

Review Essay

Albert Memmi.

Decolonization and the Decolonized.

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Introduction

During the 1950s, in the midst of ugly colonial wars of independence a body of work, including Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), and Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957), explored the injustice and oppressive daily humiliations of the colonized. Their analyses influenced a generation of scholars and activists involved in the anti-colonial liberation movements in the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin-America, and the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. Fanon and Césaire were black men from the island of Martinique and spent some part of their lives in France. Césaire returned to Martinique where he was a teacher and a lifelong mentor to Frantz Fanon and became involved in politics and cultural resistance. Fanon became a psychiatrist and found his anti-colonial political struggle in Algeria. Memmi, a sociologist and creative writer, is part of an altogether a different tradition and political trajectory.

A Tunisian Jew who spoke eloquently about liberation and independence, Memmi, along with Albert Camus, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, and many others (Jews and non-Jews) joined an intellectual diaspora by leaving the former North African colonies for France, where they established their own considerable reputations as scholars and writers. Many of them lacked the polished backgrounds of the French academic elite but became self-made intellectuals who contributed immensely to the effervescence of French cultural life. Edward Said (1994) referred to Memmi as one of the few intellectuals during the colonial period who managed to bridge the gap between the colonized and the colonizer. Since the 1960s Memmi has explored in his various works the tricky triangulation of his different cultural identities — Arab North African, Jew, and French citizen — and over the years disillusionment with anti-colonial leftism moved him closer to a position which on cultural matters can be viewed as decidedly conservative.

With the publication in France of his new book *Decolonization and the Decolonized* in 2004, Memmi entered a heated national debate. The book had a cool reception from the established French intellectual community, but it hit a responsive chord among segments of the French public and a small number of thinkers who have been widely called "French-Jewish intellectuals," including Bernard Henri Lévi, Alain Finkielkraut, Bernard Kouchner, and André Gluckmann, all of whom at one point or another have taken a pro-Iraqi war position or have been critical of Muslim culture. The moniker is misleading since it tends to lump under one broad category Jews whose convictions and political ideas differ substantially; nevertheless, the label has stuck out of journalistic laziness and implicit anti-Semitism. Michael Shurkin, writing for the Jewish American magazine *Zeek* (2006), calls the "French-Jewish intellectuals" neo-conservatives in the sense that like many of the early American neo-conservatives they have abandoned the left and are now at the forefront of culturally conservative discourse. In France, this discourse places great emphasis on secular values and the threat that Islam and Islamism pose to liberal culture.

For many French citizens headscarves in public schools became a sign of the undermining of a French national identity. The recent French law prohibiting the wearing of the *hijab* and other

"oversized" religious symbols in public schools, as well as the inflammatory remarks of the tough talking French interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy (now running for president as a candidate for the conservative Union for a Popular Movement party) who described rioters in poor immigrant neighborhoods as "scum," are indicative of the volatile mood of French society. For a number of years intellectuals in France have also been engaged in a debate about the coherence of a national identity and one argument has always been that to press the claims of minorities and immigrants onto the main core of French identity would be to dislodge traditional authority rooted in Enlightenment liberal values in favour of a new and possibly fractious identity. Yet never was this sense of compelling unitary national identity stronger than at the time of the nineteenth century during the age of Empire. Throughout this period a rigid division was set up between European colonizers and non-European colonized peoples which maintained a strict cultural hierarchy between whites and nonwhites, between the colonized and the colonized. It is this asymmetry of power which Fanon analyzed as the Manicheanism of colonial rule that enables the persistence of a stable national identity at home and of an inferior cultural identity for the colony.

In the postcolonial world, and France especially, this duality has resurfaced as a struggle between secular democracy and Muslim orthodoxy. The popular press, along with some high profile public intellectuals, have cast this conflict as a mighty battle where universal Enlightenment values are under attack by religious particularism, but as usual there is more to this story. The debate is fascinating to watch because its lessons have a direct impact on Canadian and Québec politics of multiculturalism and accommodation to immigrant religious values. Beyond that, it underscores the rhetorical strategies of Eurocentrism and, perhaps more importantly, the fear and anxieties of western societies trying to accommodate new immigrants who are themselves coming to terms both with the allure of the west and its disenchantments.

