new ethnicities” theorizes (post)migrant belonging by centering not on the power of othering, but rather on the agentive force of diasporic groups to contend with their essentialization and marginalization. While rooted in Black transatlantic experiences of colonialism and slavery, “new ethnicities” provides a conceptual platform from which those more broadly marginalized in the diasporic context of Europe may speak and act. In this paper, Becker argues that Hall’s theory of “new ethnicities” provides a productive lens through which to rethink the knot of religious-racialized-ethnic othering that has served to set both Muslims and Jews apart from the European mainstream. She does so by tracing the historical differentiation of Muslims and Jews, both together and apart, as well as the contemporary politics of difference enacted by Muslim and Jewish Berliners who contest essentialized understandings of their identities and marginalized sociocultural locations in Europe, today.

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Introduction

While Salman Sayyid (2006, 5) poignantly writes that “the ‘post’ in the post-colonial reminds us that we have not arrived at something that can have its own name”, a new era is dawning in Europe: one in which minoritized groups are making claims on full cultural belonging. Since the post-WWII immigration of “guest workers” and migrants from Europe’s (former) colonies, European societies have been home to new diasporic populaces produced by imperial projects that violently reshaped societies across the globe (Castles 2006; Hall 2015). As European societies have come to face their own resulting

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racial, ethnic and religious pluralism, scholars have posited the “culturalization of citizenship”, in which belonging is determined along not only legal but also cultural lines (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016).

This article shifts away from the political production of such a culturalization of citizenship by dominant elites, prominent in the scholarship to date, in order to focus on the contestation of cultural exclusions¹, based in norms, values, and emotions, by dominated groups (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016). It does so by looking to the margins as an important locus of social critique and transformation, asking us to take seriously the politics of difference enacted by minoritized groups in Europe (Gilroy 1991; 1994; 2020; Modood 2003; Hall 2015). At the same time, it moves away from the exclusionary framing of both individuals and groups in essentializing racial and/or national terms. Instead, it turns towards the concept of diaspora, as it pertains to struggles over cultural belonging in the European context. Thinking about Europe diasporically in turn leads to a reconsideration of how both ascribed identifications and self-proscribed identities emerge in, and give shape to, today’s plural European societies.

“Diaspora” is here operationalized as by sociologists Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, in their work centered on the Black British experience. According to both Gilroy (1991; 1994; 2020) and Hall (2015), “diaspora” is an at-once local and global locus of belonging, shaped by the dynamic reformulation of collective subjectivities following territorial dislocations. While “less about origins than trajectories”, diasporic belonging does not divorce from tradition or heritage but rather entwines it with new contexts and relationships (Louis Gates Jr 2017: xvi). It is, therefore, in Hall’s (2017, 7; 1989, 80, citing Dick Hebdige) understanding, both dynamic and “hybrid”, “cut-and-mix”. Diaspora does not stand in contrast to, instead calling for a rethinking of the material and cultural boundaries of the modern nation-state, and the primacy of national attachments. “For Hall, ‘diaspora’ spoke to the sense of ceaseless movement he saw in the world around him, and it was intertwined with modernity. It also signified belonging to a culture, a tradition, a heritage – a historical arc that bound us together without closing the door to further transformations or other kinships” (Louis Gates Jr 2017: xvi).

Although Hall (2015) and Gilroy (1991; 1994; 2020) both pay careful attention to “diaspora” as a concept used to describe the premodern Jewish experience of violent dispersal, they also temporally open it up, making space for plural and hyphenated modern identifications: those resulting from slavery and colonialism, in particular. Nested within a long historical trajectory of persecution and flight, the contemporary Jewish diaspora, much like the contemporary Black diaspora, has experienced multiple dislocations – casting Jews first towards, and later with great centripetal force outwards from Europe (and now, to a certain degree, back again) (Safran 2005; Sheffer 2005; Fireberg, Glöckner, and Zoufalá 2020). The contemporary Muslim diaspora in Europe, on the other hand, resulted from economic and

postcolonial migration in the post-WWII era, leading to a significant Muslim populace rooted in urban centers like Paris, London, and Berlin, while also transnationally connected to the places from which their parents or grandparents migrated (Ewing 2008; Beaman 2017; Everett 2020; Becker 2021).

Stuart Hall (1996; 2006; 2015) engages in debates about (post)migrant belonging from a different perspective, centering not on the power of othering, but rather the agentic force of diasporic groups to contend with essentialization and marginalization. In so doing, he does not move away from a race discourse entirely, instead positing “new ethnicities” as a category of practice imbued with agency: a means to respond to enduring racisms in hierarchical and exclusionary nation-state projects – including what Balibar (1990, 349) terms “fictive ethnicity”, the assumed primordial attachment of national projects to homogenous ethnic groups (Hall 1996; 2015; Lentin 2008; Lauwers this issue). Just as race is an ascribed European articulation of colonial differentiation, “new ethnicities” is a self-prescribed diasporic articulation of post-colonial difference (Hesse 2007). In his theory of “new ethnicities”, Hall (1996, 448, 449) thus focuses on the actions of diasporic groups as they “abandon ... [old] essential categories” in favor of a “politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity”. This politics of ethnicity moves beyond externally-imposed, xenophobic projections of otherness into the realm of self-determined subjectivities.

