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Albert Memmi, Zionism, and the Left

Susie Linfield
New York University

Four years before Frantz Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth*, Albert Memmi explored the psychic toll that colonialism exacted in his landmark 1957 book, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the introduction, as he would for Fanon, and Memmi dedicated the American edition “to the American Negro, also colonized.” Memmi’s book had a strong impact on the anti-colonial liberation movements and was praised by the likes of Léopold Senghor, Senegal’s first president, and Négritude theorist Alioune Diop. But Memmi’s book was and remains overshadowed by Fanon’s, especially in the West, for a number of reasons. These include Fanon’s premature death, his non-white identity, the romance of the Algerian Revolution, his rejection of so-called Western values, and his exaltation of violence. In my view, Memmi’s is the deeper book, for it resists Fanon’s Manichean outlook and the easy panacea of violence. Memmi was not a pacifist. But he knew that the creation of freer societies would depend on the creation of freer people, and that such people could not be birthed, much less nurtured, by the AK-47.

Whereas Fanon viewed the colonized and the colonizer as “different species,” Memmi viewed them as human beings, albeit of vastly unequal power; the two were trapped in a suffocating embrace. Memmi seeks to understand colonization as an objectively racist system and as a subjectively damaging experience; much of the book concentrates on the psychic impossibilities that colonialism creates. “It is not enough for the colonized to be a slave, he must also accept this role. The bond between colonizer and colonized is thus destructive and creative,” he wrote. “One is disfigured into an oppressor, . . . [a] treacherous being, worrying only about his privileges . . . The other, into an oppressed creature, whose development is broken and who compromises by his defeat.” The colonized is not only acted upon, but colludes in his oppression.

It was this psychic mutilation – the colonized’s humiliation, self-hatred, and disavowal of self – that was so brutalizing. (There is an echo here of Isaac Deutscher, writing of the Jews’ “stigmata of shame” that Zionism meant to eradicate.) What made the colonized’s situation even more wrenching was that, in an effort to reject the colonialist’s denigration, the oppressed created counter-myths of their own grandeur, potency, and unquestionable moral worth. These might provide temporary satisfaction, but they will be deeply destructive to the colonized’s future development. “Not only does he accept his wrinkles and his wounds, but he will consider them praiseworthy,” Memmi observed. “Suddenly, exactly to the reverse of the colonialist accusation, the colonized, his culture, his country, everything that belongs to him, everything he represents, become perfectly positive elements.” A fatal cultural retrogression is born: “Everything is good, everything must be retained among his customs and traditions.” Thus an injurious cycle begins;

in an attempt to create a more dignified society, the colonized maims his aptitude for critical self-assessment precisely at the moment that he needs it most.

Memmi's analysis of the historic position of the colonized subject closely parallels Hannah Arendt's description of Jewish worldlessness. "The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history," Memmi wrote. "He is out of the game. He is in no way a subject of history . . . He has forgotten how to participate actively in history and no longer even asks to do so." He viewed the Third World's independence movements, as Arendt viewed Zionism, as the entering-into-history of the world's castoffs.

The Colonized and the Colonizer was written only one year after Tunisia gained its independence. Yet Memmi already intuited the crippling position in which the leftwing, Western anti-colonialist would find himself, or put himself, for the next half-century. For moral and political reasons, the Left would of course support the independence movements. Yet such movements would frequently repudiate many of the Left's bedrock principles, which Memmi identified as "political democracy and freedom, economic democracy and justice, rejection of racist xenophobia and universality." And so the European leftist and "leftist colonizer" (people such as himself and Albert Camus) "discovers that there is no connection between the liberation of the colonized and the application of a left-wing program. And that, in fact, he is perhaps aiding the birth of a social order in which there is no room for a leftist as such." Memmi would become a particularly incisive observer of the Left's confused responses to this (ongoing) dilemma.

Memmi was also prescient about the prominent place that terrorism would occupy in these future struggles, though he could not foresee the extent of the barbarism to come. It is a very bad sign of the times in which we live that the terrorism of the postwar anti-colonial movements seems almost quaint compared to today's beheadings, suicide bombings, mass rapes, and deliberate targeting of humanitarian workers, doctors, journalists, intellectuals, secularists, teachers, students, and ordinary civilians of every stripe, especially women and girls. Memmi assumed he was writing within a leftist tradition that "condemns terrorism and political assassination"; he termed such actions "incomprehensible, shocking and politically absurd. For example, the death of children and persons outside the struggle." But that tradition was weakening even as he wrote.

