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Radical Candor: On Albert Memmi (1920-2020)

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If Memmi did not exist, would we invent him?

Perhaps not. For one thing, his writings have no scholarly apparatus. Relying only on his own language, he wrote political theory the way he wrote his novels. If he submitted work to academic journals in French and Francophone studies today, reviewers might reject it for lack of footnotes. Even more, Memmi was a contrarian. A pioneering theorist of “oppression,” he also rebutted some of the leading liberationist movements of the twentieth century: Marxism, nationalism, and feminism among them. Memmi specialized in the criticism of tyrannical domination of all kinds. More than any other writer since World War II, he combined the compassion needed to articulate the anguish of oppressed groups with the forthrightness needed to censure them for their own acts of oppression. He refused to pose as a righteous defender of innocents, for he believed that to treat a group as if it were a victim and nothing else would be to treat it like an infant. “[I]f we are to help decolonized peoples,” Memmi wrote in *Decolonization and the Decolonized* (2004), “we must . . . acknowledge and speak the truth to them, because we feel they are worthy of hearing it.”¹

I have elsewhere sketched Memmi’s thought and career as a whole.² For this forum, I was invited to comment on *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. The book seems to be a particularly conservative moment in Memmi’s work; the text is an indictment of the economic and human-rights record of post-colonial nations in North Africa and the Middle East. Memmi does not apologize for colonialism, but he does insist that we need to examine why “the pitched battles” of anti-colonialism did not “produce the anticipated results.” And even more pointedly, he wrote:

Fifty years later nothing really seems to have changed, except for the worse . . .

Widespread corruption and tyranny and the resulting tendency to use force, the restriction of intellectual growth through the adherence to long-standing tradition, violence toward

¹ Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006; first pub. 2004), xiv.

² Daniel Gordon, “Telling the Whole Truth: Albert Memmi,” *Jewish Review of Books* (Spring, 2008). <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/3044/telling-whole-truth-albert-memmi/>. See also Jonathan Judaken, “The Heresies of Albert Memmi,” *Tablet* (June 24, 2020) <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/albert-memmi-obituary>; and Judaken’s “Introduction” in *The Albert Memmi Reader*, ed. Jonathan Judaken and Michael Lejman (University of Nebraska Press, 2020), xv–xliv.

women, xenophobia, and the persecution of minorities – there seems to be no end to the pustulent sores weakening these young nations.³

However, Memmi foreshadowed his criticism of post-colonial regimes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957). Instead of moving from a youthful progressive phase to a late-in-life conservative phase, Memmi expressed apprehensions about revolutionary movements in all stages of his work.

I am interested in what we can learn from Memmi's radical candor, which is a constant feature of his work. If we isolate certain passages from *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, we become aware that Memmi might be “canceled” if he were writing today. For example:

Black Americans are not a decolonized people, although they have certain traits in common with them, just as they have certain traits in common with the colonized. But their evasive responses are the same. It is the fault of history, it is always the fault of the whites. Dolorism is a natural tendency to exaggerate one's pains and attribute them to another. Like the decolonized, as long as blacks have not freed themselves of dolorism, they will be unable to correctly analyze their condition and act accordingly.⁴

And:

The last Palestinian revolt, the second Intifada, which drew significant media attention, cost two thousand lives. That's two thousand too many. But a quick glance at any collection of newspapers will show that, in the past few decades alone, there have been more than a million deaths in Biafra, five hundred thousand in Rwanda, uncounted massacres in Uganda and the Congo, three hundred thousand deaths in Burundi, two hundred thousand victims in Colombia since 1964 along with three million displaced persons, the eradication of Communists in Indonesia, estimated at five hundred thousand, and the terrifying massacres of the Khmer by their own people. To focus on the Arab world itself, how many lives did decolonization cost in Algeria and France? Five hundred thousand Algerians died, according to the French, a million according to the Algerians; seventy thousand young French soldiers lost their lives.⁵

I realize that some readers will find the above passages repugnant. But Memmi would say that such a reaction represents a refusal to regard a complex problem from different sides. Memmi did not intend his provocations to stand alone as final truths; they are stakes driven with force into the ground in order to uphold a tent of debate.