In this paper, I specifically argue that Hall’s theory of “new ethnicities” provides a productive lens through which to rethink the knot of religious-racialized-ethnic othering that has served to set both Muslims and Jews apart from the European mainstream (Norton 2013; Becker 2021; Van der Tol and Becker 2024). While rooted in Black transatlantic experiences of colonialism and slavery, “new ethnicities” provides a conceptual platform from which those more broadly marginalized by European modernity may speak and act (Hall 1996; 2015). I begin by tracing how difference has been linked to the diasporic experience of Jews through “the Jewish Question” from pre-modern to modern Europe. I then turn to the “Muslim Question”, with equally deep historical distinctions powerfully re-invoked following the post-colonial and “guest worker” migrations in the mid-twentieth century, and its crystallization as a diasporic phenomenon in the 21st (Bernstein 1996; Norton 2013). I continue by calling for a critical re-engagement with the concept of ethnicity, with Hall’s (1996; 2015) theory of “new ethnicities” a means to frame diasporic difference in Europe. Finally, I analyze how “new ethnicities” can help us to make sense of the knotted forms of difference experienced by Muslims and Jews in Europe, as well as the agency of both to create and communicate their own complex subjectivities.

Difference and diaspora: on the Jewish question

The so-called “Jewish Question” has long shaped perceptions of difference and diaspora in Europe, with the collapsing of religious and racialized

distinctions into the figure of “the wandering Jew” as internal European Other since the Middle Ages (Cohen 2013, 147; Norton 2013). This negative differentiation historically entailed the erection of physical and cultural boundaries between Jews and the European societies in which they lived (Nachama 2015). In pre-modern Europe, Jews – predominantly cast as religious others – were relegated to ghettos and displaced through pogroms: deemed impure and therefore threatening to both Christianity and emergent nation-state projects. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council declared that Jews, and Muslims, were required to wear clothing that would distinguish them from Christians in public life (Ravid 1992; Nachama 2015; Aktürk 2020).

What began as a project of pre-modern religious distinction in Europe transformed into a racialized project in the 15th-sixteenth century Reconquista, undergirded by “limpieza de sangre” (blood purity) laws, in which anyone deemed polluted by a single drop of Jewish or Muslim blood was purged from what is today Spain. The blood-based otherness of Jews was henceforth powerfully re-invoked as a justification for segregation and persecution (Martínez 2008). In 1928, Jewish poet Michael Beer wrote and produced a show by the name of *Der Paria* (The Pariah), with a Hindu protagonist – an allegorical representation of Jews in Europe – denied full sociocultural inclusion in Germany. As the Nazis rose to power and pursued the total annihilation of European Jewry, notions of “the Jew as Pariah” were echoed by political theorist Hannah Arendt (1944) in her writings from exile. And yet the shift from religious otherness to racialization was never linear nor complete, as a collapsing of religious, racialized, and ethnic difference took hold, resulting in a “knot” of distinction that served to set Jews culturally apart (Norton 2013, 228; Van der Tol and Becker 2024; Türkmen 2024). This peripheral, non-normative position of the Jew in modernity – inside and yet set apart from society – has long been theorized as one of strangerhood by sociologists. The concept of “the Stranger”, built on the fraught positionality of Jews in Europe, appeared in the essay by the same name written by Georg Simmel in 1908 (2016). Zygmunt Bauman (1991, 71, 85; 2001, 39) later theorized the “conceptual Jew”, as the essentialized figure of the Jew: a “prototypical” “ethnic-religious-cultural stranger” produced by modern European societies.

While the religious and racial articulations of Jewish difference have long been entwined in Europe, the “ethnic” articulation of Jewish difference and identity predominantly arose in the shift away from traditional religious institutions from the nineteenth century forward (Nachama 2015; Topolski 2018). Today, ethnicity is invoked in contemporary discourses as a way to name a secular Jewish identity, as well as a signifier for cultural and national attachments (Lederhendler 2011). Jews are diverse in terms of ethno-national/geographical ties (i.e. of Ashkenazi/Eastern European origin, Sephardic/Iberian origin, Mizrahi/Middle Eastern origin, Ethiopian origin etc.), yet “Jewishness”

is now widely recognized as a unifying ethnic identifier (Brenner 1998; Lederhendler 2011). The idea of a Jewish ethnicity draws on unifying symbols, shared myths and collective memories, as well as traditions that include – while transcending – religion: bound by both cultural sources and resources (Calhoun 1993).

Yet ethnicity, while binding a plurality of Jews to one another, has also been used to set Jews apart from Europe. The entwinedness of ethnicity and the nation long contributed to the contested positionality of Jews, who became the antithesis – while called to assimilate into – the ethnicized modern European nation-state (Van der Tol 2021). Since the Holocaust, nation-centric understandings of Jewish ethnicity have instead increasingly become tied to Israel (Simpson 2000). The notion of Jewish ethnicity thus remains ambiguous and imprecise, as does the notion of Jewishness as singularly religious, or singularly racialized. As Webber (1997, 269) emphasizes, there exists a “lack of fit between standard categories of description and the Jewish case”. On the one hand, the black–white color line that sits at the heart of Anglo-American discourses on inclusion and exclusion does not capture the complex experience of Jews in modern Europe as distinguished on account of more than religion, but nor do particularistic notions of European ethnicity, attached to the European nation-state (Rubin 2019; Van der Tol 2021; Magazzini 2024).