The anti-terrorist tradition that Memmi called home has been crippled if not decimated in the past half-century; the question is whether it can be revived. Memmi was particularly revolted by suicide bombings, which came to the fore in the Palestinian movement in the 1990s and have since globally metastasized, and which even now are sometimes falsely rationalized as "primarily a response to foreign occupation," as a 2007 essay in the *London Review of Books* claimed. (Most victims of suicide bombings are unarmed Muslim civilians, often killed in mosques or marketplaces.) Murder-suicide was not just an ugly tactic but something much worse, Memmi averred: a "reversal of the gradual humanization of human societies." As a civilizational regression, it is a threat not only to its victims but to all people everywhere.

Memmi did not believe that the psychic disfigurements of colonialism could be solved through psychoanalysis on the part of the colonized or goodwill on the part of the colonizer. Colonialist

oppression and its handmaid, racism, were structural problems that required structural eradication. “There is no way out other than a complete end to colonization,” he wrote toward the end of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. “The refusal of the colonized cannot be anything but absolute, that is, not only revolt, but a revolution.” This was the only road to achieving the goal, the true revolutionary goal, of becoming “a whole and free man.” But he always insisted that resistance and terrorism are not the same.

The Left’s hostility toward the “bourgeois deviation” of nationalist aspirations became a crisis as the postwar anti-colonialist movements emerged. In analyzing this phenomenon, Memmi focused first on France, where the predicament had multiple, intersecting causes. To begin, there was the failure of North African revolutionaries to fight for socialism and democratic freedoms and their acquiescence to religious orthodoxy and oppressive social traditions. Then, across the sea, there was the French working class’s conspicuous lack of solidarity with, or actual hostility to, the anti-colonial movements. None of this comported with Marxist doctrine. And though consciously anti-colonial, French intellectuals betrayed a kind of colonialist arrogance. They expected that their politics, worldview, and modern social vision would be shared by their Third World brothers. Surely, they thought, only the shackles of imperialism had sustained practices such as religious obscurantism and the debasement of women.

One reaction to this crisis was the Communist Party’s somewhat belated insistence that anti-colonialism *was* socialism (or at least soon would be). It followed that leftists should support the independence movements, no questions asked. Memmi decried this strategy, which was dictated by the Soviet Union and adopted by the French Communists, as a “mania . . . for dubbing any political mutation that they find useful ‘socialist and revolutionary.’” Sooner or later, reality would assert itself: “One cannot live forever in a dream world of scholasticism or tactics, and often the real world takes its revenge – when the new leaders send the Communists to prison.”

He condemned the opposite reaction too: resentment of the colonized and their movements. “So these colonized people turn out to be greedy, aggressive, blood-thirsty fanatics,” he wrote in an essay called “The Colonial Problem and the Left.” “Well then, we will be as nationalistic as they are; and since they are making war on us, we will reply in kind.” Memmi criticized this stance even as he understood it. “It is a reactionary attitude, to be sure, but . . . the claims it makes are ethical; they are those of a secular humanist bewildered by events, of a universalist who feels himself cheated and who, in a certain sense, has been.”

The French Left was truly in a pickle. If it championed the national liberation movements, it lost support among the French working class and sacrificed some of its basic principles. If, conversely, it pandered to French nativism, it renounced a different set of principles and, moreover, “*commits a fruitless suicide,*” for “*the right can always outbid the left on this score.*” And so a split, or perhaps a dual if contradictory strategy, emerged: indulging the independence movements and simultaneously ignoring what was actually happening within them.

It quickly became clear that this solution didn't solve much. In choosing to overlook developments in the Third World that it found unsavory, the European Left abandoned "both the universal and the international front," Memmi charged. "For, in the long run, no true internationalist can say: this does not concern me." The other extreme – the populist stance – was predicated on the view that the colonized are always deserving of unwavering support. This too proved destructive, for it "leads to the toleration of every kind of excess – terrorism, xenophobia, social reaction." And far from aiding the colonized, uncritical encouragement "fostered in him every kind of mental and spiritual disorder, and . . . added to the perplexity of those few victims of colonization who had retained a relatively sharp and morally sound political sense." The Left had essentially abandoned the Third World's true progressives and true democrats, who were not necessarily dominant within their liberation movements or at the helm of their new governments.