A reluctance to interrogate post-colonial societies, a preference instead for maintaining simple moral judgments when referencing colonialism and anti-colonialism – this need for a melodrama seems to have become widespread in the humanities and social sciences. Memmi was disappointed by the refusal of French intellectuals to engage with the arguments of *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. Would he be any less disenchanted with North American scholars today?

³ Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, x–xi.

⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁵ Ibid, 26.

In the field of history, there is a regular stream of scholarly and specialized studies that do not portray colonialism and anti-colonialism in Manichean terms. But the basic picture which students receive in sociology, political science, education, and various “studies” fields is generally shaped more by radical theory than by nuanced monographs. There is a reason for the authority of critical theory. The accumulation of piecemeal results is never enough to transform a dominant intellectual paradigm. In the many academic disciplines that touch on colonialism and decolonization, the most frequently cited authors are not specialized scholars publishing in venues such as *French Historical Studies* but rather thinkers with overarching and politically energized interpretations – such as those who reiterate the ideas of Frantz Fanon and Edward W. Said. In the spirit of “post-colonial” theory, colonialism is an unmitigated evil; anti-colonialism, a natural and just response to it; and any harms perpetrated by post-colonial regimes are explicable in terms of the colonial past or the colonial present of Europe and the United States. The importance of Memmi’s *Decolonization* is that he confronts such thinking not with minor corrections but with an alternative mindset.

In 1956, Memmi noted in his diary, “I continue to think, in spite of frequent hesitations, that I must tell not only the truth but the whole truth. And this will be not only my aesthetic and social contribution but my most important political achievement.”⁶ Memmi was in fact a founder of post-colonial theory, but what distinguishes him from other post-colonial theorists, such as Fanon and Said, was his capacity to be the critical interlocutor of his own anti-colonialism. Alternatively, one could say that he never let political activism squeeze out his novelistic pursuit of irony and complexity. If one is inspired by Memmi, the important task is not merely to construct academic commentaries upon his writing but to find ways to encourage the reproduction of people like him. Without such people we will have an abundance of “critical theory” but no real intellectual debate.

What made Memmi’s audacity possible? An answer lies in what I will call his trans-generational style of thinking: his refusal to find an ideology or social movement alluring unless he could envision it evolving progressively over two or more generations. Memmi himself was influenced by two regimes designed to sustain a culture over generations – something which the academic disciplines no longer make a priority. The first was his Jewish upbringing. Memmi helped to complicate Jewish identity by speaking of “Jewishness” as distinct from “Judaism.”⁷ But there is no doubt that he had Jewish pride, a pride invested in images of lineage, family, custom. He believed his Jewish ancestry could be traced in North Africa back to the Punic Wars – to around 200 B.C. He considered Judaism to be more indigenous to North Africa than Islam. An additional source of trans-generational thinking was his experience as a philosophy student in colonial Tunisia, where the system appears to have been a hyper-copy of the French method of focusing on classic texts and on techniques of reflection deemed to have perennial value.

⁶ Albert Memmi, *Tunisie, An I, Journal tunisien, 1955–1956*, ed. Guy Dugas (CNRS Editions, 2017), 42. Translations from this work are my own.

⁷ On Jewishness, see Gordon, “Telling the Whole Truth.” Also, Daniel Gordon, “Albert Memmi: From Colonialism to Laïcité (by way of Zionism)”, *Tocqueville21* (May 30, 2018), <https://tocqueville21.com/books/albert-memmi-from-anti-colonialism-to-laicite-by-way-of-zionism/>.

In 1955 Memmi wrote in his diary, “A resolution. Never give a person the impression that you want something from him, or even that you need him.”⁸ Memmi was determined to write the truth regardless of the social consequences. But this does not mean that he faced the world alone. I am suggesting that the traditions that mattered to him – Judaism and European intellectual history – enabled him to think of himself as a link in a brilliant chain of generations. But even more, trans-generational thinking enters into the very substance of Memmi’s thought; it is not just a psychic source of confidence. As radical as Memmi may have been in some of his writings, he always identified freedom with the achievement of a secular and liberal society along Western lines – not with declarations of independence from Western hegemony. The function of a revolt cannot merely be “liberation“ from colonialism. Liberation is a means. It is an exit from oppression; it is not tantamount to the gaining of liberty. Readers of the Torah, from Moses Maimonides to Michael Walzer, have noted that the Book of Exodus highlights the difference between the Israelites’ liberation from slavery in Egypt, which occurs in a matter of days, and their maturation into a free people in the desert over 40 years. Ahad Ha-Am summed up this tradition when he wrote that “[a] people trained for generations in the house of bondage cannot cast off in an instant the effects of that training and become truly free.”⁹