From the Jewish question to the Muslim question

Today, the so-called “Muslim Question” sits at the center of debates over cultural difference in Europe, although the racialized and religious differentiation of Muslims in Europe is far from new. From demarcation and segregation under the Fourth Lateran Council to the blood purity laws during the Reconquista, Muslims have been violently othered throughout European history (Jónsson 2007; Martínez 2008; Norton 2013). Contemporary debates have reinvigorated entwined notions of Muslim religious and racialized othering, most notably in relation to the headscarf (Meer and Modood 2009; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2014; Beaman 2017). Thus, Muslims and Jews share a history of partial inclusion and partial exclusion, with the collapsing of their otherness into a totalizing religious, racialized, and ethnic form (Norton 2013; Becker 2021). As I argue in earlier works, this otherness centers on an association of both with incivility, and even – in extreme cases – lack of humanity (Becker 2021).²

This projection of incivility first occurred in the thirteenth century, with the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215: “the turning point when Jews and ‘Saracens’ (Muslims) in Catholic lands were required to wear distinctive clothing, banned from public office, and residentially segregated, followed by their expulsion, conversion, and/or killing” (Aktürk 2020, 701). The most extreme

moment of such persecution was during the Reconquista, as noted above; even Muslims who converted (so-called “moriscos”) were expelled en masse in 1609 (Jónsson 2007). Re-invocations of the image of “dangerous” Muslim others inside the bounds of Europe accompanied mid-twentieth century migrations, leading not only to the settlement of new Muslim populations in various European societies, but also to the potential unsettling of ethno-centric nationalisms. At first, these migrants were labeled foreigners who would temporarily reside in the European core and eventually return to their countries of origin. With the settlement of tens of thousands of these migrants in the 1970s-1990s, such othering shifted in its focus from foreignness to particularistic ethnic difference (i.e. “Turkish”, “Maghrebi”, “Pakistani” identifiers) (Castles 2006). By the end of the twentieth century, the focus had again shifted, this time from particularistic ethnic difference to universalized religious and racialized difference: creating the highly-securitized umbrella category of “the Muslim” (Bowen 2007; Awan 2012; Helmes-Hayes and Santoro 2016; Türkmen 2024).

The juxtaposition of “uncivil” Muslims to Europe has not faded with the permanent settlement of, or even citizenship among Muslim populations (Allievi 2003; Bowen 2007; Becker 2021).³ This ascribed incivility has historically been invoked to cast Muslims as the “external other” of Europe, whether through imperial contestations or the enduring notion of foreignness. Erupting in mid-1980s France, and rapidly spreading to other national contexts, the “headscarf debates” portrayed the scarf as a barrier to civic inclusion in European societies (Bowen 2007; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2014; Jones and Braun 2017). These debates and their legal ramifications quickly shifted beyond the individual Muslim body to institutional bodies, mosques in particular. Since the onset of the twenty-first century, mosques have been sites of both symbolic and legal struggles over what can and should mark the European landscape, in the case of Switzerland culminating in the outlawing of minarets (Allievi 2003; Jonker 2005; Becker 2017). In recent years, Muslims have also become marked as uncivil carriers of a “new” anti-Semitism, supposedly “imported” from outside of Europe; the idea of a Judeo-Christian Europe has been used to animate the notion that Muslims/Islam are culturally external to Europe (Özyürek 2016, 40; Topolski 2020).

Scholarship that engages with the post-colonial and “guest worker” migration from the 1950s-1970s, and the post-migrant generations that followed, has explored the drawing of cultural boundaries to Islam/Muslims across European societies (Bowen 2007; Ewing 2008; Fernando 2014; Beaman 2017). Sociologists have articulated the need for a cultural understanding of citizenship in the face of exclusions that persist in spite of legal inclusion (Modood, Triandafyllidou, and Zapata-Barrero 2006; Beaman 2016; Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016). In the social science literature, more broadly, debates regarding the culturally marginalized

positionality of Muslims in Europe have specifically come to focus on the concepts of religion and race (Meer and Modood 2009; Özyürek 2014).

The role of Islam as a religion and its relationship to a secular (post)Christian Europe has been a nodal point in this debate. Scholars have documented how the public display and practice of Islam is seen as conflicting with secular norms (Modood and Kastoryano 2006; Roy 2007). This has been particularly stark in France, where claims of religion-free publics through *laïcité* clash with the reality of religiously-practicing populaces (Fernando 2014; Oliphant 2021). Over the last decade, however, many scholars have increasingly come to focus on the racialization of Muslim bodies in public life. The resulting “cultural racism” literature centers on the notion that markers of difference (e.g. the headscarf) relate to culture rather than traditional signifiers of race (Meer and Modood 2009; Özyürek 2014; Beaman 2017). Yet ethnicity as a category of identification and/or difference has largely been left out of the literatures on Muslim cultural distinction in Europe; it has almost exclusively been engaged in intersectional analyses focused on ethnic origins tied to national contexts outside of Europe, such as Turkish, Moroccan, Pakistani etc. Unlike Jews, Muslims have not been considered as a unified ethnic group, perhaps in part because of the European understanding of ethnicity as tied to national identity and the lack of a unifying Muslim national project.