Decolonialization and the Decolonized

Decolonization and the Decolonized is composed of two main narratives, one about decolonialization, the other about immigration. Memmi refers to them as "descriptive portraits" and they are vivid, easily recognizable and seductive ideal types. His arguments are stated boldly and his authorial voice is free from idling apprehension. In every page one is reminded of the presence of a forceful intelligence, but also a consolidating intelligence that organizes large swaths of life and experience under a set of highly selective assumptions. Memmi relies heavily on the construction of a singular collective personality, as indicated by such phrases as "the Arab world" and the "Arab mind," on the metaphors of sickness and health, and on the Nietzschean psychology of resentment, all skillfully used to pathologize the "other." Memmi is not (and this is what makes the book interesting) a reactionary or xenophobe and, unlike many American neo-conservatives who have made a political alliance with Christian fundamentalists, he is a secular humanist who values reason, technology, science, and the critical spirit. He cherishes European cultural and scientific achievement but with Splenglerian gloom also feels the decline of the West is nigh due to what he calls the "Trojan horse" of Islamic immigration, and the skeptical and blasé attitudes of an exhausted Europe.

Memmi recognizes that decolonized countries have been at the short end of history's stick but he refuses to make history an excuse for self-pity. The decolonized, he writes, find fault in everyone but themselves: It is the fault of history, or of whites, but as long as the decolonized do not free themselves from such evasions (he calls it dolorism, the tendency to exaggerate one's pain) "they will be unable to correctly analyze their conditions and act accordingly" (19). Decolonization, he argues, has been largely disastrous. It has not ended violence or the oppression of women. Border disputes continue to rage in former colonial states; the ills of poverty have not been

addressed, while the intellectuals who championed colonial independence have grown timid or silent. The end of colonization should have brought freedom and prosperity, the use of its recovered language should allowed native culture to flourish. But instead of creating a renewed culture, a new forward-looking society with greater freedoms, employment and widespread education for its population, decolonialization has given rise to an old familiar story of tyrants and religious zealots eager to assert their retrograde convictions.

In nearly all Arab-Muslim nations, notes Memmi, democracy has never been tried or has been pushed aside after unsuccessful experiments while diversions are used to disarm resentments and prevent revolt. In Algeria, fundamentalists won at the ballot box and the military had to intervene and annul the elections. In Egypt, where democracy has never been fully tried, minimal liberties are eroded by a fearful government trying to dampen a fundamentalist resurgence. Tunisia and Libya are in the hands of strongmen who after a few timid efforts at reform, subsided into autocratic rule and cynically used religion to control its population. Meanwhile American allies like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the oil emirates are hard pressed to keep up the pretense of being democratic.

The wealthy new rulers want to distract the people and convince them that their poverty is inevitably the result of fate or a foreign plot, and conveniently the Israeli-Palestinian struggle is used to unite a fragmented Arab-Muslim world. "[T]he misfortune of the Arabs," writes Memmi, "does not arise from the existence of Israeieven if the country didn't exist, none of their [the Arabs] problems would be resolved..." (25). The Palestinian question "is legitimate but minor. It is a part of a trap developed by the privileged to maintain their people in a state of subjection and confusion" (29). The confusion and powerlessness of Arab-Muslims creates a dysfunctional culture conducive to terrorism and suicide bombers. These are the products of a sick society and of a people who feel trapped by circumstances beyond their control. "To employ the language of medicine," adds Memmi clinically, "we can say that Arab-Muslim society suffers from a serious depressive syndrome that prevents it from seeing any way out of the current situation" (65).

Reserving his most searing critique for religion and intellectuals, Memmi asks: "Why has decolonization not succeeded in separating the religious from the profane? In freeing critical thinking, the necessary condition for technological and scientific renewal" (21). Memmi's stand on religion is contradictory at best. On the one hand, he laments the fact that the Muslim world has not produced any moderates. Where are the moderate Muslims? he admonishes. On the other hand, he does not think that even a moderate religious position is possible. "All religions are intolerant, exclusive, restrictive, and sometimes violent. The conception of a 'moderate Islam,' which some willingly defend, is misguided: there is no such thing as a moderate religion" (34). Memmi is looking for a strong willed and critical individual. "Are there no independent minds in the vast Muslim world? He asks. "Is there no one who will play the part of Voltaire or Nietzsche and criticize traditional thinkers or even--horror of horrors-Holy Scripture? (35)" Memmi does not hear such a voice in the Arab-Muslim world, least of all in its intellectuals who are accused of being "democratic and tolerant abroad but becoming obedient children once they've return to their native soil" (33). Even the literature of the ex-colonizer has become guarded and nostalgic, preferring to focus on some idealized folkloric past than on the frustrations and oppressions of the present.