Memmi wrote "The Colonial Problem and the Left" in 1958. He was charting, perhaps more than he knew, the future trajectory of a large and influential portion of the Left in western Europe and the U.S. In subsequent decades, many leftists would adopt a bipolar attitude – with all the unhealthiness that implies – to the formerly colonized world and the question of nationalism. On the one hand, they would take a demotic stance: Think, for instance, of Maxime Rodinson and Isaac Deutscher praising the presumably revolutionary nature of the Arab dictatorships. But in doing so, a problem instantly emerged. Those regimes were rabidly nationalist, and yet the Left had staked itself, for the past 100 years, on *anti*-nationalism as a rudimentary principle. Here, I believe, is where Israel became so calamitously useful. The Jewish state enabled the Left to sustain a blistering critique of nationalism, albeit only in the case of one small country, while simultaneously kowtowing to the anti-imperialist and stridently nationalist rhetoric of the Third World.

This explains a glaring if often unnoticed contradiction of Left politics in the postwar period, but especially from the 1960s on. Leftists, and especially New Leftists, were enthralled by Cuban, Vietnamese, Mozambican, Chinese, Algerian, and Palestinian nationalism. But they loathed Zionism as a thing apart. This approach would come to fruition in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, when much of the western Left hailed some of the world's most horrifically repressive – and racist – regimes as harbingers of justice and freedom. As Simcha Flapan, a member of Israel's far-Left Mapam party, would charge: "The socialist world approved the 'Holy War' of the Arabs against Israel in the disguise of a struggle against imperialism . . . Having agreed to the devaluation of its own ideals, [it] was ready to enter into an alliance with reactionary and chauvinist appeals to genocide."

A decade before this debacle, Memmi saw that such convoluted strategies would spell disaster by harming colonialism's victims and weakening the Left. Memmi called for a radical reorientation of the socialist movement. On the one hand, it must recognize the validity of national liberation movements, including Zionism. Rather than regarding nationalism as something "stuck in their throats like a bone they are always longing to cough up," leftists should support national independence as "genuine and constructive. To reject it is mere abstract intellectualization: the negation of what is real." Simultaneously, support of the unsupportable – of those who repudiated humane, democratic, and egalitarian principles – must cease. "If we accept nationalism without argument and without reflection, we are again disqualifying

ourselves. We must judge it and make up our minds about its errors.” Critical acumen was required in all instances; no blank checks would be written. An important test of the Left’s capacity for judgment, Memmi wrote, would be its rejection of terrorism against civilians.

To my Jewish brothers
To my Arab brothers
so that we can all
be free men at last.

So reads Memmi’s dedication to his 1974 essay collection, *Jews and Arabs*. But the book’s stance is not one of cozy fraternity. Writing in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, Memmi began by reasserting his identity as “an Arab Jew and a left-wing Zionist.” And though he affirms the brotherhood of Arabs and Jews, he announces that Jews have “the most serious of accounts to settle” with their brothers. These included the treatment of Jews when they lived in the Arab countries, Arab refusal to accept Israel, and, most controversially, acceptance of the joint Arab-Jewish population transfer that had transpired since 1948. This was, Memmi asserted, an accomplished fact and the only practical basis for peace. He would build a sustained argument against the right of return.

“*Jewish Arabs*”: This, Memmi says, is what he and his fellows wanted to be. “And if we have given up the idea, it is because for centuries the Moslem Arabs have scornfully, cruelly, and systematically prevented us from carrying it out.” He scoffs at Muammar Qaddafi’s suggestion that Sephardic Israelis “go back home.” Home to what? Memmi points out the glaringly obvious: “No more Jewish communities are to be found in any Arab country, nor can you find a single Arab Jew who is willing to return to his native country.” (In the anti-Zionist scheme, European-born Israelis would presumably “also be sent ‘back home’ – to remove the remains of the crematoria.”) The State of Israel is the retort to homelessness. Home for Israelis is Israel.