New ethnicities

The scholarship on contemporary pluralism and its discontents in Europe has engaged significantly less with the concept of ethnicity than the concepts of religion and race. This owes, at least in part, to the ambiguity of ethnicity as a conceptual term. But ethnicity is no more ambiguous than race. As Hall (2017, 108) writes, “ethnicity not only functions within the same discursive field as race but also operates in similar ways, that is to say, as a sliding signifier”. The term “ethnicity” is equally understood and operationalized in multiple ways. Sociological understandings of ethnicity begin with Max Weber’s (1978, 364) assertion that “‘ethnic’ groups describe human groups (other than kinship groups) which cherish a belief in their common origins of such a kind that it provides a basis for the creation of a community”. It is this “belief in”, i.e. construction of the idea of common origins, that links the members of ethnic groups – although physical characteristics, language, and specific cultural norms may be signaled as ethnic markers. Ethnic identities are thus constructed notions of belonging to a particular culture and group, which can be ascribed and/or self-prescribed (Malesevic 2004; Gans 2017). And ethnicity, as Herbert Gans (1979, 2014) explains, functions both as a category of analysis (a way of seeing and understanding cultural groups and their boundaries), and as a category of practice (a sense of groupness enlivened for sociopolitical aims) (Van der Tol and Becker 2024). As a

category of practice, ethnicity can – again like race – entail a form of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “strategic essentialism”, through which to make political claims on specific protections or rights (Herbert Gans 1979; 2014; Abraham 2009; Meer and Modood 2009; Partridge 2022).

American sociologist Du Bois theorizes race as a form of such “strategic essentialism” in his essay “The Conservation of Races”, published in 1897. Du Bois therein recognizes race as the main and enduring signifier of cultural difference in the United States. He rejects phenotypical understandings in favor of a historical and cultural understanding of race, one that allows racialized groups to identify with – and make social and political claims through – racial categories (Harris 2019). Hall (2006), on the other hand, argues that a different categorical discourse should be used to respond to exclusions in the contemporary diasporic age: that is, “new ethnicities”. Although attuned to the myriad ways in which it may be understood and operationalized, Hall (2006) perceives ethnicity rather than race (or religion), as the main “signifier of cultural difference” in modern Europe (Louis Gates Jr 2017: xii). Reflecting on the Black British experience, he writes,

If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically – and the concept which refers to this is ‘ethnicity’. The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. (Hall 1996, 447–448)

While Hall (1996) acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in specifically *diasporic* constructions of subjectivity and identity, he does so in order to develop a new understanding of ethnicity as a category of practice. According to Hall (1996) and Sinisa Malesevic (2004), ethnicity and ethnic groups are most sociologically interesting in terms of action – not the construction/imagination of shared cultural heritage, markers, or language, but rather the ability to jointly contest social hierarchies. Through his conceptualization of “new ethnicities”, Hall explicitly hones in on processes of ethnic subjectification that denaturalize the link between ethnicity and nation. Importantly, while Hall (1996) deconstructs this ethno-national hyphenation that has dominated European history, he does not de-territorialize ethnicity, suggesting instead multiple loci of relationality and belonging, present and past. In fact, as Gilroy (1994) argues, such diasporic subjectivities result primarily from scattering – ruptures between people and land – and the consequent processes of resettlement on new geographic and social terrains.

“New ethnicities” was formulated by Hall (1996; 2015) as a potentially emancipatory category of practice for Black diasporic populaces in Britain: forging pathways through which to express hybrid subjectivities

characterized by numerous loci of belonging in the modern, globalized world. “New ethnicities” as a means of active and hybrid identity formation is today relevant not only to the specific Black British experience, but also to the larger multicultural reality of postcolonial Europe, which is a diasporic Europe, resulting from these ruptures and processes of settlement. “New ethnicities”, centering on and in the reflexive potentiality of the margins, gives voice and weight to “culture bearing units”⁴ outside of the normative center of society (Barth 1998, 11). Hall’s explicitly normative concept therefore challenges the moral and cultural hegemony of European nation-states as (post)Christian and white through a politics of difference led by minoritized groups (Barth 1998; Modood 2003; Lentin 2008). And this politics of difference entails a call to think diasporically: first, by decolonizing the concept of ethnicity, itself, moving away from singular or stabile identities necessarily linked to the nation (“closed” constructions of ethnicity), to those forged by migration, entailing multiple orientations of the self, which is “always in motion” (“open constructions of ethnicity”); and second, by decolonizing Europe as an unmoving core juxtaposed to a conquered periphery of places and peoples (Mercer 2017, 5; Tyler 2011, 525).