Immigration and the Decline of the Western National Identity

Memmi's portrait of decolonized nations as resigned, betrayed, sick, and open to mystic effusions and nostalgia is complemented by another about the decolonized subject as rebellious, resentful, and prone to petty criminality. It is perhaps not surprising that he should begin this section with a discussion of immigration as a "weapon" or a "bargaining chip" for the leaders of decolonized

nations. The image of Fidel Castro emptying the jails of Cuba, thus promoting a massive exodus from the island and in the process ridding himself of political enemies and criminal elements, is called to mind. In Memmi's scenario the role of Fidel Castro is played by Colonel Khadafi of Libya, who uses immigration as a way of pursuing his war against the West by allowing his nation to be a gathering place for "Turks, Nigerians, Somalis, Moroccans" (78), who are then piled into small boats for the dangerous and illegal crossing to Europe.

The problem with illegal immigration, says Memmi quite correctly, is that it denies the concept of territory and national borders and increases the sense of anxiety on the part of the majority of the population which then votes for increasingly right-wing candidates. Legal immigrants of former Muslim-Arab colonies present yet another problem, for these carry with them, argues Memmi, a psychological baggage of resentment against the colonizing West. Powerless to achieve their aspirations at home, they make a decision and hope for a better life in the former colonizing country where they perform menial jobs and come face to face with modernity.

The immigrant knows that he or she will never return home and has reached an accommodation of sorts with the host country. But the children of immigrants are stuck in a double identity. They assert, claims Memmi, their Frenchness just as easily as they claim "affiliation with Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia," and they do so in order to "provoke." They are rebels who do not know what to do with their own rebellion and have doubts about their future. If the French interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy calls them "scum," Memmi analyses them as "Zombies" suspended in a form of arrested development. They are unstable, agitated, in conflict with both their elders and themselves. They reject education as well as the resigned life of their parents and seek a new model, preferably a subculture favoured by African-Americans, so hip hop, rap, tagging, piercing, tattoos, baggy pants, cornrow hairstyles, and backward baseball caps have become their signs of revolt. These are not fashion, but signs of self-inflation and importance. There may have been no major terrorism in France but, he suggests, the rise of a rebellious subculture among Arab-Muslim youths as well as in the general level of delinquency is tantamount to another form of attack.

Fearing that tolerance has weakened Europe and that France no longer believes in the primacy of its values and culture, Memmi conjures up a final scarifying scenario. Immigrants, the old filled with resentment, the young deracinated and rebellious, look for answers in the totalizing system of Islam, which "is not only a religion, it is a culture and a civilization that encompasses the social even the political" (127). Mixed marriages bring new converts to Islam which swells its population at a time when European and French demographics are heading down. The result is the kind of argument that is being popularized in the United States by writers like Bruce Bawer (2006), who suggests that Europe cannot ignore the clash of civilizations within its own borders because it leads to knee-jerk hatred towards the U.S. and Israel, and to the rise of virulent anti-immigrant nationalism. Memmi does not stress the nationalist threat but the message is in many ways similar. Immigrants represent a kind of Trojan Horse, "its belly filled with combatants who, on a signal from without, spread through the city to open the gates to the assailant" (126). The French nation has been weakened from within because it no longer has the civic pride to defend its values and is promoting an easygoing leniency towards the very group whose religious orthodoxy is bent on the destruction of liberalism and civic rights.

More subtlety, fewer Manichean stereotypes

Memmi offers very simple, easy to understand "portraits," but the real story of decolonization and the decolonized subject is far more complex and it takes real work and subtlety to tell it well and responsibly. *Decolonization and the Decolonized* is in many ways a manifesto that relies on

emotionalism and the reinforcement of prevailing stereotypes, and Memmi is more than willing to confirm reader's prejudices. He insists that Western tolerance has allowed its own core values to be undermined and we should revert to asserting those older unifying Eurocentric values, which, coincidentally, serve to consolidate aspects of the conservative and authoritarian role of the nation.

While much of Islam is hardly ecumenical, Memmi's view of it is incredibly narrow and dependent on a rhetorical strategy that homogenizes and essentializes all Muslims as having the same unchanging characteristics. Tariq Ramadan, one of Europe's important (and moderate) Islamists, suggests in his book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2005) that Islam in Europe has several constituencies. He lists them as follows: political-literalist Salafism, which stresses that everything is in the Koran; a militant anti-Western stance in favour of an Islamic state, and liberal-reformism, which makes faith a private affair. Memmi does not discuss variations within European Islam; instead, he brings the immigrant Muslim into a unified and authoritative structure that disallows other possibilities, other ways of being. This is the major problem with Memmi's book: it reinforces a distilled religious identity. Furthermore, Memmi's discussion of Arab-Muslim or African youths and their subculture of "provocation" and "rejection" misses both the role of subcultures as a way of negotiating and affirming new identities with symbolic resources that are not part of traditional national French culture, as well as the more obvious processes of marginalization and racism which produced many of these subcultures in the first place.