In the conclusion of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, a book known primarily for its indictment of racism and colonialism, Memmi expressed the same apprehension. “In order that his liberation may be complete, he [the anti-colonialist] must free himself from those inevitable conditions of his struggle.”¹⁰ Thus, even when calling for the elimination of colonial governance, Memmi registered his fear of a negative reproduction of chauvinism. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, he used the term “counter-mythology” to signify the tendency of the anti-colonial revolutionary to mirror the mindset of the colonizers.

While he [the colonized] knows how to overthrow the colonizer and colonization, he cannot cause the end of what he truly is and what he so disastrously acquired during colonization . . . 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. We shall ultimately find ourselves before a counter-mythology. The negative myth thrust on him by the colonizer is succeeded by a positive myth about himself suggested by the colonized – just as there would seem to be a positive myth of the proletariat opposed to a negative one. To hear the colonized and often his friends, everything is good, everything must be retained among his customs and traditions, his actions and plans; even the anachronous or disorderly, the immoral or mistaken.¹¹

In 1956 Memmi wrote in his diary, “The left is making a wager about the nascent nationalisms: that these nationalisms will not veer into xenophobic chauvinism, or fascism, or racism . . . One

⁸ Memmi, *Tunisie, An I*, 36.

⁹ Cited in Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (Basic Books, 1985), 137.

¹⁰ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Earthscan Publications, 1974; first pub. 1957), 196.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 182–83.

must acknowledge that it's a dangerous wager.¹² He was particularly concerned that nationalism would unleash a kind of Islamism leading to "theocratic fascism."¹³ And finally, he was sensitive to "the conformism of the left" – the failure of French intellectuals to register these risks.¹⁴

In a guitar, the truss rod is a metal component, not visible from the outside, which runs through the neck and maintains its curvature, while preventing further warping. A fascination with the reproductive dimension of a given ideology is the truss rod of Memmi's thought, unifying his early "radicalism" and his later "conservatism." He brought a trans-generational viewpoint to both his novels and his political theory. Memmi was interested in "the couple" as a natural phenomenon among human beings. But he regarded the childless couple as insufficient – an inadequate relief from loneliness. The child is more than a triangulation of the couple's intimacy; the child moves the couple into society and into history. Memmi knew that at the heart of the Torah is a vision of the Jewish people transmitting its texts, laws, and customs "from generation to generation" (*l'dor v'dor*, a term that occurs often in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish prayers). God's reward to the righteous, such as the midwives who thwart the Pharaoh's plan to commit infanticide, is to enable them to have children. The worst punishment is not merely to die but to die without children, or to have one's children killed. Judaism achieves eternity not in the afterlife but by way of perpetual reproduction over historical time. This is why Judaism can be described as both a religion and an ethnic group.

Memmi's commitment to the trans-generational ideal explains the occasional eruption of "conservative" ideas in his work even prior to *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. A case in point is his condemnation, in *Dominated Man* (1968), of Simone de Beauvoir. Memmi's complaint was not that she was childless; he recognized the freedom of a woman not to become a parent. But Memmi presupposed that most women wished to be mothers. He charged that de Beauvoir presented herself as an archetype of female liberation – that her autobiographical writing aimed to have the exemplary character of Augustine's *Confessions*. The shortcoming of de Beauvoir's story, according to Memmi, is that she never explained how the radical autonomy she sought to achieve is compatible with raising a child. In de Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre, a relationship characterized not only by childlessness but also by long periods of separation and infidelity, Memmi discerned a sexual license bordering on celibacy:

Observing that a child is a weighty material, moral, and metaphysical responsibility, she decides not to have children. Indeed, without family ties, the couple is free to travel, to go from country to country, from town to town, as they please. Unattached, and financially undemanding, they are relatively independent of history and of geography and even of the society in which they live . . . *The need to block all routes against oppression leads this particular couple towards a kind of abstraction . . .* The candidate for freedom will find emancipation on these conditions set at too high a price . . . A comparison springs to mind which I will set down, for what it is worth. The Catholic Church has also offered us a pattern, of the ideal man; one to whom passion and procreation alike are denied: he is

¹² Memmi, *Tunisie, An I*, 118–119.