As James Vernon (2019, 261) powerfully asserts, “Colonial history ensured that it was no longer possible to conceive of specific communities or traditions whose boundaries and identities were settled and fixed”. Hall’s (1996; 2015; 2017a) theory of “new ethnicities” emerged from his own dynamic biography embedded in this history – as a Black man born in colonial Jamaica, who migrated as part of the Windrush Generation to England and never left – writing his seminal essay as a response to his conflicted relationship with Europe. Hall’s personal experience was nested within the broader experience of his age: as the remnants, the lasting residues of empire, reshaped both Britain and the European continent. Hall (1996) also wrote “New Ethnicities” in late-twentieth-century Britain, an era marked by the hopes and possibilities of multiculturalism. In 1995, Hall contributed to the Runnymede Trust Report on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000), which made policy recommendations aimed at protecting multi-ethnic diversity. Hall (1996; 2015; 2017a) thus theorized “new ethnicities” to both make sense of – and claims on – the complex and layered subjectivities of Black postcolonial migrants in the UK, a diasporic populace that constituted a new multicultural version and vision of Britain, as those he termed “familiar stranger[s]”.

Hall’s (1996, 2015) theory of “new ethnicities” was undeniably rooted in his grappling with the concurrent marginality of Black identities in mainstream society and culture, and the (re)formation of Black identities in a diasporic context. This theory is thus rooted in a Black cultural politics of a particular time-place: in which the inequalities resulting from plural forms of racial and ethnic difference in Britain were resisted through the Political Blackness

Movement, with Black identifications linked to emergent hyphenated (Caribbean-British and South Asian-British) or plural, rather than singular, fixed, and ascribed identities (Hall 2017a; Mercer 2017). These two influences – Hall’s personal trajectory and his time–space location in postcolonial Britain – interacted to produce his critical standpoint. He expresses this tense and interdependent relationship in critical texts, writing that “once you abandon essential categories, there is no place to go apart from the politics of criticism” (Hall 1996, 449).

Hall’s concept of “new ethnicities” is thus rooted in his particular life. It is at the same time imbued with a broader, universalizing capacity to turn the table on superimposed identifications – of the essentialized, racialized other in national visions of coherence and order – to the emancipatory potential of plural identities developed within the societal margins. This concept endows the marginalized subject with the agency to accept their own plurality while also actively transforming society, embracing rather than rejecting difference. And it entails not only a specific self-understanding but also a larger “politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity”, which normalizes hyphenation and multiplicity – in Judith Butler’s terms, alterity that is not only between us, but also *within* us – while decentering nation-state projects dependent on the marginalization of diasporic groups (Butler 2012; Sabsay 2016; Hall 1996, 448). It entails *thinking diasporically*.

Hall explicitly links “new ethnicities” to the problematic construction and expansion of the nation-state, both disrupting through, and transformed by modern imperial endeavors. Importantly, he emphasizes that the so-called “civilizing” project of modern Europe erected a powerful “hierarchical scaffolding” to dominate Black and other native bodies through slavery and in colonized geographies (Louis Gates Jr 2017: xi). Hall argues that this global project of expansion paradoxically begins with a violent contraction, namely the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. “Globalization is not a recent phenomenon per se”, Hall (2017, 10) writes. “We could say it was inaugurated in the moment at the end of the fifteenth century when Europe, having expelled its others – Jews and Muslims – turned outward and the Euro-imperial adventure we call modernity began on a global scale”.

“New ethnicities” thus demands an understanding of ethnicity in action under the scaffolding of cultural hierarchies that have long drawn boundaries to religious-racialized-ethnic “Strangers” inside of Europe. It illuminates how agency functions even under social constraints, moving beyond particularistic conceptions of ethnicity linked to nationalist projects, while complicating discussions that identify othering through the lenses of ascribed religious or racial difference alone. Hall’s (1996, 2006, 2015) concept thus allows us to approach sociological questions of difference by thinking diasporically: through perspectives that originate and activities that occur in the societal margins; a recognition of dynamism rather than stagnancy; and the multi-

pronged identities that result from the scattered and hyphenated lived experiences of contemporary Black, Jewish, and Muslim Europeans. “New ethnicities” emphasizes emancipatory processes of identification rather than ascribed classification. It conceptualizes the way in which culturally marginalized actors (whether Black, Jewish, Muslim, or other) move away from the ascriptive identities that aim to contain them, by shaping their own plural subjectivities. I now turn to the potentiality of “new ethnicities” for articulating Muslim and Jewish positionalities in today’s diasporic Europe.