Memmi upholds four principles throughout *Jews and Arabs*: first, the Arab peoples’ right to independence and national development. Second, the Jewish people’s right to the same. Third, that the crux of the Israeli-Arab conflict is Arab irredentism. (He was writing before Israeli irredentism, in the form of the settler movement, became so powerful.) Fourth, that the only solution to the conflict is a national one: sovereignty for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Despite the treatment of Jews in Arab countries, pre- and post-1948, Memmi never faltered in his allegiance to the independence movements of the formerly colonized world. He praises Tunisia’s Habib Bourguiba, Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, and Senegal’s Léopold Senghor. He insists on treating Arabs as political equals rather than damaged victims. “I am not a ‘friend’ of the Arabs,” he explains. “I have a fairly accurate knowledge of the humiliations they want to erase, the fears they want to exorcise, the hopes that may be stirring in them. . . . I refuse to take an attitude toward them which, at bottom, is paternalistic. . . a mixture of old colonialist scorn and newfound benevolence.” Memmi’s Zionism affirms rather than negates Arab aspirations. “A Zionist who is aware of the nature of his own cause cannot fail to understand and approve of the

Arab peoples' social and national ambitions, even though he may regret coming into conflict with them," he insisted. But a relationship between equals entails parallel responsibilities: "Conversely, he is entitled to demand of the Arab peoples, clearly and openly, that they recognize his own demands for liberty and the reconstruction of his nation." Internationalism means nothing without mutuality.

Memmi also forthrightly addresses the key indictment of Israel's legitimacy: the Palestinian refugees. He found a multi-faceted situation rather than a simple tale of oppressors and victims. Approximately 700,000 Arabs left Palestine in 1948 because they were forced to do so, or chose to do so, or were terrorized into doing so; in the years 1948 to 1964, an equal number of Jews left their native Arab countries because they were forced to do so, or chose to do, or were terrorized into doing so. Memmi articulates a truth that to this day is generally taboo: "Let's dare to say: a de facto exchange of populations has come about." *Two* civilian populations experienced a *nakba* – a parallel ethnic expulsion. And while the Palestinian situation was "tragic," it was neither unsolvable nor a world-historic catastrophe. "When you come right down to it, the Palestinian Arabs' misfortune is having been moved about thirty miles . . . We [Oriental Jews] have been moved thousands of miles away, after having also lost everything." In any case, Memmi insists, neither of these exchanges could or would be reversed, despite the Arab refusal to accept the finality of the first or to acknowledge the reality of the second. History does not flow backwards; woe to those who deny this. To destroy Israel in order to compensate Palestinians "would amount to resolving a tragedy by means of a crime."

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Memmi averred, set two nationalisms against each other. Each was relatively recent and therefore fragile; both peoples "have been and still are victims of human history." The conflict did not, however, set Palestinian revolution against Israeli reaction, Palestinian anti-imperialism against Israeli colonialism, or Palestinian poverty against Israeli riches, despite attempts to impose such interpretations on it. Framing the conflict in false terms enabled the Left to assail Israel's right to exist and fling it "into the ignominious hell of the imperialist nations." Only by abandoning Manichean oppositions and the flawed history on which they rest could a workable solution to the conflict be found.

The good news, Memmi reminds us, is that strife between nations can be solved. In Marxist terms, such clashes are conflicts rather than contradictions; they do not call for the negation of either side. The important thing, the urgent thing, was to find a reasonable solution for the future rather than recurrently shedding blood in an impossible attempt to avenge the past. "A mediocre agreement is better than continual war," he pleaded. Reason paired with realism was a practical demand as well as an ethical one.

In short, Memmi beseeched Israelis and Arabs to step out of myth and into reality, for only there can politics be made. For Israelis, this meant acceptance of a sovereign Palestinian state; Palestinians, like all other peoples, had every "right to perfect their existence as a nation." Furthermore, Israelis must never forget Palestinian suffering until such national ambitions were met; to ignore Palestinian statelessness, he warned, is "impossible, and dangerous." For Palestinians and the Arab states, reality meant replacing their view of Israel as a temporary, imperialist interloper with acceptance of the Jewish state as a sovereign nation. "The Palestinians

have *never* stopped claiming the *entire* region,” Memmi pointed out. “It is our life that is at stake. A day must come when the Moslem Arabs will admit that we too . . . have a right to existence and dignity.” Unlike Rodinson, he saw the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a symptom, not the cause, of the region’s political dysfunction and incessant violence.

Memmi wrote these essays in the late 1960s to mid-1970s. The settlements had not yet expanded, nor had Israel veered rightwards to the Likud; the Palestinians had not yet spawned the suicide bombers and fundamentalist fanatics of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. It is grievously painful to acknowledge that, five decades later, some Palestinians and many Israelis have moved further from the ethics of realism for which Memmi pleaded.

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Susie Linfield
New York University

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