The text is also shot through with contradictions that a more thoughtful author would have attempted to resolve or at least hide. "The situation," Memmi writes with regards to Western/Muslim conflicts, "is not one in which, as has been repeated so complacently, several civilizations clash. There is now a single global civilization that affects everyone, including fundamentalists" (44). Yet a few pages later, when addressing Arab terrorism, he resorts to a familiar characterization of a clash of civilizations. Terrorism is "the result of a confrontation of two societies, one open adventurous, dynamic, and therefore filled with danger, wicked and depraved, the other static, turned inward, powerless to confront this challenge, but virtuous and legitimate through its submission to God" (65-66). One is left wondering whether globalization or the clash of civilizations or both are the blame for terrorism. Ultimately Memmi's take on terrorism is limited. One can just as convincingly argue that terrorism reflects a change in modern war. It is waged by non-state actors with unprecedented media coverage and its aim is to provoke violent reaction. Terrorism is irrational, morally unjustified, and indiscriminating, but the issue is not clarified or deepened if we remain on the level of psychological pathology (Arab societies are "sick," suicide bombers are nihilists) without accounting for the global and tactical nature of terrorism as part of modern war.

Memmi's discourse relies on shopworn phrases that tend to compound, rather than dispel, preconceived notions of the decolonized nations as hopelessly corrupt and tyrannical, but this picture lacks equanimity. The West, and the U.S. in particular, may not be "The Great Satan" that it is often made out to be by former colonial nations, but neither are—we—entirely blameless. President Franklin Roosevelt once said of General Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua; "He is a son of a bitch, but he is our son of bitch." How many western countries have reached similar conclusions about the tyrants they support: Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Mubarak in Egypt, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran, Khadafy of Libya, King Hussein of Jordan, and so on. The geopolitics of decolonization are complicated and equivocal and one would have wished that Memmi had examined these complexities more carefully.

Edward Said (1979) and others (Said and Walther: 1997) who have examined the linguistic imagery used both in literature by orientalist historians and the modern media, found a distinctive irrational

representation when it comes to a discussion of the Arab-Muslim world. In a metaphorical environment where the Western world is taken as the basis of democracy, rationality, productive work, and restraint, the encoded message is that Arab-Muslims don't truly belong and are perhaps incapable of having the same qualities and thus lack real potential to be "just like us." At the very least, this form of stereotypical representation means that the decolonized are measured, framed, and evaluated in terms that they have little possibility of challenging.

Of course one can sympathize with Memmi's hatred of terror and totalitarianism in all its forms, and one can even celebrate, as I do, his attachment to progressive Enlightenment values which have led to greater civic freedoms and the separation of Church and State. But Enlightenment values come with their own price. Poets and philosophers who have regretted the Age of Reason have told tales of the monstrous perversions that science and reason can bring to humanity. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* comes to mind, but so does Max Weber's critique of rationalization and Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Memmi makes few concessions to such critiques nor is he willing to acknowledge that progressivist ideology produces its own asymmetries of power, its own self-fulfilling stereotypes between the "advanced liberal West" and the "regressive, pathological, emotional Middle East." The reiteration of this duality does not move us forward but keeps us stuck compulsively in old debates about the primacy of the West and the decadence of the East, or in "clash of civilizations" arguments which, having been given new fuel by the war in Iraq, continue to rage in the academy.

These are perhaps the *idées fixes* of this generation. We see their political expression in France and more closer to home in Québec. When the Québec town of Hérouxville passed a controversial code of conduct that warns immigrants that they cannot stone or burn women or make them wear a veil, it stirred up a political hornet's nest. In typical Canadian fashion, Québec Premier Charest set up a commission headed by the sociologist Gerard Bouchard (brother of former separatist Premier Lucien Bouchard) and the philosopher Charles Taylor to explore some "reasonable accommodation" between religious sensibilities and the secular values sanctioned by the state. In a multicultural bilingual federal state like Canada such accommodations are not uncommon. What is needed ultimately is a way of communicating across the divide, of having a more complex understanding of each other, and of reaching an agreement on what Will Kymlicka (1996) calls "shared citizenship." Towards the end of the book Memmi makes a few gestures in this direction and writes of exploring the promotion of "rationality" and "universal morality" (as usual Canadians will settle for a more modest system, like shared rules in the game of citizenship), but Memmi's few pages of dialogue and understanding cannot undo the previous hundred and forty pages of complaint and accusation.

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