The question of Europe: Muslims, Jews and “new ethnicities”

Turning towards “new ethnicities” entails turning away from the Jewish Question and the Muslim Question that have been invoked across Europe and turning towards the Question of Europe (Anidjar 2013; Norton 2013). Throughout modernity, Jews in Europe have been pulled between the demands for assimilation and assertions of difference across European nation-states. As Marietta Van der Tol (2021) and Sophie Lauwers (2024) argue, European nation-states emerged as places for the expression and rooting of ethnic identities, with ethnicity coming to signal the national. As articulated above, what constitutes Jewishness in Europe, in relation to, but not fully bound by the nation-state, remains deeply contested, and a particularly sensitive area of debate following the Holocaust. In regards to diasporic subjectivities, the social science scholarship has largely explored anti-Judaism and the racialization of Jews in Europe (Meer 2014; Özyürek 2016). Framing the Jewish experience in Europe in terms of “new ethnicities”, that is detached from a singular national site, “engag[es] rather than suppress[es] difference” both in relation to the plural Jewish populace and the plurality of Europe (Hafez 2014, 1672). It also turns away from public debates regarding the authenticity of Jewish identities, and towards the lived experiences of today’s European Jews – as not only victims of the European story but equally agents of societal transformations.

As noted above, ethnicity has largely been invoked in relation to the Muslim experience to signal ethno-national or regional identities that link European Muslims to loyalties outside of Europe (Kaya 2007; Rinnawi 2012). There has, at the same time, been a notable turn towards the blanket identification of Muslim otherness, eroding plurality through the superimposition of this “master status” that draws both on historical narratives (e.g. of uncivil/barbaric Muslim empire threatening Europe) and contemporary migrations (Becker 2021). While no exact moment can be pinpointed, this shift towards a master status of “Muslimness” has been particularly potent in right-wing political movements, again identifying Muslims writ large as a potentially violent and destructive social force (Hafez 2014). Attempts by Muslim scholars to make sense of Muslim identities from within have

centered on developing terms such as “progressive Muslim” and “cultural Muslim” (Safi 2006; Milani 2017). These terms are employed to signal a secularized Muslim identity, contrasted with a religious Muslim identity. This is not without its problems, as it has been used in some cases to further marginalize, securitize, and exclude those “mainstream” Muslims not explicitly identifying as “progressive” or “cultural”. Moreover, such polarization eludes a spectrum of identifications and practices that may be coded as “religious”, just as religious signifiers may be racialized (Meer and Modood 2009; Beaman 2017). In both the lived experiences and identifications of Muslims, religion, race, and ethnicity remain knotted and difficult to pull apart (Norton 2013; Van der Tol and Becker 2024; Türkmen 2024). The concept of “new ethnicities” thus emerges as potentially inclusive of the diasporic Muslim as well as Jewish experience in Europe: with ethnicity at once delinked from the nation, while it “acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity” (Hall 2006, 446).

I will now briefly focus on two empirical cases of “new ethnicities” from my own research with Muslim and Jewish communities in Germany. This entailed over a year of ethnographic and interview-based research centered in Berlin, across the period of 2013-2017. Both of these cases counter the dominance of national framings of subjectivities, by focusing on the local and the transnational as additional sites of attachment and identification. And both complicate essentialized notions of what it means to be Muslim or Jewish. These are by no means representative cases, but rather auxiliary, showing how such a theoretical expansion of new ethnicities may be empirically engaged with.

The first empirical example to which I turn is the Salaam-Schalom Initiative, which brings Jews and Muslims in Berlin together to engage and shape the city in which they live, through forms such as political activism and art exhibitions. Founded by Rabbi and sociologist Armin Langer in 2013, Salaam-Schalom includes anyone who identifies themselves as a Muslim or a Jewish Berliner. Its members aim to create a space for plural, local Jewish and Muslim voices to speak out together against stereotypes of “the Muslim” or “the Jew”, the assumption that Jews and Muslims are inherently at odds with one another, and the encoding of Jewish and Muslim bodies as inherently threatened or threatening. By actively engaging with, rather than suppressing difference, they together foster a “politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity” (Hall 1996, 448). This was witnessed, for instance, during the 2014 “My Head, My Choice” protest in the district of Neukölln’s City Hall, which linked the struggle of a young Berlin lawyer named Betül Ulusoy – who had a legal fellowship rescinded because she wore a headscarf⁵ – to a global struggle over women’s bodies, mirroring the “My Body, My Choice” discourse. This protest, consisting of dozens of men, women, and children marching while holding signs with the “My Head, My Choice” slogan, or “it matters what’s in a woman’s head, not what’s on it”,

resulted in a re-offering of the position, which she subsequently declined. It elucidated the potential transformation of society through political contestation from the margins by those identifying as Muslims and Jews.

In his own empirical work, Hall specifically focused on the role of art in speaking difficult truths and thereby carving out new social terrain: creating “a space of possibility – a space of critique, of poetry, of reflection, of debate” (Tawadros 2008, 67). Salaam-Schalom has used not only political action, but also art to contest and powerfully unsettle essentialized notions of Jewish and Muslim otherness. In 2015, it held an exhibition consisting of staged homes throughout Berlin’s Neukölln neighborhood, explicitly blurring the boundaries between Jewish and Muslim life. At one of the homes, a mezuzah marked the doorway beside a Quranic verse. Opening these homes as a form of public art also laid claims to space in the city as home, with subjectivities rooted primarily in the urban terrain: a form, one might argue, of decolonizing the metropolis, while confronting enduring national exclusions (Becker and Everett 2023). When I asked one of the organizers to whom a particular home belonged, she answered: “It is ours. Just as the city is ours”. There Salaam-Schalom members blurred the boundaries between Muslim and Jewish lives, while also exposing their ordinary private lives, countering assumptions of difference from – or even danger to – the German mainstream.