¹³ *Ibid*, 139.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 149.

the priest. Is a free woman then also necessarily a woman without a partner and without children?¹⁵

The trans-generational ideal also underlies Memmi's terrific early novel *Strangers* (*Agar* in French, 1955), which is about a mixed marriage between a Tunisian man and a French woman, a marriage that deteriorates into divorce.

At a point when the reader thinks this couple has hit rock bottom, Memmi devises an even lower level of marital hell. The woman, who is Catholic, informs the man, Jewish, that she is going to abort their child. *Strangers* is about the failure of two people who are deeply in love to endure as a couple because they cannot become more than a couple. It is a failure to agree upon how the couple will define itself diachronically – in relation to ancestry and progeny. The man is too ashamed of his Jewish background to inspire his wife to identify with his religiously observant family. The woman aggravates the problem by viewing Jewish customs as barbarous. In fact, she views Tunisia as a whole as an uncivilized backwater. Love induced her to move to her husband's native country, but she cannot avert the colonialist's sense of superiority. Finally, this couple lacks the imagination to forge a third alternative in a neutral space: to invent a new tradition for themselves and their potential offspring. The dissolution of the marriage results from the pair's inability to move intimacy onto the plane of history: to identify with their respective ancestors, or to create something new they can share with descendants. It is a trans-generational fiasco.

Pillar of Salt (1953), on account of its plainly autobiographical qualities, is often treated by scholars as more revealing of Memmi's political maturation than any of his other novels. Yet, *Strangers* is the text that Memmi used to explain his evolution from a novelist into a theorist of colonialism:

I discovered that the couple [in *Strangers*] is not an isolated entity . . . on the contrary, the whole world is within the couple . . . I felt that to understand the failure of their undertaking, that of a mixed marriage in a colony, I first had to understand the colonizer and the colonized, perhaps the entire colonial relationship and situation.¹⁶

Memmi's illumination was that personal disasters have an analogue at the collective level. The challenge of producing a decent society from the throes of colonialism cannot be solved by romanticizing the process of liberation. With an "us against the world" mentality, neither a couple nor a social movement is likely to evolve into maturity.

In the introduction to *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, Memmi noted that his ideas were likely going "to annoy just about everyone."¹⁷ He presented what he regarded as the plain facts about post-colonial regimes that few European intellectuals wished to discuss in public. My aim is not to summarize all the text's major arguments but to raise a question about it: Could it be

¹⁵ Memmi, "A Tyrant's Plea," in *Dominated Man* (Orion Press, 1968), 152–54 (italics in original).

¹⁶ From the Preface to the 1965 edition of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 4 (per the edition cited in note 10).

¹⁷ Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, x.

published today? It will suffice, then, to provide two passages representative of Memmi's radical candor:

Unfortunately, in most cases, the long-anticipated period of freedom, won at the cost of terrible suffering, brought with it poverty and corruption, violence, and sometimes chaos. Those days are long gone, lost in the fog of memory, when, with the dawn of independence—something the younger generations have not experienced—the national leader, finally released from prison, entered the capital to the screams of women and the shouts of men, barely able to hold back their tears. The slogans of national unity, heard at a time when everyone felt as if they were members of the same family, have been extinguished, and the faces we see are the pale faces of egotism.¹⁸

Even in the past, colonization was not responsible for everything. There were famines before colonization; corruption as well. In the Ottoman Empire, which dominated the Arab world for centuries, poorly paid or unpaid civil servants made the conquered populations pay. Although it wasn't its primary purpose, Western colonization did serve as the opportunity for some technical, political, and even cultural advances, as can happen when civilizations come into contact with one another. In many respects, South Africa continues to live off the advances of the past.¹⁹

In the Afterword which appears in the English translation of *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, Memmi noted that the book's reception in ex-colonized countries was courteous. *Jeune Afrique* devoted a full page to it, and *Afrique-Asie* a long article. But the former colonizers would not engage with his claims:

I want to review here some of the more pathetic disavowals I encountered. A week after the appearance of the book, I received an invitation to speak on *Radio Libertaire*. The night before I was scheduled to go on, I received a phone call. The program had been canceled. Why? I was told, "Your comments are inappropriate for our listeners." "Maybe, but at least allow me to explain myself." The answer was no.²⁰

Recounting how a review in *Libération* was also canceled, Memmi writes:

I was forced to acknowledge that my readers were offended by my interpretation of the facts. I have written that the current misfortunes of third-world populations do not arise from the continued actions of their former colonizers, of neocolonialism, but principally from their new rulers, whose corruption and tyranny I have denounced. These rulers have kept their countries, even those rich in resources, in a state of paradoxical poverty, allowed customs to stagnate, and fostered mass emigration . . . *I had formulated arguments that everyone was aware of but didn't want to discuss, and which my book exposed.*²¹

Memmi concluded the Afterword with a comment about the conformism of intellectuals:

I take some consolation in realizing that, aside from my disappointment as an author, this weighty silence suggests, on the contrary, the accuracy of my claims. This includes my remarks about the irresponsibility, if not blindness or cowardice, of many intellectuals,

¹⁸ Ibid, 3.

¹⁹ Ibid, 21.

²⁰ Ibid, 146.

²¹ Ibid, 147 (italics added).

who have taken refuge in outdated theories instead of daring to confront a novel situation.²²

Is the academic establishment in North America any different?

The chances of discussing colonialism and decolonization in non-Manichean terms, as Memmi did, seem to be diminishing. Witness the treatment of Bruce Gilley, professor of political science at Portland State University. He has been “canceled” for ideas that are much like Memmi’s. Gilley has raised this question: How do we go about measuring and comparing the costs and benefits of colonial and post-colonial regimes? He is open to both economic calculations and qualitative human-rights considerations. But he maintains, reasonably, that if we are going to analyze colonialism with overtones of condemnation, then we need a yardstick for measuring the evils of colonialism, a yardstick that must simultaneously apply to post-colonial nations. Gilley’s article, “The Case for Colonialism,” was retracted from *Third World Quarterly* because it included statements such as the following remark, which sounds like Memmi:

Anti-colonialism ravaged countries as nationalist elites mobilized illiterate populations with appeals to destroy the market economies, pluralistic and constitutional polities, and rational policy processes of European colonizers. In our ‘age of apology’ for atrocities, one of the many conspicuous silences has been an apology for the many atrocities visited upon Third World peoples by anti-colonial advocates.²³

Even more concerning is that the publication of Gilley’s archivally-based biography of the British imperialist Sir Alan Burns was suspended by the publisher, Lexington Books, after complaints by anti-colonial militants. These *convulsionnaires* had no access to the manuscript yet knowingly asserted that Gilley was going to propagate a “white nationalist perspective.”²⁴ Gilley successfully switched publishers but the power of the “cancel culture” was on display.

Readers of *H-France* may be thinking, “This is all unfortunate, but Gilley is not a specialist of France. What does any of this have to do with me and my current project?” That is the point. Specialization tends to induce an academic modesty that amounts to silence in regard to those whose specialization is vulgar and intimidating generalization. Refining one’s knowledge about a particular slice of history can be a noble vocation. But the cost is too great when historical specialization yields a professionalized indifference to the larger contours of academic debate in the social sciences. The question is whether the reserve of most rank-and-file specialists toward important controversies signifies a laudable professionalism or a lack of confidence conditioned by lifelong specialization. To commemorate the centennial of Memmi’s birth by composing

²² Ibid, 148.

²³ Bruce Gilley, “The Case for Colonialism,” published in *Academic Questions*, Summer, 2018, https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/31/2/the_case_for_colonialism after it was unpublished from *Third World Quarterly*. *Academic Questions* is the journal of the National Association of Scholars.

²⁴ Mark Bridge, “Bruce Gilley’s Biography of Imperialist Sir Alan Burns Cancelled after Petition,” *The Times*, Oct. 9, 2020. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bruce-gilleys-biography-of-imperialist-sir-alan-burns-cancelled-after-petition-9qv536tjz/>. The book, *The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns’s Epic Defense of British Imperialism*, is forthcoming with Gateway Editions.

erudite essays in his honor is an easy thing. The question is whether we would encourage Memmi or abandon him, if he were alive and dared to practice his radical candor in our midst.

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