Another example of a politics of difference vis a vis “new ethnicities” through art is *i,Slam*, a poetry group of Muslim youth based in Germany. On its website, it is described as an initiative that “tasks itself with strengthening young people’s identity and personality. Art is a tool for empowerment. Opportunities are created in which art projects are realized and thereby create a community and a safer space for Muslims in particular and young people who are generally affected by discrimination”. *i,Slam* supports the expression of social critique through interruptive acts, such as confronting society through poetry slams performed on street corners and in city squares. Here “interruption ... seeks not to impose a language of its own ... but to enter critically into existing configurations to re-open the closed structures into which they have ossified” (Torode and Silverman 1980, 7).

Fatima, one of the *i,Slam* performance artists who I interviewed, was born and raised in Germany but has also lived in Switzerland. She describes herself as European Muslim and Black, leading to a “double stigmatization”. And she sees her experience, her rise as an award-winning slam poet in Europe, as both political and performative, two terms that are important for her anti-racist activism. Yet in her slam poetry, Fatima does not point to the continuities that bring the past into the present, but instead purposefully interrupts them. And it is this interruptive practice that sits at the heart of *i,Slam* as an organization contesting cultural borders to belonging that exclude Muslims, imbuing disorientation, breaking with continuity to

create ruptures and thereby openings for new possibilities. This is neither a constructive nor destructive act, but rather an *instructive* means of enlivening alternatives to racism, alternatives to binary distinctions between Europe's insiders and outsiders. "My great-grandfather was in the Waffen-SS, I'm black and brown like the German hazelnut, eat German food and speak the German language perfectly, (...) have a dark migration background – brown history, so to speak – I'm German! (...) I like harmony, but I don't give a shit about yin and yang. Because as long as contours cannot blur, two halves are never whole".

In another interview, Berliner *i,Slam* poet Merve described her own performance at Alexanderplatz, the center of former East Berlin – which has been much less influenced by Muslim migration and settlement than the western side of the city – as interrupting expectations of who inhabits which space in the city. In her performance, she confronted exclusions in the "existing configurations" of the German capital through her physical presence, her body, her voice. While *i,Slam* links itself to Islam as both inspirational and narrative foundation, those who participate in the group see themselves broadly as Muslims concerned with the transformation of civic life, the creation of more inclusive publics in which they will no longer be set apart as *Muslims* from the normative core of Europe. Here they strive for equality through recognized difference, a world in which one may be recognized as Muslim and European too. In both cases, Muslims and Jews resist singular perceptions of their religious and/or racialized otherness, instead mobilizing their Muslim and Jewish subjectivities, their migration histories and multiple cultural localities – notably attached to the city of Berlin – to make demands for full inclusion.

These auxiliary empirical cases have served to illuminate the potentiality of "new ethnicities" as a way of thinking about the diasporic experience vis a vis the lived subjectivities of minoritized groups in Europe. Moving from its origins as a theory on and developed through the Black British experience, in particular, it suggests that "new ethnicities" can function more universally as a means of empirically articulating and understanding cultural inequalities, as well as their contestation in the diasporic context of Europe.

The question of Europe: thinking categories of difference together

Strangerhood has been a defining trope of Jewish and Muslim experiences in Europe over time: being in but also out, intimately familiar, hyper-visible, and yet still set apart from society. This position of strangerhood is inhabited not only by Muslims and Jews, but many minoritized populations in an unsettled postcolonial Europe. Of course, the experiences of these different groups, with their unique histories, cannot be collapsed into a single form of (internal)

otherness, but they can speak to one another in and, from the margins of Europe, speak to the core of struggles with difference.

In the European imaginary, Muslims and Jews have similarly been considered a threatening religious other and an equally threatening racialized other. In semiotic terms, the signifier shifted between religion and race, but the signified remained the same, as both minorities have long embodied a nebulous kind of difference perceived as dangerous to Europe (Becker 2021). This shift was, however, never linear nor complete, with the continued invocation of religious alongside of racialized, ethnic, and cultural distinctions throughout European history. At the same time, contemporary European societies have attempted to create cleavages *between* Muslims and Jews, not least of all by blaming Muslims for a “new antisemitism”, antisemitism supposedly imported into a morally purified post-war Europe; and by assuming the dominance of the Israel-Palestine conflict in Muslim-Jewish interactions in diaspora (Özyürek 2016; Özyürek 2022). Resistance to these narratives of opposition take form in initiatives like *Salaam-Schalom*, which focuses on Jews’ and Muslims’ shared experiences of othering and marginalization in Germany, and the transformative potential of sociopolitical alignments in an urban setting.

Modern feminist thinkers draw attention to the potentialities of the marginalized to critique and transform through Standpoint Theory, providing a critical lens for producing knowledge from the margins. For instance, Judith Butler poses the “big question” of “whether that idea of an ethics of alterity – an alterity that is built into the identity itself – can become a basis for a new political vision” (Aloni et al. 2011, 217, quoting Butler). While initially a feminist epistemology, Standpoint Theory has also been employed as an at-once theoretical and methodological tool for contesting power relations, for instance by indigenous populations in Australia (Foley 2006; Rolin 2009). Standpoint Theory also undergirds intersectionality, first theorized by Patricia Hill Collins (2019), as a way to make sense of, and thereafter confront intersecting marginalities and their compounded effects on lived inequalities. Recognizing such multiplicity and intersection of marginalities has spurred ethical alignments both within and across diasporic groups in Europe, Muslims and Jews among them. Today, many Muslim and Jewish Europeans identify their shared positionality as strangers, uniting in the societal margins in order to transform the core (Gidley and Everett 2022; Becker 2023). Some Muslim actors mobilize the tactics of resistance used by Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, as Damani Partridge (2022) explores in his research on the power of Black politics in Germany. Gilroy (1993) and Hall (2017) have also explicitly called attention to the intersections between the transatlantic Black and Jewish diasporic experiences. Hall writes of the need for clearer alignment between Black postcolonial migrants and Jews, as they both grapple with diasporic positioning present

and past: the potential for emancipation that such alignments could entail (Chen 1996).

“New ethnicities” provides a critical lens and a critical opportunity to think through and act upon the overlapping, intersecting, knotted distinctions of minoritized groups in Europe, today (Norton 2013). For Black Brits, these remain deeply racialized, while for Muslims and Jews, deeply rooted in shifting notions of religious-racial-ethnic difference. For all, they remain linked to ideas of incivility, a framing of difference that suggests such groups are not only distinct, but dangerous to national European orders (Beaman 2017; Becker 2021). Hall’s (1996, 2006) turn towards thinking ethnicity as decoupled from the nation, *thinking ethnicity anew*, is not only deeply personal but also deeply political as it confronts such othering with a politics of difference that values, and draws power from, the plurality of today’s diasporic Europe.

Perhaps, most importantly, is how such thinking diasporically shifts our gaze from the hypervisibility of the Other to seeing *through* the Other’s perspective, resulting in an opening, an aperture to another vision of Europe that is not just possible, but has in fact already arrived:

The question of Europe is ... Since cultural diversity is, increasingly, the fate of the modern world, and ethnic absolutism a regressive feature of late-modernity, the greatest danger now arises from forms of national and cultural identity – new or old – which attempt to secure *their* identity by adopting closed versions of culture or community and by the refusal to engage ... with the difficult problems that arise from trying to live with difference. The capacity to *live with difference* is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century. (Hall 1993, 361)

The concept of “new ethnicities” moves the conversation from enduring particularistic (Black, Jewish, Muslim) notions of cultural difference in relation to a (post)Christian, postcolonial European mainstream to the sharedness of space and society inhabited by a plurality of people at present. Alana Lentin (2008) powerfully argues that the European/non-European divide is a colonial divide, and postcolonial migration, by blurring the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, erodes this divide. But what exactly lies beyond this divide in Europe, where the vestiges of colonial and imperial projects remain, yet where the children and grandchildren of migrants are actively reshaping the contours of its societies from their edges, their margins?

“There is energy in the margins”, Mary Douglas (2007, 141) warns in her seminal work, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Stuart Hall invites us to embrace this energy in “the *edges*, the *margins*, where ‘identity’ ceases to hold with certainty and where ambiguity, otherness, finitude, the outside, begin to decenter and undermine its fables of stable self-presence” (Scott 2005, 15). He calls on us to recognize

how this energy spurs a “process of unsettling and recombination” led by minoritized populaces – whether those staging protests and art shows or those interrupting the status quo through slam poetry on urban street corners in Berlin (Hall 1996: 447). In unsettling taken-for-granted notions of what and for whom Europe is, the societal stranger, the “unspoken and invisible other” may both speak and be seen (Hall 1996: 441). Perhaps this post-postcolonial era may finally be named an *era of diaspora*: the time-place in which dispersal give way to resettling, and devastation to renewal. Perhaps, by thinking and enacting categories of difference together – whether from Black, Jewish, or Muslim positionalities – a new center of gravity may settle in the margins, pluralizing how we understand, and how we live together with difference, rather than indifference and enmity.

Notes

1. An exception that looks at both culturalization by elites and its resistance is the work of Margaretha Van Es (2019).
2. Hall’s (2017, 74) critique of Enlightenment universalism is also based on the civil/uncivil divide, the ways in which enslaved and colonized people became labeled as “barbaric” and thus set apart from the sphere of equal protections and rights.
3. In the post-Enlightenment period of Europe, the civility/incivility boundary has replaced notions of purity and pollution. Incivility was, for instance, enlisted to justify colonial projects, as iterated by Anindyo Roy (2005: i, 1) who discusses civility as the “ethos of the British colonial state”: a “normative code” that facilitated “control and effecting exclusion”.
4. Culture is made through a reflexive, dialogic process between individuals and the social worlds that they inhabit or connect to, in Hall’s terms “a practice of articulation” (Mercer 2017, 7). Culture gives shape to how we interpret and relate to the world, by both creating and making legible collective meaning.
5. There was no legal grounds for rejecting her, since this was a fellowship position and not a permanent job.

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